

BECOMING WHOLE

**WHY THE OPPOSITE OF POVERTY
ISN'T THE AMERICAN DREAM**

BRIAN FIKKERT & KELLY M. KAPIC

Jesus announced, from the very onset of his ministry, his love for the poor (Luke 4:18). Some spiritualize away this concern for the poor, the way others try to spiritualize away His miracles. Others seek to alleviate poverty in fragmented, counterproductive ways. In this fascinating new book, Brian Fikkert and Kelly Kapic call Christians to where Jesus is already: in the fight for whole persons, body and soul. This book will not just awaken you to the plight of global poverty but will also give you hope as we seek to follow Jesus together for the sake of the poor of the world.

RUSSELL MOORE

President, The Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention

Becoming Whole is a hard-hitting, transparent read that will force you to think and act differently as you are confronted with poverty at home and abroad. It will help you understand the root of poverty, whether the unhappiness of the affluent West or the material poverty in the global South. This book will introduce you to an alternative universe, one in which human flourishing, born inside of man through a change in the heart and mind, bears external fruit in the present reality of the coming of the City of God. Metaphysical capital is more important than physical capital in the path to human flourishing.

DARROW MILLER

Author of *Discipling Nations*
Cofounder of Disciple Nations Alliance

In *Becoming Whole*, Fikkert and Kapic build upon the watershed legacy of *When Helping Hurts* by challenging latent assumptions and awakening essential truth. *Becoming Whole* is a torch of wisdom to lift high, a beacon to help us to exemplify God's love in cultures across the world and also our own backyards. Read at your own risk, however: these words will transform!

STEPHAN BAUMAN

Coauthor of *Seeking Refuge*
Former President and CEO of World Relief

Thanks to the principles of love and leadership as articulated in this book, as well as in the related work, *When Helping Hurts*, the church I serve has been able to come alongside disadvantaged, vulnerable, oppressed, and marginalized communities in more informed, life-giving, and sustainable ways. Backed with sound biblical theology *and* practical guidance and stories, *Becoming Whole* is a must for any Christian community aiming to make a difference. I can't recommend this book highly enough.

SCOTT SAULS

Senior pastor of Christ Presbyterian Church in Nashville, Tennessee
Author of *Befriend* and *Irresistible Faith*.

The kingdom of God is about life as God intends. In *Becoming Whole*, Brian Fikkert and Kelly Kapic help us understand the robust narrative that the kingdom creates and supports. Unfortunately we have settled for puny competing storylines that make people poor—in every way. The Spirit is shouting to the Western church to abandon the worldviews and idols that are keeping us from *becoming whole*. This book serves as a gracious but prophetic invitation to partner with God in his mission to enable us to become fully human.

REGGIE MCNEAL

Author of *Kingdom Come* and *Kingdom Collaborators*

Becoming Whole is about the rest of the story, our story and how having it right can help in dealing with poverty and the real needs of people. It examines cultures and religions, even religions that claim they have nothing to do with religion. It is revealing and will cause people to reflect in fresh ways on how they see the world and our role in it.

DARRELL L. BOCK

Executive Director for Cultural Engagement, Howard G. Hendricks Center for Christian Leadership and Cultural Engagement; Senior Research Professor of New Testament Studies, Dallas Theological Seminary

The big story (or the metanarrative) that one lives by is not benign; rather, it really, really matters. Our brothers Fikkert and Kapic show us how to identify

and jettison false metanarratives, like the American Dream, expressive individualism, and consumerism; so that, we can wisely appropriate and live by the True Big Story found in Scripture for the sake of escorting the poor from their impoverishment to a flourishing position, for the sake of our flourishing and personal wholeness, and for the sake of the flourishing of our communities and cities.

LUKE BOBO

Director of Curriculum and Resources, Made to Flourish

Why aren't Christians making more progress at becoming whole? The economic systems that shape our daily lives have been warped to keep us broken, so the world can exploit our brokenness. No one has done more to open our eyes to this, and show us what we can do about it, than Brian Fikkert. He and Kelly M. Kapic bring the whole story of Scripture to bear on God's perspective on what it means to be human and to flourish. This book is a perfect way to start—or continue—the eye-opening process that we all so desperately need if we want to become whole.

GREGORY L. FORSTER

Director of the Oikonomia Network, Trinity International University

This is a book about transformation. I'm grateful that it's not just about how American Christians can help transform the poor, although that is a worthy topic. No, as surrendered people, we need to constantly yield to the Holy Spirit for our own transformation—to become more and more like Jesus Christ. And we are not truly whole until we give and serve and love like Jesus. There is no more urgent, inspiring, and satisfying mission than bringing God's vision of fullness of life to the ends of the earth. Thank you, Brian Fikkert and Kelly Kapic, for this helpful resource for our journey!

EDGAR SANDOVAL SR.

President, World Vision U.S.

Those of us who have tasted the American Dream know that it's not all it's cracked up to be. And when you understand what's happening in the rest of the world, you realize that pursuing it keeps you on the sidelines of God's

great mission. You miss the most exciting adventure there is in life: demonstrating the love of Christ to the “least of these” in ways that draw people to the cross of Christ. *Becoming Whole* is a remarkable sequel to *When Helping Hurts*, and it should be required reading for ministry workers, church leaders, donors, laypeople—everyone responding to God’s call to change the world.

RICHARD STEARNS

President Emeritus, World Vision U.S.

Author of *The Hole in Our Gospel* and *Unfinished*

Becoming Whole challenges the basis for our best intentions toward the poor, which are often consciously or subconsciously founded on American materialism rather than a holistic Christian view of transformation. Although it is a fitting prequel and sequel to *When Helping Hurts*, it is more than this. It lays an engaging, yet theologically comprehensive guide to the foundations of human flourishing.

BRUCE WYDICK

Professor of Economics, University of San Francisco

Distinguished Research Affiliate, University of Notre Dame

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BRIAN FIKKERT & KELLY M. KAPIC

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To Jill, Jessica, Joshua and Morgan, and Anna. Thank you for your faithful love, support, encouragement, and sacrifice. I long for that great day when we all will dwell in the same house again, for then we will be whole, together forever.

~ Dad

To Jay Green and Jeffrey Morton. Thank you for your love, wisdom, laughter, and presence. God has powerfully used you both to patiently nudge me toward becoming whole.

~ Kelly

CONTENTS

Opening Exercise

Preface

Part 1: The Shaping Power of Stories

Introduction: We Need a New Story

1. Love Really Does Make the World Go 'Round
2. How Do Human Beings and Cultures Change?

Part 2: When False Stories Make Helping Hurt

3. You Can Become a Consuming Robot
4. You Can Be a Harp-Playing Ghost Forever

Part 3: God's Story of Change

5. Escaping Flatland
6. Reconsidering Creation: The Key to Understanding Human Flourishing
7. Reconsidering the Fall: More Than Just a Legal Problem
8. Reconsidering Redemption: Fully Embodied Hope
9. The New Creation Dawns
10. Living Into the Story

Acknowledgments

Notes

More from the Author

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OPENING EXERCISE¹

Consider the following hypothetical scenario:

For tax purposes, you must spend \$100 on one or all of the following funding requests from three different ministries. You can allocate the \$100 in any way that you want, but you must spend all \$100 of the money. All three of the proposals come from Christian organizations that are of similar size and age, and that work with materially poor people in the Majority World of Africa, Asia, and Latin America. How much money will you spend on each of these requests for funds?

Microenterprise Organization (“MicOrg”)

MicOrg helps very poor people launch their own microenterprises so they can earn a living. Toward that end, MicOrg staff members provide weekly training in biblical principles of business to small groups comprised of poor people. For the past several years, MicOrg has been pilot testing the use of a new approach that allows the training to be distributed via cellphones. Because there is no longer a need for the small group meetings, this approach saves both the staff and the poor people a lot of time. An evaluation of the pilot has found that those trained via cellphones understand the curricula as well as those trained in the small group meetings. However, the cellphone approach enables MicOrg to cut its costs by 50 percent per beneficiary. MicOrg is seeking funding to install the new cellphone system organization wide, which should lead to a significant cost savings and help the organization to scale its impact.

Health Organization (“HealthOrg”)

HealthOrg provides basic health services in rural regions in the Majority World. HealthOrg has decided that demonic forces are one of the biggest causes of poor physical health in the regions in which they work and that demonic forces are also attacking their organization. HealthOrg believes that unless its large network of frontline healthcare staff is trained in how to engage in spiritual warfare, its traditional medical services alone will be

ineffective. HealthOrg is asking you to help pay for a new Director of Spiritual Integration, who will train staff on how to use prayer and Scripture to combat demonic forces.

Jobs Organization (“JobsOrg”)

JobsOrg provides jobs preparedness training that has been highly successful in helping urban slum dwellers find and keep good jobs. Each lesson of the training integrates a biblical worldview with work skills training on such topics as interviewing for a job, being punctual, writing a résumé, respecting the boss, working hard, and so on. JobsOrg has recently obtained a large grant from the United States government to dramatically increase the scale of its training. However, to maintain the separation of church and state, the grant requires JobsOrg to separate any biblical training by time and location from the work skills training. The US government will pay for the work skills training, and JobsOrg would like you to help pay for additional training sessions that will teach people about salvation through Jesus Christ alone. This overall approach will allow JobsOrg to double the number of people it reaches each year.

Complete the following:

1. Fill in the blanks below with your donations. We will return to your answers later in this book.

The dollar amount you would give to MicOrg is:

The dollar amount you would give to HealthOrg is:

The dollar amount you would give to JobsOrg is:

Total: = \$100

2. Why did you allocate the funds the way you did?

PREFACE

In 2009, Steve Corbett and I (Brian) wrote a book called *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty without Hurting the Poor ... and Yourself* (*WHH*), wherein we articulated a biblically based, relationally focused approach to caring for people who are poor. We argued that while we should do more to help materially poor people, good intentions are not enough. It is possible to hurt poor people in the process of trying to help them. So, we need to abandon strategies that undermine dignity, diminish capacity, and create unhealthy dependency. And we need to increase the use of approaches that are truly empowering. In the ten years since *WHH* was published, readers have had three general types of responses.

The first group of readers accepted the basic premises of *WHH*, but they weren't always sure what to do next. Many ministry leaders still ask, "Could you visit us and examine our ministry? We want to know if we are doing it right." Similarly, many donors regularly ask, "Which poverty alleviation ministries should we give our money to? Who is really doing it right?"

Behind these questions is a heartfelt desire to be good stewards of God's resources in order to bring positive change to the lives of materially poor people. Many people really do want to help without hurting. At the same time, these questions reveal a sense of inadequacy that many of us feel. The causes of poverty are extremely complex, and the solutions usually are unclear. To make matters worse, even followers of Jesus Christ do not have a shared understanding of what success in poverty alleviation looks like or how to get there. It's often difficult to determine who is "doing it right" when we don't even have a common conception of what "right" is or how to achieve it.

This book and its companion, *A Field Guide to Becoming Whole: Principles for Poverty Alleviation Ministries*, is our attempt to address this confusion by creating a more systematic model than that provided in *WHH*. Of course, we cannot provide poverty alleviation ministries with a detailed, one-size-fits-all recipe that can be used to design everything from after-school tutoring programs in the United States to medical clinics in Zimbabwe. Each ministry and each context are different. Similarly, we cannot provide donors with a list of organizations that are worthy of their

support. We don't have enough knowledge about most ministries to be able to create such a list, and we are not qualified to be the judges of the entire poverty alleviation movement! However, we do hope that God will use this book and the companion *Field Guide* to equip His people with a common set of lenses through which they can view any poverty alleviation effort.

A second group of readers decided not to try to help poor people at all, saying that they were afraid of hurting poor people in the process of trying to help them. While for some this response reflected a sincere desire not to do harm, we fear that others may be using *WHH* as an excuse to justify their lack of concern for the poor. Many of us, including we authors, often just want to maintain the status quo in our lives. Many times, we don't want to heed the Bible's command to "spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed" (Isa. 58:10). Often we just want to come home at night, lock the doors, and watch Netflix or ESPN in peace and quiet. Regardless of the motivation, inaction is simply not an acceptable response. Both the Old and New Testaments indicate that caring for the poor is one of the primary indicators of saving faith (Isa. 58:1–12; 1 John 3:17–18). Doing nothing is simply not an option for a follower of Jesus Christ.

This book is highly relevant for this second group of readers—those who have chosen not to help the poor at all. For the subset of this second group that sincerely wants to help but are afraid of doing harm, we hope that the model presented in this book will provide some more direction for moving forward effectively in any setting. *There is definitely no need to be paralyzed.* And for the subset of the second group that really just doesn't want to care for the poor—a problem with which we all struggle in some form or another—the material in this book truly is good news: *there is a better life than the one you are currently living, a life of greater flourishing for both you and for people who are materially poor.* Press on!

The third group read *WHH* and decided that there was nothing wrong with what they were doing, so they just maintained the status quo in their poverty alleviation ministries. Sure, the church down the street was doing some things that hurt poor people, but their own church's approach was just fine. Perhaps. Or maybe these readers didn't really understand the radical nature of what *WHH* was saying. Indeed, I am still learning what the core messages of *WHH* really mean in my own life, even though I coauthored the book!

If you are in the third group and maintained the status quo in your poverty

alleviation ministries, we think this book is for you too. We believe the status quo isn't working, not just in our ministries but in our lives in general. There is a better way of being in the world. We don't have all the answers to how to best live in our world and how to effectively alleviate poverty, but we do believe that the messages of this book, which are deeply rooted in God's mission, can move all of us to a much better place than the status quo.

HOW DO THESE BOOKS RELATE TO *WHEN HELPING HURTS*?

This book provides a more systematic treatment of the underlying concepts and principles foundational to *WHH*. This book, then, is sort of a *prequel* to *WHH*, and readers of both books will definitely notice some overlap.

At the same time, a large amount of material in this book is not in *WHH*. In particular, drawing on recent insights from theologians, philosophers, scientists, and practitioners, this book employs deeper theology, anthropology, and cosmology than *WHH* in order to articulate a model of human and cultural change that can be used to improve any poverty alleviation initiative. Building on this foundation, the companion *Field Guide* then articulates principles that can be implemented to design more effective poverty alleviation ministries. Some of these principles are in *WHH*, but many of them are not. Hence, because so much of the material is new, in some sense these two books are the *sequel* to *WHH*. In summary, whereas this book and the *Field Guide* provide a systematic, overarching framework to help readers design more effective poverty alleviation ministries—and thus summarize the operating system behind *WHH*—*WHH* fleshes out how to apply some of these principles in concrete situations.

So should you read *WHH* or this series first? It's up to you! However, we guess that most people would benefit from first reading *WHH*, then reading this book, and then reading the *Field Guide*. The reason for this is that some of the concepts in this series are more challenging to grasp than those in *WHH*, making this series a somewhat more advanced treatment of effective poverty alleviation.

INTENDED AUDIENCE

This book is relevant for anybody seeking to alleviate poverty, including ministry leaders, staff, volunteers, boards, donors, and individuals. It is particularly focused on those involved with Christian ministries that are directly interfacing with materially poor people. Hence, some of the content will be slightly less relevant for organizations working in other domains, e.g., organizations seeking to change public policy at a national or international level; however, even readers working in such arenas should find most of the content to be highly relevant to their work.

GETTING OUR STORY STRAIGHT

At the heart of poverty alleviation is change. We are trying to help poor people move from their current condition to a better one. Fostering such change requires us to understand the very nature of human beings, of human flourishing, and of God Himself. God has a plan for changing the entire world—including poor people and ourselves—and since God is all-powerful, we would be wise to get on board with His story, His plan for change.

These issues are deeply theological in nature. As a result, I asked my dear friend Kelly M. Kapic to join me as a coauthor on this book. Kelly is far too humble to say this about himself, but he is an internationally respected theologian who has focused much of his work on the Trinity and on exploring questions about human nature and relationships, making him an ideal partner for this project. Just as Steve Corbett has been a huge mentor to me in general and in the writing of *WHH* in particular, Kelly has been discipling me on these theological issues for the past decade, deeply impacting me both professionally and personally. Although there are two authors, whenever “I” appears in this book, it refers to me (Brian).

As we shall see, the poverty alleviation initiatives used by many Christians are deeply rooted in false “metanarratives,” overarching accounts of the nature of God, of human beings, and of the world. Metanarratives lead to a “story of change,” an understanding of the goal of life and of how that goal can be achieved. Every poverty alleviation ministry, either explicitly or implicitly, embodies a story of change in its design, execution, and measured outcomes. If we hold a false understanding of the nature of God, of human beings, or of the world, our story of change will be wrong, and we will harm

poor people in the very process of trying to help them.

This means that developing more effective poverty alleviation strategies involves far more than simply adopting new tools and techniques, as important as those are. Rather, it involves the more profound act of both recognizing and repenting of cultural lies that are deeply embedded in Western civilization and the Western church, lies that we often unconsciously perpetuate in the design of our poverty alleviation ministries. The good news is that as we repent, we move more deeply into the only story of change that is true: God's story of change for the entire universe, including people who are poor ... and ourselves.

Toward that end, Part 1 of this book sets the stage, examining how the stories of change that we believe—whether those stories are true or false—profoundly shape every aspect of our lives, impacting even the cells in our bodies. Part 2 then describes several common but misguided stories of change that are shaping our lives, including our approaches to poverty alleviation. As we shall see, the fact that our poverty alleviation efforts often do harm is because we have—unknowingly and unconsciously, yet deeply and destructively—absorbed misguided stories of change from our culture. In order to get our story of change straightened out, Part 3 attempts to articulate God's story of change, which is both more marvelous and more mysterious than anything we could ever imagine or describe. In the process, we will pay particular attention to the implications of God's story of change for our poverty alleviation efforts. Building upon this framework, the *Field Guide* articulates very practical principles that can be used to design, evaluate, and improve poverty alleviation ministries in light of God's story of change—that is, in line with the way that the world really works and the direction in which it is actually heading.

THE HEROES ON THE FRONT LINES

We would like to highlight two challenges in writing a book about subjects like poverty alleviation and the gospel.

First, our culture often gives lots of accolades to authors. But the real heroes are the sacrificial servants working in front-line ministry who normally don't have time to write books. Although our work with the

Chalmers Center at Covenant College gives us years of experience in the field of poverty alleviation, it is the faithful practitioners who are the real heroes, as they seek to hold together ministry that is holistic amid the endless storms of life. This book is meant to honor these faithful servants, highlighting the many lessons we have learned from them about both working in poverty alleviation and living faithfully in this broken world. We want theology, research, and practice to be held together, rather than pitted against one another. We want compassion and confession, mercy and meaning, realism and hope. We don't want to choose. So, inspired by many on the front lines, we are offering you what we pray will be biblically, academically, and experientially sound guidance that will help all of us in our diverse callings to see the embodiment of the gospel in our lives and communities.

Second, we authors are very much a work in progress. As our family, friends, and coworkers can attest, we are a long, long way from becoming whole. We struggle every day to live out the concepts in this book, and often we fail more than we succeed. That said, we have confidence that He who began a good work in us will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus, that great day when we'll join all God's people in finally becoming whole (Phil. 1:6). Come quickly, Lord Jesus!

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

If you haven't done so already, complete the “Opening Exercise” that precedes this preface—the exercise about allocating \$100 to various ministries—before you continue reading. Really—stop and do that right now. You will need to use your answers to that exercise later in the book.

We hope God uses this book to affect your mind, feelings, and actions. Such impact is less likely to happen if you simply read through the book. Toward that end, we have included questions called “Initial Thoughts” before each Part, and at the end of each Part are “Reflection Questions.” Throughout this book, you'll notice sections with green asterisks above and below the text. These sections offer further research, examples, or applications of ideas being discussed in the main text. It is vital that you take the time to prayerfully and thoughtfully work through all the questions and applications, as they are an integral part of engaging with the material and applying it to your own life.

HOW *NOT* TO USE THESE BOOKS

We hope the two books in this series will enable readers to foster more effective approaches to poverty alleviation. One of the keys to making this happen will be for donors to increase funding for more effective ministries and to decrease funding for those that are less effective. However, in most cases, these books should *not* be used as the basis for immediately cutting off funding to a ministry. No ministry is perfect, including the Chalmers Center at Covenant College, under whose auspices this book has been written. Moreover, many of the concepts that will be discussed are new ideas to many ministries. They need to be given time to process these concepts and to determine whether they need to make any adjustments to their work. An attitude of patience and grace should prevail, since all of us—ministries, donors, and materially poor people—are still in process this side of Christ's second coming.

That said, we so believe the concepts and principles discussed in these books are profoundly important, and that widespread disregard of these ideas

can do real harm to materially poor people and to those who are trying to help them. Thus, in cases in which a ministry is clearly doing considerable harm and is unwilling to even consider making changes, it may be necessary to remove funding from this ministry relatively quickly.

May God grant all of us the wisdom and humility we need to truly help without hurting.

ABOUT THE ANECDOTES

To the best of our knowledge, all the anecdotes included in this book are true. However, the names of some individuals, churches, and organizations have been changed to protect their identities, unless those names have been previously revealed in other publications from which the anecdotes were taken.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

These two books are only an introduction to some incredibly complex issues. You will find additional resources and learning opportunities at the Chalmers Center at Covenant College (www.chalmers.org).

WE NEED GOD’S HELP

We do not want this book to simply be an intellectual exercise. Rather, we are praying that God will use this book, as imperfect as it is, to deeply impact the lives of His people. Toward that end, we encourage readers to join us in examining ourselves before the Lord, praying to God as David did:

Search me, O God, and know my heart!

Try me and know my thoughts!

And see if there be any grievous way in me,

and lead me in the way everlasting! (Ps. 139:23–24 ESV)

May God grant all of us both wisdom and obedience as we press into His grand story of change for poor people—and ourselves.

PART 1

**THE SHAPING
POWER OF
STORIES**

INITIAL THOUGHTS

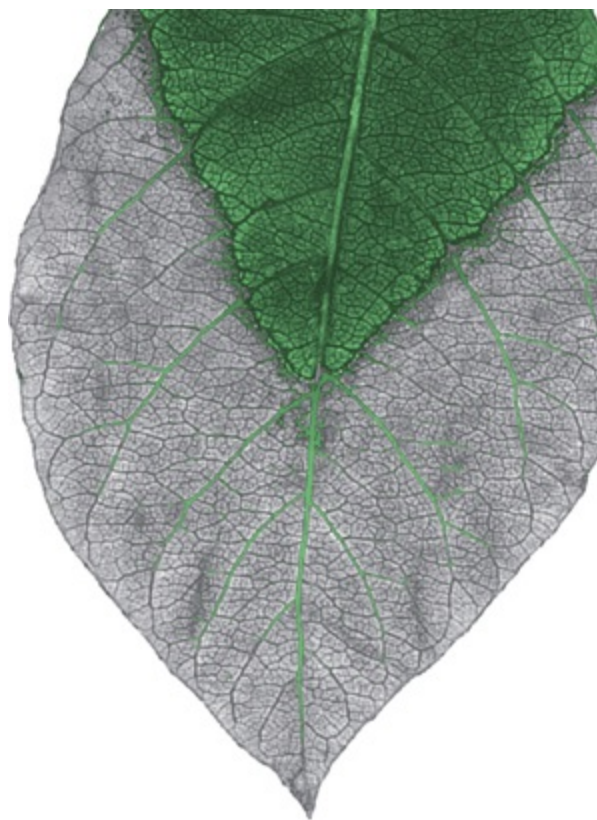
PLEASE WRITE SHORT ANSWERS TO THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

1. *In what ways is America a better place to live than it was, say, thirty to fifty years ago? In what ways is it worse? If you are too young to answer this question, ask an older person.*

2. *When you think about God, what three qualities about Him come most quickly to your mind?*

3. *How do you define success in your life? What are you doing to achieve this success?*

4. *Think back over your life. How have you changed over time? Ask people you trust to give you honest feedback.*



INTRODUCTION

WE NEED A NEW STORY

What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of postwar history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.¹

—FRANCIS FUKUYAMA, POLITICAL SCIENTIST, 1989

If one looks at the world scene from a missionary point of view, surely the most striking fact is that, while in great areas of Asia and Africa the church is growing, often growing rapidly, in the lands which were once called Christendom it is in decline.... Can there be an effective missionary encounter with *this* [Western] culture—this so powerful, persuasive, and confident culture which (at least until very recently) simply regarded itself as “the coming world civilization”?²

—LESSLIE NEWBIGIN, MISSIOLOGIST, 1985

Something has gone terribly wrong in America. Life feels unstable and uncertain, as if the foundations are shifting somehow. But it's difficult to pinpoint exactly what's changing, why it's changing, and where it's all heading. All we know is there's a gnawing sense of anxiety that wasn't there before. This is definitely the age of anxiety.

We didn't always feel this way, at least not to this extent. Only several decades ago, many from the dominant American culture—middle- to upper-class white Americans—were remarkably optimistic, not just about our future, but about the future of the entire world. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union led many to believe that *Pax Americana*, an era of American-led peace and prosperity, would become the new world order. Indeed, little could hinder the United States, the world's lone superpower, from exporting Western values and institutions across the globe.

Globalization was there to accelerate this process. As multinational corporations, technology, financial capital, information, and entertainment

crisscrossed borders at lightning speed, the global economy and the world's metropolises became increasingly Western. One can now order a Big Mac and Coke in virtually any major city of the world.

The 1990s was a decade of great confidence for America. We had won the Cold War. Freedom was better; democracy was better; and capitalism was better. The whole world was finally recognizing what America had known all along: the American Dream is the best story in the history of the world.³

Then, almost overnight, it all seemed to go up in smoke.

The hotly contested Bush-Gore presidential election of November 2000 eroded trust in the political process and left Americans bitterly divided. Unfortunately, disillusionment and cynicism have only increased since then, as legislative gridlock, wealthy lobbyists, shameless deception, and questionable Supreme Court decisions have further eroded Americans' trust—not just in our current leaders, but in the very institutions of our government.

Americans are losing trust in one another as well. Not only do Group A and Group B have honest disagreements about the best policies, they no longer accept each other as people of good will, and they are willing to use whatever means necessary to destroy each other. Indeed, the airwaves and social media have degenerated into mindless vitriol, making reasonable discourse nearly impossible. We no longer have *E Pluribus Unum*—"out of many, one." Rather, we have *E Pluribus Tribalism*.

Concurrent with our internal political struggles, the surreal images of the 9/11 attacks on the Pentagon and World Trade Center—symbols of American military and economic might—brought the world's lone superpower to its knees. Life has never been the same since. Heightened airport security, color-coded warnings of threat levels, and repeated acts of terrorism remind us that we're not as safe as we once were. Additionally, a steady stream of mass murders instigated by racists, lonely schoolboys, and deranged men have become almost commonplace. On top of that, unresolved racial tensions and police shootings of unarmed African Americans have resulted in protests, and even some reprisals, further dividing us along ethnic lines. *Pax Americana*? We don't even have *Pax Neighborhood*!

Our confidence in our economic system has been shaken as well. The Great Recession at the start of the twenty-first century was the most devastating economic crisis since the Great Depression, causing property

foreclosures and unemployment to skyrocket. Moreover, the fundamental structure of the economy changed as new technology, foreign competition, and outsourcing moved jobs from the Rust Belt to Silicon Valley. As a result, blue-collar wages have stagnated, and income and wealth inequality have exploded. Alarming, the share of America's total income accruing to the top 1 percent of households is now equal to the share earned by the bottom 70 percent combined!⁴

These economic realities have created not only financial hardships, but also a deep crisis of confidence, leaving many Americans feeling that the entire economic system is rigged against them. Indeed, both the Great Recession itself and the remedies that followed raised suspicions that elites in Washington and Wall Street had colluded to line their pockets at the expense of the average taxpayer. And some suspect that these same elites are colluding with their foreign peers, negotiating unfair trade deals to advance their own interests at the expense of American workers.

As trust in the very integrity of our economic system has crumbled, the tribalism has intensified. Everybody is to blame: the Democrats, the Republicans, the Tea Party, the elites, the uneducated, the academics, the urbanites, the rural, the Chinese, the immigrants, the whites, the blacks, the Hispanics—whoever.

Community is breaking down at the local level too. Americans are withdrawing from engaging with civic organizations, their neighbors, and even their own families.⁵ Harvard Professor Robert Putnam once lamented that Americans were “bowling alone;” increasingly, we’re also eating alone, as nobody is home for dinner.⁶ The tribalism is largely superficial, masking our deeper problem: *extreme individualism*.⁷

Indeed, individualism is at the very foundation of Western civilization in general and of America in particular. At its best, individualism has blessed the world with institutions that uphold human dignity, freedom, and justice for all. But at its core, individualism reflects a fundamentally unbiblical understanding of human beings and human flourishing. And when individualism is combined with Western civilization's materialistic worldview, the result is a highly self-centered, consumeristic society.

Welcome to twenty-first century America: *E Pluribus Consumerism*.

Unfortunately, the Western church is on shaky ground as well. In a culture that is increasingly cynical about any claims to objective truth, damage is

done when the church's behavior suggests that it doesn't believe in the objective truths that it supposedly upholds. The Bible says, "Blessed are the meek" (Matt. 5:5), but the church seems fixated on wielding political power at home and abroad. The Bible says, "You cannot serve both God and money" (Matt. 6:24), but the church seems as materialistic as the surrounding culture. The Bible says, "Spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed" (Isa. 58:10), but the church seems largely indifferent to the plight of the poor and marginalized right in its own backyard.

Hence, it isn't too surprising that millennials, who crave authenticity, can smell a rat. Indeed, millennials are abandoning the church in droves: only 20 percent of all millennials believe church attendance is important, and 35 percent take an anti-church stance.⁸ Ironically, when millennials leave the church, they plunge headlong into American culture, becoming even more individualistic and consumeristic than their ancestors.⁹ And so the cycle continues.

Our recent problems didn't just happen overnight. Rather, much of what we're experiencing is the consequence of longstanding issues that are deeply embedded within the dominant American culture. And many from America's subdominant cultures, including minorities and the poor, have been painfully aware of these problems for far, far longer than people from the dominant culture.

THE PARADOX OF UNHAPPY GROWTH

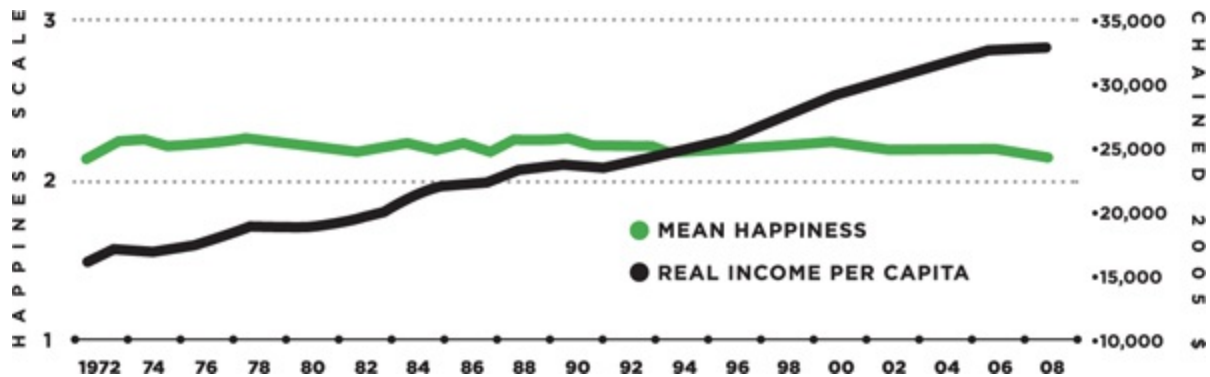
Undoubtedly, Western civilization's emphasis on individual rights has given us values and institutions that uphold human dignity, freedom, and justice for all. In particular, the West's market-based economies have generally rewarded human creativity, entrepreneurship, and hard work, providing unprecedented opportunities for the majority of Western civilization to rise out of material poverty. When viewed against the backdrop of human history, this is a phenomenal accomplishment.

But we also need to ask some serious questions about the overall impact of Western culture on human flourishing. Consider this: while real income per capita *tripled* in the US between 1946 and 2014, the self-reported happiness

of the average American stayed the same (see [Figure I.1](#)).¹⁰ We got richer, but not happier. And we're not alone. Similar results have been found for a number of other wealthy nations.¹¹

FIGURE I.1

Long-Run Trends in Average US Income and Self-Reported Happiness

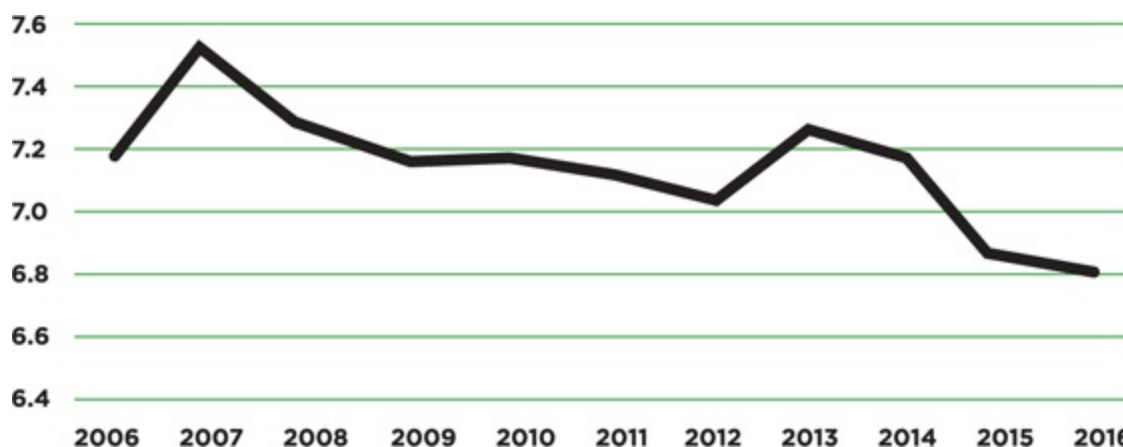


Adapted from Rubén Hernández-Murillo, Christopher J. Martinek, “Dismal Science Tackles Happiness Data,” *The Regional Economist* 18, no. 1 (January 2010), 15.

Moreover, in the last ten years, Americans have reported a steady decline in overall life satisfaction, despite the fact that average income per capita increased by 5.5 percent (see [Figure I.2](#)). We got richer, but became less happy.¹² Something has gone terribly wrong.

FIGURE I.2

Recent Trends in Average US Self-Reported Happiness (Cantril Ladder)



Adapted from Jeffrey D. Sachs, “Restoring American Happiness,” in *World Happiness Report 2017*, John F. Helliwell, Richard Layard, and Jeffrey D. Sachs, eds. (New York: Sustainable Development Solutions Network, 2017), 179.

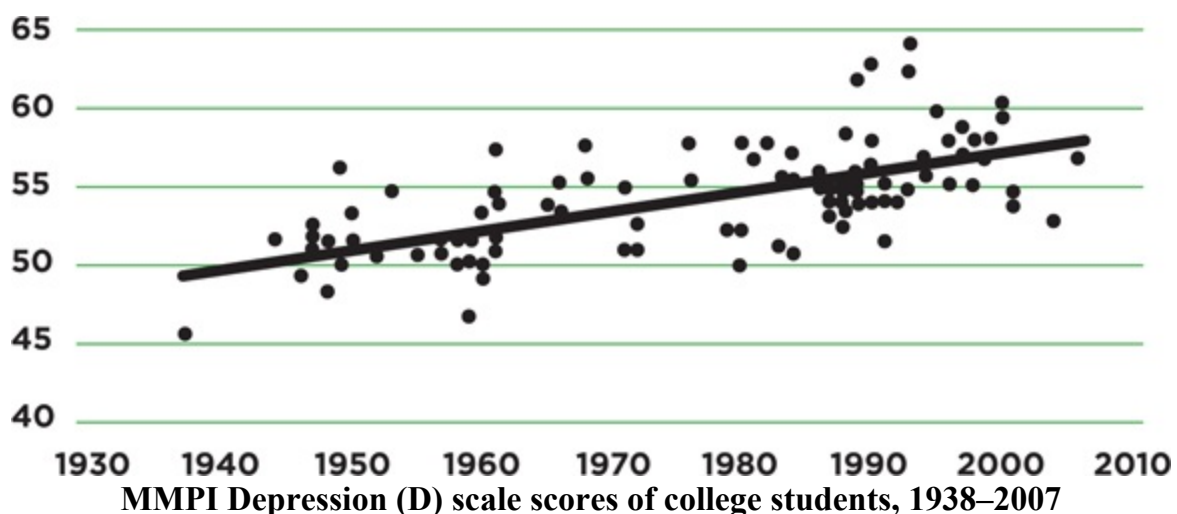
Additionally, a number of more objective measures of physical, social, and psychological health are on the decline in the US as well.¹³ For example, life expectancy dropped in 2015, as death rates increased for nine of the top ten leading causes of death: heart disease, chronic lower respiratory illness, unintentional injury, stroke, Alzheimer's, diabetes, influenza and pneumonia, kidney disease, and suicide. Commenting on this data, one health expert remarked, "There's this just across-the-board phenomenon of not doing very well in the United States."¹⁴

Even our bodies indicate something has gone terribly wrong in America.

While the decline in Americans' overall well-being has accelerated in recent years, it is actually not a new phenomenon. From the late 1930s to the present, a period of sustained economic growth, depression, anxiety, and other mental health problems among America's youth have markedly increased (see Figure I.3).¹⁵ The suicide rate for Americans under age 24 increased by 137 percent from 1950 to 1999¹⁶ and by an additional 24 percent from 1999 to 2014 for all age groups combined.¹⁷ Unfortunately, the church is not immune to all this, as depression and anxiety among Christians has increased as well.¹⁸

FIGURE I.3

Long-Run Trends in Depression Among US College Students



Adapted from Jean M. Twenge, Brittany Gentile, C. Nathan DeWall, Debbie Ma, Katharine Lacefield, David R. Schurtz, "Birth Cohort Increases in Psychopathology among Young Americans, 1938–2007: A Cross-Temporal Meta-Analysis of the MMPI", *Clinical*

We will examine the causes for the long-run decline in Americans' mental health more in chapter 3, but for now, consider the assessment by Jean Twenge, a leading social psychologist:

I think the research tells us that modern life is not good for mental health.... Obviously there's a lot of good things about societal and technological progress, and in a lot of ways our lives are much easier than, say, our grandparents' or great-grandparents' lives. But there's a paradox here that we seem to have so much ease and relative economic prosperity compared to previous centuries, yet there's this dissatisfaction, there's this unhappiness, there are these mental health issues in terms of depression and anxiety.¹⁹

Something has gone terribly wrong in America. We all know it, and even our nerve endings can feel it.

The fact that we have achieved unprecedented economic prosperity without corresponding increases in our well-being is completely counter to the basic assumptions of Western civilization. As a result, swarms of Western economists are currently trying to discredit this result, which they refer to as "the paradox of unhappy growth."²⁰ How could it be that we have attained such wealth without increasing human flourishing?

* * *

The Loneliness Epidemic

The British Government has a new senior position: the Minister of Loneliness. Prime Minister Theresa May created the office to address the social and health issues caused by increasing levels of social isolation. May explains, "For far too many people, loneliness is the sad reality of modern life."²¹ And the data support May's claim: nine million British people say they "often or always" feel lonely, and 200,000 of the elderly report not having had a conversation with a friend or relative in over a month.²²

The United Kingdom is not unique. Researchers have found that more than

half a million people in Japan stay at home for at least six months at a time without having any contact with the outside world.²³ Similarly, rates of loneliness in the US have doubled since the 1980s, reaching “epidemic levels” in which nearly half of Americans report that they “sometimes or always” feel alone. The problem is particularly acute for younger people, with Generation Z, born in 1997 or later, and millennials, born between 1982 and 1996, being lonelier and in worse health than older generations.²⁴

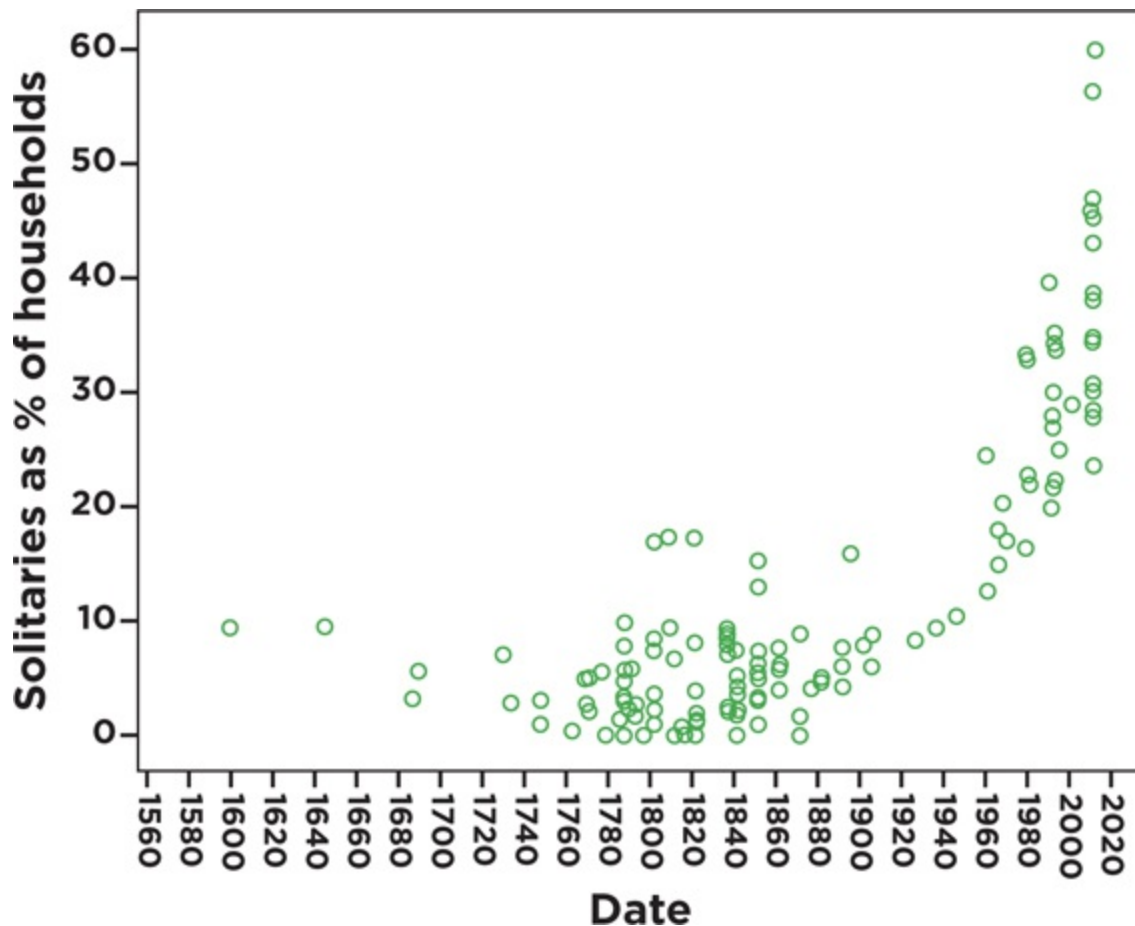
Although there is no data measuring loneliness over long periods of time, a recent study demonstrates that the number of people living alone (solitaries) has dramatically increased in recent years.²⁵ As pictured below, from 1500–1960, the percentage of people living alone in Europe, Japan, and the United States rarely exceeded 10 percent, but starting in 1960 that figure skyrocketed.

In addition to the emotional pain that it causes, loneliness has serious physical ramifications. Vivek Murthy, former surgeon-general of the United States, recalls, “During my years caring for patients, the most common pathology I saw was not heart disease or diabetes; it was loneliness,” which is associated with a decrease in life span similar to that caused by smoking 15 cigarettes a day.²⁶ Indeed, researchers have found that loneliness is consistently linked to increased incidence of heart attack, strokes, cancers, depression, anxiety, and premature death.²⁷

FIGURE I.4

Single-Person Households as Percent of Total

(Data from Selected Regions of Europe, Japan, and the United States)



Data from Figure 1 of K.D.M. Snell, “The Rise of Living Alone and Loneliness in History,” *Social History* 42, no. 1 (2017): 8.

While the causes of the increase in loneliness are still being debated, a growing number of observers are pointing to the modern economy, which fosters the pursuit of materialistic individualism and replaces human interaction with impersonal transactions.²⁸ Is it possible that modern economic prosperity is a case of when helping hurts? See the [related discussion](#) in chapter 3.

* * *

WE NEED A DIFFERENT STORY

If you picked up this book because you want to learn how to alleviate poverty more effectively, you may be wondering why we started off describing these disturbing trends in American culture. Why aren’t we talking about poor

people and how to help them?

We believe these disturbing trends reveal a tragic irony in our poverty alleviation efforts. On one hand, many of us can sense that there is something wrong with both Western civilization and the Western church. We can tell they aren't working, and we don't like who we've become. On the other hand, the unstated assumption behind most of our poverty alleviation efforts is that the goal is to make poor people just like us. We implicitly believe that we have exactly what the poor need, so we try to turn Uganda into the United States and America's inner cities into its affluent suburbs. Thus, we design our poverty alleviation initiatives—our interventions, operations, staffing, funding, marketing, metrics, messages, and goals—to help poor people pursue the American Dream.

But why would we want to do that? We are not okay. You can feel it, and we can feel it. And as we shall see later, as poor people become more like us, they can feel it too.

The American Dream is the wrong story, for both poor people and ourselves. We all need a different story, a better story, for the stories we believe profoundly shape us, impacting every aspect of our lives, including even the innermost aspects of our bodies and souls. Hence, if we are trying to live out the wrong story, one that doesn't fit who we really are as creatures, we simply cannot flourish. It's like being miscast for a role in a movie. No matter how hard you try to play the role, it just doesn't work.

For example, imagine you're asked to play the role of the jockey who rides Secretariat, the greatest race horse of all time. And imagine you're 6' 10" like me (Brian). No matter how hard you try, you just can't play the part. The horse's back strains under your weight, and when your feet fall out of the stirrups, they drag on the ground. The horse can barely move with you on his back, much less run at breakneck speed. No matter how hard you try to crunch up and be small, you simply can't do it. You are who you are.

As the filming drags on, things only get worse. Your neck, shoulders, and legs ache. The horse runs away every time you approach him, fearing that you're going to break his back. The director gets frustrated about having to reshoot every scene. The entire crew is discouraged, as they know the movie will flop. And your own self-image plummets, because you feel like a failure as an actor.

Now imagine that the filming lasts for decades. Things never get better.

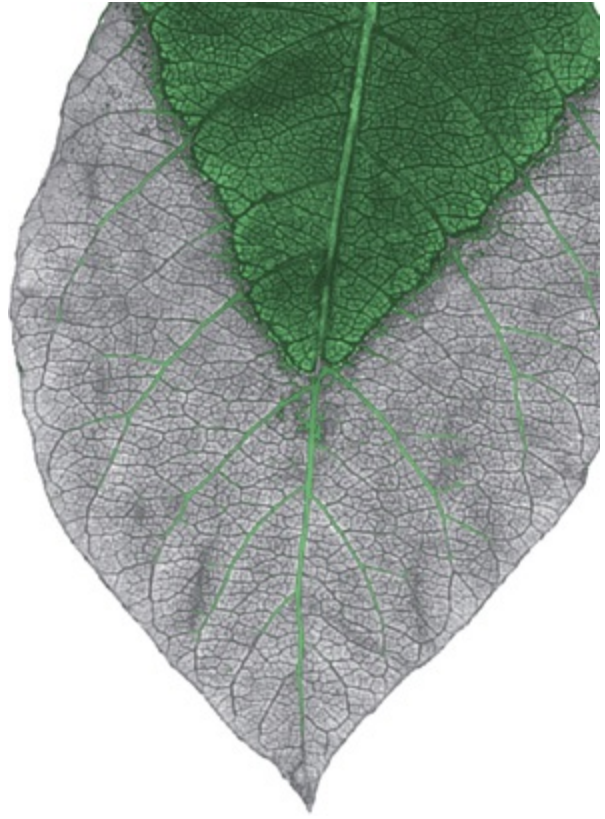
But for some reason, everybody keeps trying to make it work, rather than selecting a different script that would fit you better.

This is the life we are living. We keep trying to live out the story of Western civilization, even though it doesn't fit who we are as human beings. And we keep asking poor people to join us in the story, giving them roles to play that don't fit them either. But we haven't just been trying to live this story for decades; we've been trying to live it for centuries. We need a better story, one that fits who we really are as human beings. Unfortunately, we don't even realize there are different scripts we could try out.

You see, the story of poverty alleviation shouldn't be to turn Uganda into the United States or the inner cities into the suburbs, for all these places are *fundamentally broken*. Rather, the right story calls for all these places to become more like the New Jerusalem. That's God's story. It's the only story that is actually true, the only story in which we can actually play the roles for which we've been created. It's the only story that actually works.

That's what this book is all about: helping us to change the story of our lives in general and of our poverty alleviation efforts in particular. To do this, we'll need to throw away the script we already know—the one that Western civilization has been asking us to live for centuries. That sounds scary, and it is. But it gets even scarier: we won't be able to give you a whole new script, because we don't even fully know what that script looks like. Just like you, we authors have been immersed in the false story of Western civilization our entire lives, so we don't fully know what it looks like to live out God's alternative story. But we do know this: God's people can't continue defaulting to the story of Western civilization. That script isn't working, and it never will.

Hence, this book won't give you a detailed script in which every line in the story is laid out in advance; rather it's more like an invitation for you to improvise with us.²⁹ Of course, in any improv, the actors need a prompt to get started, and in some ways this book serves as that prompt. Although we'll give you more guidance than most prompts do, going forward we all will need to experiment with how God's story applies in our own contexts, making mistakes, trying again, and sharing with one another the lessons we've learned. As we do, we will be improvising God's story together, a story that is already breaking forth into this world, making all the other stories come untrue for both poor people ... and ourselves.



CHAPTER ONE

LOVE REALLY DOES MAKE THE WORLD GO 'ROUND

The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?

—JEREMIAH 17:9

We were poor on the outside, but also on the inside, because poverty starts in the heart.¹

—CELESTIN, A VERY POOR MAN IN RWANDA, 2014

I (Brian) recently visited a nursing home full of elderly people whom I had known in their younger years. As a boy, I had delivered newspapers to their doors, cut their lawns, and run errands for them. It had been many decades since I had seen most of them, so it was a bit surreal to see my old customers all hunched over, feeble, and walking with canes.

Mr. Gordon was there, beaming brighter than ever. He had always had a positive attitude, but now, despite his aging body and the recent death of his wife of over fifty years, his face simply glowed. I reached out to shake his right hand, but he quickly clasped my hand between both of his. I asked how he was doing, expecting him to be grieving the recent loss of the love of his life. His eyes twinkled as he said, “Oh, I couldn’t be better! Look at the wonderful life I’ve had, and look at where I am going! I will be with my wife again soon. God has been so good to me. How could I possibly complain?” Mr. Gordon had always been special, but now the joy emanating from his face seemed almost otherworldly. He was the same as always, but different.

As I walked down the hallway of the nursing home, I suddenly felt the hair stand up on the back of my neck. *No, it couldn’t be him*, I thought. I got a little closer. Sure enough, although his hair was now gray and his face shriveled, this was old “Scrooge,” the nickname we had given him as kids. As a boy, I was afraid to walk past Scrooge’s house, for if my foot would even slip just partway onto his lawn, he would rush out of his house,

screaming at me to get off his property. Hoping that age had mellowed him, I got a little closer, but I could immediately see that the scowl that had terrified me as a kid looked more bitter, angry, and hateful than ever. Like Mr. Gordon, Mr. Scrooge was who he had always been, only much more so.

On my way out, I saw Mrs. Anderson. I had always remembered her as an anxious and depressed person. I didn't know the details, but I knew she'd had a hard life due to some bad personal choices she had made. I was surprised to see that her demeanor had changed. She wasn't beaming like Mr. Gordon, but there was a peace and calm on her face, and she had a slight but sweet smile I had never seen before. Unlike Mr. Gordon and Mr. Scrooge, Mrs. Anderson wasn't who she had always been. She had become something entirely new.

As I left the nursing home, I reflected on the fact that all three of these people had changed over time. Two of them had become more intense versions of who they had always been, and one had reversed course completely. We are not static creatures; rather, we all are becoming something.

But what are we becoming? Can it be predicted? Can we choose what we become? And how does the fact that we all are becoming something inform the way we walk with materially poor people? Can we help them change? If so, to what? And if individuals can change, what about communities, institutions, or even nations? Can they change for the better too? If so, how? And what does "better" even mean?

To provide at least some partial answers to these questions, we will describe God's "story of change." A story of change—often referred to as a "theory of change" in the social service sector—answers two key questions:

1. What is the goal of life?
2. How can this goal be achieved?²

Stories of change are powerful. The stories of change that we believe—whether true or false—shape our entire lives, impacting even our nerve endings. Unfortunately, several common but misguided stories of change are shaping our lives, including our approaches to poverty alleviation. The fact that our poverty alleviation efforts often do harm is because we—unknowingly and unconsciously, yet deeply and destructively—have absorbed misguided stories of change from our culture. In order to get our story of change corrected, we need to embrace God's story of change, which is more marvelous and more mysterious than anything we could ever imagine

or describe. And God's story of change has profound implications for our poverty alleviation efforts.

Before we dive headfirst into exploring God's story of change and the false ones we've embraced, we must first understand the nature of our God and of this creature called a "human being."

OUR GOD IS A RELATIONAL GOD

What was God doing before He created the world? Was He bored? More importantly, was God able to be loving even before He made angels, people, or trees?

Christians believe that God was never bored, nor was there a time when He wasn't full of love. How can that be? Because this one God always has been a Trinity. From all eternity, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have existed in loving, intimate communion. At the very core of God's triune being is love, for "God is love" (1 John 4:8).³ It may sound strange, but it is true and right: God loves Himself. This is only possible because of the distinctive truth that this God is eternally Father, Son, and Spirit.

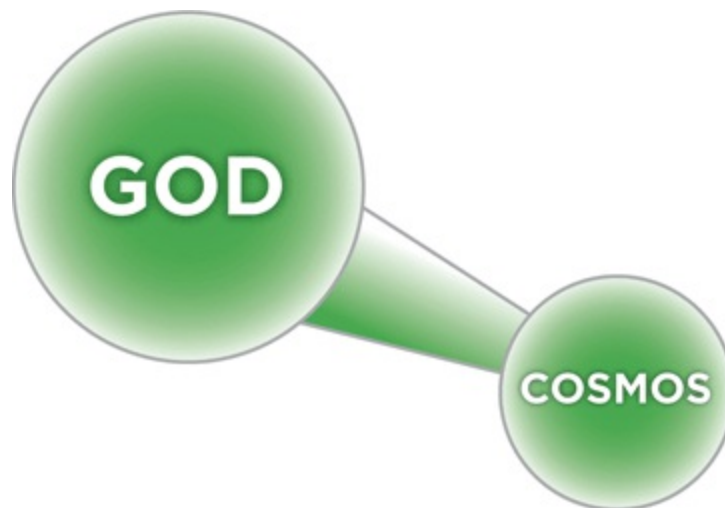
God did not create the world in order to become loving. Rather, He created because He is loving. If we're ever going to reflect God's heart to a hurting world, we must start with this basic truth: God is love. And since He creates the physical world out of His triune love, He doesn't reluctantly love the goldfish, clouds, mountains, and elephants. He does so freely and joyfully. Similarly, no one has to convince God to look with compassion on a hurting child or homeless person. God loves each and every one of us as His creations. And because the loving Creator loves all His creatures, it makes sense that we should too.

Because God loves *before* He creates the physical world, love precedes matter. We need to be careful with this truth, because matter really matters. In fact, the Western church's underappreciation of the physical realm has created all sorts of problems. Yet while the material world is deeply important to God, there is a sense in which loving relationships are even more ultimate, more foundational, and more solid to the working of the cosmos than the sidewalk under our feet. God's love is more trustworthy than the very ground we walk on.⁴

The loving relationships within the inner life of the Trinity overflow not simply as the triune God creates His world, but as He continues to care for it.⁵ God didn't just wind up the world like a watch and then hope it would keep running on its own. No, God remains actively concerned about His world. The entire cosmos was originally created and is now sustained by the Father, through the Son, and in the Spirit (Gen. 1:1–2; John 1:1–10; Rom. 8:18–27; Col. 1:15–20; Heb. 1:1–3). God is not detached from the everyday affairs of this world (see [Figure 1.1](#)). Rather, as a relational being, He is deeply and actively involved with His world, “sustaining all things by his powerful word” (Heb. 1:3). How amazing that the all-powerful God, who is seated in the heavens, actually cares for each sparrow's flight, for every hair on our head, and even for the cattle owned by the wicked (Matt. 10:29–30; Jonah 4:11)! God's triune love is the basis of His relationship with all creation. Love really does make the world go 'round.

FIGURE 1.1

Biblical View of God's Relationship to His Creation



Adapted from Darrow L. Miller with Stan Guthrie, *Discipling Nations: The Power of Truth to Transform Cultures* (Seattle: YWAM, 2001), 3–4.

Because God is so intimately involved with His creation, the entire cosmos reflects the Creator (Ps. 19:1–6; Rom. 1:20). How could the pottery not in some ways reflect the Potter? All of creation—the flowing streams, the majestic mountains, the roaring waves, and the baby's giggles—reveal something about the nature of God. And since human beings are the pinnacle

of God's creation, humans reflect the nature of God in a special way.

WHAT IS A HUMAN BEING?

No single Bible verse outlines precisely what it means to be human. Through the centuries, therefore, Christians have looked to the Scriptures as a whole to discern the nature of this noble creature.⁶ Understanding what it means to be human, though not the easiest of tasks, matters for what we do when a woman walks into our church, asking for help with her electric bill. To truly help her, we need to understand how God made her.

The Human Being as Body and Soul/Heart

According to Scripture, our bodies really matter, but we are not merely physical objects. There's something more to humans than simply mixing together oxygen, carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, calcium, and phosphorus.⁷ For Christians, the word *soul* has often been used to signify this *something more* than the physical. The Bible indicates that humans continue to exist even beyond the experience of physical death (Matt. 10:28; Luke 12:4–5; Rom. 8:35–39; Rev. 20:4). When a person dies, their body may be lying on a bed before us, but we sense they are no longer with us. Their life or soul is gone. That is partly why we ache so deeply when loved ones take their last breath. Their bodies are still with us, but they are no longer present.⁸

Highlighting the soul should never devalue our bodies but rather help us present a richer and truer picture of human existence. The Bible presents a holistic view of being human.

While it's helpful to distinguish between the body and soul, we should avoid separating them. A key Hebrew word (*nephesh*) commonly translated as “soul” literally means “throat” or “neck.” This *nephesh* represents our life, our very being.⁹ Interestingly, the Bible uses earthy language in reference to our souls. Why? Because you can't easily separate the body and soul. Similarly, the Hebrew word *leb*, which the Bible often uses to refer to the inner human being, is commonly translated as “heart,” a physical organ!¹⁰ The body and soul are not easily disentangled in Scripture.¹¹

This has huge implications for the design of our poverty alleviation ministries. People are whole people. So, partial solutions that address *either*

the body or the soul will not work as well as solutions that address *both* the body and soul. The effectiveness of an after-school tutoring program for low-income children might be hindered if the children are so hungry that they cannot pay attention to the lesson. And a job training program that increases a husband's income and physical well-being without addressing his spiritual condition could simply create a workaholic whose mental health deteriorates over time. The body and soul are highly interconnected. In fact, they aren't really two different *things*, but refer to two aspects of *one person*. And together, these two aspects capture the fullness of the whole being.

Theologians have sometimes found it helpful to speak of three facets of the soul: the mind, affections, and will. For the purposes of this book, we define these terms as follows:

- The *mind* points primarily to our understanding or rationality;
- The *affections* focus our attention on the importance of desire, emotion, and longings;
- The *will* highlights the importance of human agency, what we decide to do or not to do.

While distinguishing between these three aspects can be useful, they should not be thought of as distinctly separate components of the soul in the way that the tires, brakes, and clutch are different components of a car. Rather, the mind, affections, and will are different characteristics of one whole human soul, which is itself deeply integrated with the body. Sadly, sometimes churches or denominations distinguish too sharply between these features, pitting them against one another in problematic ways. For example, one church values the mind, while another highlights the power of emotions; one community concentrates on stimulating the will to action, while another emphasizes emotional self-control; one denomination emphasizes material prosperity, while the other acts as though only our souls matter. But we should never pretend that only one aspect of the human person is important. The Bible assumes that all aspects of the human being are highly important and deeply integrated, and so should we.¹²

In fact, the three features of the soul are so interrelated that the Bible uses

the word *heart* (*leb*) to describe all of them.¹³ In Scripture, *heart* can refer to our minds as well as our emotions, to our actions as well as our desires. We intuitively know this; that's why we often ask about the condition of people's "hearts." And when we do, we aren't asking about a particular organ in their bodies. Rather, we're asking, "How are *you* doing? What are your deepest longings and fears? How is your life going? How is your attitude toward God? How are you feeling?" Normally, these questions are concerned not just with people's emotional state, but with the very essence of their being. The simple word *heart* takes us to the center of the human creature.

Hence, it's not surprising that Scripture commands us to pay special attention to the state of our hearts: "Above all else, guard your heart [*leb*], for everything you do flows from it" (Prov. 4:23; see also Matt. 12:35). This verse doesn't merely state that we should guard our hearts so we can go to heaven someday, but that everything we do in this world—the way that we work, eat, play, date, raise kids, vote, spend, give—flows from our hearts. Whatever our heart loves most—the thing that commands the ultimate allegiance of our minds, affections, and will—determines our actions. Just as love is at the heart of the triune God, so love is at the heart of human beings. And just as the creation flows out of God's love, so too our actions flow out of what we love.¹⁴

As Christian philosopher James K. A. Smith has emphasized, this understanding of human beings starkly contrasts with that of Western civilization, which tends either to doubt the existence of the soul or to reduce it to the mind (think of Descartes's statement, "I think, therefore I am"). Although the ability to think and reason is vitally important, human beings are primarily lovers.¹⁵ We are driven by what our heart—our mind, will, and affections—loves most. *Hence, the way to a person's heart is to capture their imagination (mind), move their emotions (affections), and challenge their actions (will).* While we can play a role in shaping people's hearts, ultimately such transformation requires the miraculous work of a sovereign God.

What do these truths have to do with poverty alleviation? Everything! We will unpack this as we continue, but for now, consider three key points.

First, when a woman walks into your church asking for help with her electric bill, her behaviors both before and after that moment will fundamentally be driven by what she loves. Thus, if her need for financial assistance is a result of her own behaviors—and it might not be—then

effectively helping her material condition requires addressing her heart condition. There are no shortcuts or alternatives; her heart is at the center of her personhood and drives her behaviors.

Second, as you attempt to minister to this woman, you must treat her as an integrated whole. Unfortunately, some poverty alleviation efforts reduce this woman to her mind, believing that education alone will solve her problems. Others concentrate on her will, using carrots and sticks to spur her to action. Still others focus solely on the body, pouring all their attention into meeting immediate physical needs while failing to appreciate the emotional and spiritual challenges that are also present. Even secular poverty alleviation experts recognize that these partial solutions often fail, because people are multifaceted creatures with multifaceted problems.¹⁶

Third, your own heart drives your response to this woman. Do you create a narrative about her that belittles her so that you don't feel obligated to help her? Do you create a story in which your possessions are indicative of your moral superiority when, in fact, both her story and yours are far more complicated? What will be key, both for the woman and for those responding to her, is love. And central to this love is discovering the biblical truth that God first loved us, well before we loved Him.

We need to make two important points of clarification.

First, there are many situations in which the poor person's own behaviors are *not* the cause of their material poverty, in which case their own heart condition is not the key to alleviating their poverty. For example, it is entirely possible that this woman's husband has been negligent or abusive, leaving her in a desperate situation through no fault of her own. In most cases, there are multiple causes for poverty—some that are internal to the person and some that are external—requiring careful analysis and multifaceted approaches.

Second, even if the woman is fully responsible for her own predicament, that does *not* automatically imply we should not help her pay her electric bill. The gospel is about grace, not merit. Considerable wisdom and judgment is needed to handle this situation, and interested readers are encouraged to read *Helping without Hurting in Church Benevolence: A Practical Guide to Walking with Low-Income People* (Moody Publishers, 2015) by Brian Fikkert and Steve Corbett.

Still, any effective and sustainable poverty alleviation strategy must

consider the condition of people's hearts. At the foundation of communities are individual people, and according to God's Word, at the foundation of individual people is the human heart.

The Human Being as a Relational Creature

Because the heart is at the center of the human being, humans are necessarily relational creatures; love must be expressed toward someone or something.¹⁷ As creatures who reflect the triune God, human beings are hardwired for relationship. We are made to be lovers.¹⁸ We are not created to live as autonomous individuals. In fact, when humans live in isolation from others, the effects are devastating.

Researchers have found that when prisoners are placed in solitary confinement with little human contact and minimal sensory stimulation, severe psychological and physical issues often ensue: depression, anxiety, hallucinations, impaired brain functioning, paranoia, psychosis, uncontrollable rage, weight loss, hypertension, gastrointestinal problems, self-harm, and/or suicide.¹⁹ As some leading psychologists explain, "Solitary confinement is not a natural state for us as social creatures who require human contact and human touch to maintain our very sense of 'self.'"²⁰ Solitary confinement "destroys people as human beings."²¹ The consequences are so devastating and irreversible that solitary confinement is considered by many experts to be a form of torture that violates international human rights law.²²

Theologians regularly point to four fundamental human relationships emphasized in Scripture: relationships with God, self, others, and the rest of creation (see Deut. 6:4–6; Gen. 1:26–28).²³ The relationship with God is central, as it is the foundation for the other three. Part of the way that we both love God and experience His love for us is in our relationships with self, others, and the rest of creation. When we hold our little girl's hand as we walk along the beach, for example, we express the love of our heavenly Father to her and experience His love back to us in her adoring eyes. Our relationship to God is integral to how we experience the other three relationships.

It's important to understand that the nature of these relationships is not arbitrary. God has designed them to work in a certain way, and humans only flourish when we experience these relationships the way God intended.

Further, these four relationships are highly integrated with a person's body and soul so that the human being is a mind-affections-will-body-relational creature.

No analogy is perfect, but we can illustrate some aspects of this mind-affections-will-body-relational creature through the image of a wheel (see [Figure 1.2](#)). The boundary of the human being is not the hub in the middle—the person's body and soul. Rather, the human being is the wheel as a whole, including both the person's body and soul (the hub) and their relationships (the spokes). Remember, the relationship with God is more foundational than the other three, so that spoke is more important than the others.

Each part of a wheel impacts all the other parts. If one spoke is misaligned, enormous pressure will be placed on all the other spokes and on the hub itself, and they all will eventually bend or break. For example, when a person loses his job, this results in far more than the loss of income, as it entails a broken relationship with creation. As the spoke connecting the hub to creation is bent or broken, additional pressure will be put onto the rest of the wheel, onto the person as a whole. The other spokes will weaken, as there will likely be marital stress (relationship to others) and a low self-image (relationship to self). And the hub itself will be damaged, as the person may experience mental and physical health issues.²⁴

FIGURE 1.2
Biblical View of Human Being



Adapted from Brian Fikkert and Russell Mask, *From Dependence to Dignity: How to Alleviate Poverty through Church-Centered Microfinance* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 83.

A wheel is shaped by both internal and external forces.²⁵ Even a strong wheel that hits a pothole can end up with bent spokes and a damaged hub. Similarly, human beings are shaped by both internal and external forces. Internally, our mind, affections, will, and body play a huge role in determining the nature of our relationship to God, self, others, and the rest of creation. However, external forces shape those relationships as well. For example, the unemployment experienced by the person above could have been caused by the financial system collapse in December 2007, which plunged the global economy into the Great Recession. Some people couldn't find jobs no matter how much they desired to work. And this broken relationship with creation impacts their other three relationships as well as their minds, affections, wills, and bodies. Human beings are highly integrated, mind-affections-will-body-relational sorts of creatures.

While our description of the human being as a mind-affections-will-body-relational creature is based on the work of biblical scholars spanning thousands of years, considerable research in the natural and social sciences supports a similar characterization of human beings as integrally connected creatures with facets that may be characterized as mind, affections, will, and body.²⁶ And research in the fields of business, economics, education, neuroscience, positive psychology, and sociology support the notion that humans are intrinsically wired for loving relationships with God, self, others, and the rest of creation.²⁷

* * *

The Science of Happiness

What makes people happy? People have sought the answer to this question for thousands of years, but in the past two decades there has been an explosion of scientific research on this topic. In his presidential address to the American Psychological Association in 1998, Martin Seligman launched the field of positive psychology, also called the science of happiness, a rapidly

expanding body of empirical research that seeks to uncover what contributes to a meaningful and happy life.

The science of happiness is rapidly gaining a foothold in American higher education. Yale University offered its first undergraduate course in the field in 2018, attracting nearly twelve hundred students, thereby making it the most popular course in the school's 316-year history.²⁸ Moreover, the leading scholars in the field are faculty at some of the nation's most prestigious universities: Duke, Harvard, New York University, Princeton, Stanford, University of California Berkeley, University of Illinois, University of North Carolina, and University of Pennsylvania. A voluminous amount of research has emerged, which is summarized in *The Oxford Handbook of Happiness*.²⁹

The field lends considerable support to biblical understandings of human flourishing. For example, in his bestselling book *The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom*, Jonathan Haidt, a professor of psychology at New York University, examines the teachings from a variety of religious and philosophical perspectives in light of recent scientific evidence and concludes: "It is worth striving to get the right relationships between yourself and others, between yourself and work, and between yourself and something larger than yourself. If you get these relationships right, a sense of purpose and meaning will emerge."³⁰

Although Haidt is not a Christian, his conclusions are remarkably similar to the biblical teaching that human flourishing entails right relationships with God ("something larger than yourself"), self, others, and the rest of creation ("work"). And Haidt is not alone: scientific research provides overwhelming support that human beings are mind-affections-will-body-relational creatures, and that human flourishing consists of being those types of creatures—of being what we were created to be.

* * *

THE GOAL OF POVERTY ALLEVIATION

Recall that the first question in a story of change is: What is the goal of life? From a biblical perspective, the goal for all humans—including the materially poor—is to be what God created us to be. And as we have seen, human flourishing is to be a well-balanced wheel. Thus, true human flourishing can

be stated as follows:

The Goal of God's Story of Change

People experience human flourishing when their mind, affections, will, and body enjoy loving relationships with God, self, others, and the rest of creation.

We will explore what such flourishing looks like more deeply in chapter 6, but for now we return to the question we posed at the start of this chapter: How does the human, this mind-affections-will-body-relational creature, change over time? As we shall see in the next chapter, the Bible's answer to this question is far different from the one given by most of the poverty alleviation industry.



CHAPTER TWO

HOW DO HUMAN BEINGS AND CULTURES CHANGE?

To be human is to be for something, directed toward something, oriented toward something. To be human is to be on the move, pursuing something, after something.... We are not just static containers for ideas; we are dynamic creatures directed toward some end.¹

—JAMES K. A. SMITH, CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHER, 2016

At the end, idols completely fail. They not only fail to deliver the godlikeness and immortality they promised at first, they rob their worshipers of even the most minimal human dignity and agency. Of all the charges the biblical prophets file against idols, the most damning is this: “Those who make them become like them.”²

—ANDY CROUCH, AUTHOR, 2013

Like the people in the nursing home I visited, all of us, including the materially poor people we are trying to help, are in the process of becoming something. What is that thing? Can it be predicted? Is there something we can do in our lives and poverty alleviation efforts to move in the direction of human flourishing, of becoming whole?

There are no simple answers to these questions. Multiple complex and interrelated factors shape the quality of a person’s life, some of which are internal and some of which are external to the person. But because the primary internal driver of the human being is the heart, we need to understand the orientation of people’s hearts—the direction in which their minds, affections, and wills are pointed—if we are to determine the direction in which an individual or community is trying to move.

INDIVIDUAL AND CULTURAL CHANGE

We Become What We Worship

Human beings are created to be image bearers. *To be an image bearer is to act as a mirror, reflecting the image of whatever god we are worshiping onto the rest of creation.*³ There are three important components to this profound truth.

First, every human is worshiping something, whether God, money, sex, power, fame, or something else. The term *worship* in this context doesn't mean just singing hymns on Sunday morning. Rather, we worship whatever we love most, the magnet that has the greatest pull on our hearts. As Smith notes, "At the heart of our being is a kind of 'love pump' that can never be turned off," so that we are always worshiping something.⁴ The question is not *whether* we worship but *what* we worship.

Second, the reason we're able to act as image bearers of whatever god we're worshiping is because we're actually transformed into the image of that god.⁵ Whatever has captured our deepest affection, whatever becomes the focus of our attention, whatever consumes our energies and our passions is what we become like.⁶ Thus, when other people or the rest of creation encounters us, they encounter a reflection of whatever god we are worshiping, for we actually bear the likeness of that god.

This reality sheds a different light on the first of the Ten Commandments: "You shall have no other gods before me" (Ex. 20:3). As our Creator, God has the right to demand that we worship Him above all else. But it's also true that God loves us and wants what is best for us. He knows He made us to bear the image of whatever we are worshiping. So, He wants us to bear the image of the most wonderful thing in the whole cosmos: Himself! The first commandment, like all the commandments, therefore, is an expression of God's love for us. God is not demanding that we worship Him because He is insecure. Rather, He is calling us to worship Him because He knows that when we do so, we experience liberty, joy, dignity, love, and life. God wants us to fully flourish as human beings, and the first step to such flourishing is to worship Him.

Psalms 115 shows us what happens when we choose to worship something else:

Not to us, LORD, not to us
but to your name be the glory,

because of your love and faithfulness.

Why do the nations say,
“Where is their God?”
Our God is in heaven;
he does whatever pleases him.
But their idols are silver and gold,
made by human hands.
They have mouths, but cannot speak,
eyes, but cannot see.
They have ears, but cannot hear,
noses, but cannot smell.
They have hands, but cannot feel,
feet, but cannot walk,
nor can they utter a sound with their throats.
*Those who make them will be like them,
and so will all who trust in them.*
(115:1–8; emphasis added)

Those who worship idols take on the characteristics of those idols! Similarly, those who worship God become more and more like Him: “And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit” (2 Cor. 3:18).

Third, humans create culture in their own image.⁷ If you have kids, they undoubtedly reflect your qualities, both good and bad, because they’ve been deeply influenced by growing up in your household. Similarly, if you’re a coach, a carpenter, or an artist, you’ve played a huge role in shaping your players, woodwork, or paintings. They reflect your qualities, for you “made” them.

We worship what we love, and because our loves reflect our minds, affections, and wills, they shape our entire lives. If, then, human beings are transformed into the image of whatever god(s) they are worshiping and then create culture into that same image, to analyze where people and culture are heading in any particular setting, we must first ask what god(s) they are worshiping. Idols are incredibly powerful. Although they cannot speak, see,

hear, smell, feel, or walk, they have a powerful impact on the world, for they transform those who worship them into their likeness, ultimately shaping the world in which those worshipers live.

Again, these truths have tremendous implications for how we design our poverty alleviation ministries. Jayakumar Christian, National Director of World Vision India, offers both an encouragement and a warning: at the end of any poverty alleviation initiative, people will be worshipping something.⁸ The challenge is to design our ministries in such a way that people end up worshipping the one reality worthy of praise: the triune God. This is easier said than done. When outside organizations provide assistance to a materially poor community, it's common for the organization or their resources to become the object of worship. The community ends up worshipping the gifts or those who deliver them rather than the one true Giver. After all, the outside organizations are the ones providing the malaria nets, drilling the wells, and dispensing the penicillin.

For example, leading development expert Bryant Myers shares about a tribal community in India that added a prominent Christian humanitarian aid organization to its list of gurus—those who have answers the community does not have. Not only that, prayers and sacrifices had been instituted to ensure that this new guru (i.e., this organization) kept helping the community. Similarly, “if money is the focus, then money is perceived to be the key to transformation,” says Myers. “What we put at the center of our program is our witness. We must always ask if we are acting as a dependent people, looking to God for every good thing. We want people to observe us and say, ‘Theirs must be a living God!’”⁹

Worship and Poverty Alleviation

Human beings are transformed into the image of whatever god they worship, so at the core of poverty alleviation is worship of the one true God.

How can we design our poverty alleviation ministries to ensure that people's hearts are oriented toward worshipping the one true God? Ultimately, only God can orient people toward Himself, a truth that we will explore further in chapter 9.

Still, people throughout the millennia have observed that there are some

regular ways in which people go from worshipping a god to being transformed into the image of that god to then shaping culture in that same image.¹⁰ These ancient truths have recently been reconfirmed by theologians, philosophers, and social scientists,¹¹ shedding considerable light on what we will call the “natural process of individual and cultural formation.” We will be using this model throughout the book to understand how individuals and communities change.

The Natural Process of Individual and Cultural Formation¹²

To understand this process, let’s consider “Mary,” the woman asking your church for help with her electric bill. Mary does not walk into your church as a blank slate. Rather, she brings *herself* into your church. She is a self that has been deeply influenced by the community of Eastdale, the low-income neighborhood in which she has lived her entire life.¹³ Like all communities, Eastdale is shaped by what philosophers call its “metanarrative,” its overarching account of the nature of God, of human beings, and of the world. This metanarrative profoundly shapes the individuals of Eastdale and the community as a whole through three channels¹⁴:

- *Story of Change*: The community’s understanding, which may be explicit or implicit, of the goal of life and how that goal can be achieved.
- *Formative Practices*: The community encourages its members to engage in behaviors that are believed to help the community achieve its goals. These practices are called “formative” because they shape the people who engage in them, making them different kinds of people than they were before. Those who master these practices are lauded by the community as “heroes” for helping the community to achieve its goals.
- *Environmental and Social Systems*: Over time, the community adopts both formal and informal institutions that perpetuate its story of change across time in ways that shape future generations. Formal institutions include laws, schools, banks, and churches, while informal institutions include neighborhood associations, knitting clubs, language, and cultural norms.

The community's story of change, formative practices, and environmental and social systems create a daily rhythm that shapes each community member's individual personhood—their mind, affections, will, body, and relationships—to be in line with achieving the community's goals. For example, if a basketball team's story of change is that winning the league championship comes by practicing hard, then players will spend long hours practicing their dribbling, shooting, and passing within the boundaries of the league's rules (the system). And as the players repeatedly engage in these practices, they will change over time by developing the ability to *think* (mind), *feel* (affections), and *act* (will) in ways that are consistent with the team's goals. In other words, “practice makes perfect.”

Figure 2.1 summarizes this process, highlighting how the elements of the community create a “formative feedback loop,” a mutually reinforcing story of change, formative practices, systems, and individual personhoods that make particular communities what they are.¹⁵

FIGURE 2.1

The Natural Process of Individual and Cultural Formation



Adapted from Brian Fikkert and Michael Rhodes, “*Homo Economicus Versus Homo Imago Dei*,” *Journal of Markets and Morality* 20, no.1 (Spring 2017): 106.

Again, the healthy human being is in some respects analogous to a wheel,

with the hub (mind, affections, will, and body) and the spokes (four key relationships) perfectly aligned. Building on this analogy, we can think of the *systems* as the road on which the wheel travels. For the wheel to have a smooth ride, the road must be free of potholes. Similarly, for human beings to flourish, the systems must be conducive to people living in right relationship with God, self, others, and the rest of creation.

This entire process of individual and cultural formation is often not explicit. A community might not even be aware of the story of change that is shaping its practices, systems, and individual personhoods (mind, affections, will, bodies, and relationships). The reason for this lack of awareness is that as the individual members are shaped by their community's culture, they begin to *automatically* and *subconsciously* think, feel, and act in certain ways as a matter of *habit*. Their hearts have been formed. In other words, the community's goals and means of achieving those goals become internalized by the members of that community. Consequently, the community's story of change, practices, and systems are *unconsciously* assumed by its members to be the normal way of being in the world.¹⁶ In fact, the members of the community are often unaware that alternative stories of change, practices, and systems even exist.

For example, a community whose goals include preparing children to be as successful as possible when they become adults will have parents who are heavily engaged in various practices related to teaching their children. Over time, these parents will see the advantages of collaborating and will pool their resources to pay the best teachers available for each subject. Of course, somebody needs to manage these teachers, so administrators are hired and boards are formed, resulting in the establishment of formal schools and eventually a school system. The existence of these school systems will shape the practices and personhoods of future generations by communicating to them what normal childrearing looks like. In the future, parents in this community will likely *automatically* and *unconsciously* assume they should put their kids into the local school system without considering alternatives, such as not educating their kids or educating them in different ways.

Let's go back to Mary. When she walks into your church asking for help with her electric bill, she likely unconsciously embodies the story of change, practices, and systems of her community.

For example, if one of Eastdale's goals is economic prosperity, and if

Eastdale believes hard work can achieve such prosperity, then the community will have been explicitly and/or implicitly encouraging Mary to engage in hard work. Unless Mary decided to reject her community's story of change, she will regularly have engaged in hard work. And as she did so, she actually became a hard worker. She became the type of person who works hard to earn money and who only asks for assistance when she really needs it.

In contrast, if Eastdale believes that the goal is economic prosperity but that there are no opportunities to work, the community will have developed alternative practices to achieve economic prosperity. Such practices might include regularly asking churches for assistance in light of the perceived lack of jobs. If Mary has repeatedly engaged in this practice, she has likely been shaped, over time, into the type of person who successfully solicits help from churches.

On the surface, Mary's request for help looks identical in each case. But below the surface lie vast differences in her personhood, a personhood that has likely been unconsciously shaped by the story of change, formative practices, and systems of Eastdale. Effective poverty alleviation must therefore discern what's happening in a given situation. Is Mary's poverty due to faulty stories of change? Broken systems? Unhealthy formative practices? Individual brokenness? Something else? Once we've properly diagnosed the cause, we can begin to foster positive change in Mary's life.

We must add three extremely important caveats to all that we've just said.

First, although the communities in which we live powerfully shape us, human beings are not simply products of external forces. We are always responsible for our own actions, and individual sin is always individual sin. However, understanding a person's background can help us be more empathetic, as we all are profoundly shaped by the communities in which we live. In particular, we must remember that sanctification is an ongoing process that starts where people are when they are converted to Christ. A person who was raised in an abusive household might struggle to control their temper more than a person who was raised in a loving household, even if the former is a believer and the latter is an unbeliever. Understanding the abusive background of the believer can help us rejoice over the evidence of God's grace at work in their lives, even though they may lose their temper more than many unbelievers.

Second, we must be careful not to stereotype. Mary could be the type of

person who has rejected her community's story of change, practices, and systems, making her distinctly different from the rest of the Eastdale community. Furthermore, various subcommunities always exist within any particular community; thus, not all people in the same geographic region live in exactly the same subcommunity. Two kids growing up next door to one another can be raised in very different families, which will have different lifelong impacts on each of their personhoods. Hence, we need to avoid stereotyping and work with individuals on a case-by-case basis.

Third, to think of Eastdale as a self-contained community whose systems are solely the result of Eastdale's story of change is mistaken. A host of outside forces impact Eastdale, not the least of which is the global economic system, which puts Eastdale's residents in competition with workers all over the world. Eastdale is far too small to have any impact on the global economic system; rather, that system is imposed upon Eastdale. Not all of Eastdale's problems, therefore, are due to the hearts of its members. Much of what is wrong in Eastdale could stem from forces that are outside of its control.

The Sustainability of Poverty Alleviation Interventions

The process of individual and cultural formation is a helpful tool that we can use to think about any poverty alleviation initiative.

For example, on a recent trip to an African country, I visited the local office of a major, global Christian relief and development organization. This organization has a strong reputation, and it appeared to me that the leadership and staff in this country office were hardworking and dedicated. But when I asked the director if I could visit some of the low-income communities where his organization was working, his face fell, and he replied:

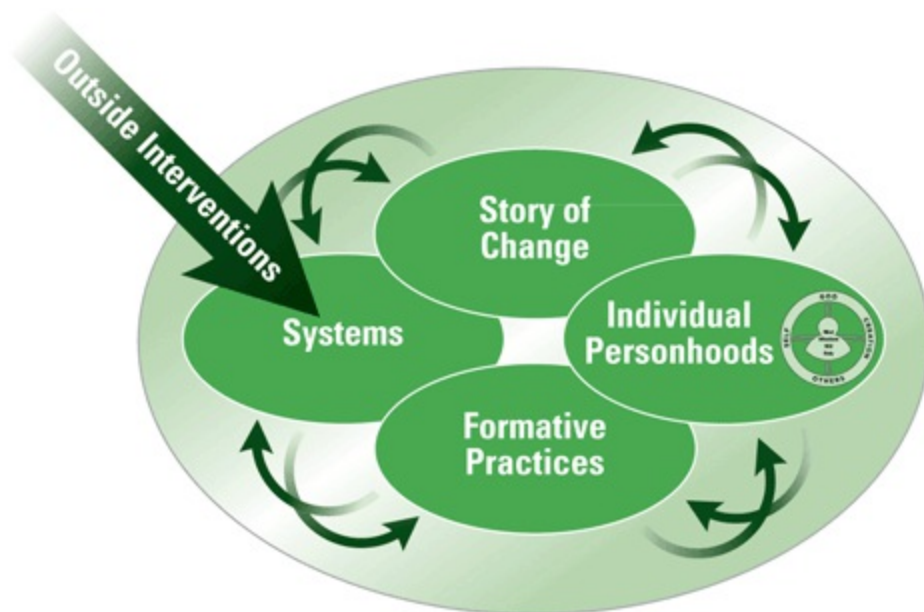
I could take you to many villages and towns that have our organization's sign on their entrance, indicating that we have been working there. Unfortunately, there is no evidence that we have ever done anything. We started projects in these places, but after we left, the communities didn't maintain them. The people's hearts weren't right. All the other organizations working in our country have had similar experiences. It's impossible to sustain anything.¹⁷

Unfortunately, this organization's experiences are far from unique. One of the most aggravating problems in poverty alleviation is the lack of sustainability of many interventions. Organizations go into a village and drill wells, build clinics, and start schools. Things seem to be going well, but after the organization leaves, it's not long before the wells, clinics, and schools stop functioning. What's going on?

As pictured in [Figure 2.2](#), the organization's projects often amount to injecting a new institution into the local community, which changes the systems in that culture. One of the key factors of the long-run sustainability of this new institution is the extent to which it fits with the story of change, systems, formative practices, and personhoods of the community. Just as the human body sometimes rejects an organ transplant if it doesn't match the rest of the body, communities sometimes reject interventions that don't fit with the rest of their cultures.

FIGURE 2.2

Injecting Interventions from the Outside



Adapted from Brian Fikkert and Michael Rhodes, "*Homo Economicus Versus Homo Imago Dei*," *Journal of Markets and Morality* 20, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 106.

For example, if a community believes that sicknesses are due to evil spirits that must be appeased through various rituals and sacrifices, then it's unlikely that a clinic based on Western medical practices will have enough customers

to be financially sustainable. Thus, once the donor money is gone, the clinic will have to close.

What is the solution? I once asked the former head of a major Christian relief and development organization what he had learned in his decades of experience in the field of poverty alleviation. Consistent with the model depicted in [Figure 2.2](#), he said,

At the foundation of a community are human beings, and the fulcrum of the human being is the human heart. Unfortunately, we keep on trying shortcuts. We rush in with all sorts of buildings and programs, but unless the people's hearts are properly oriented, we are just building on sinking sand. There simply are no shortcuts. There is no other way. The human heart is the foundation of the community, and we need to address the human heart before we do anything else.¹⁸

The matter of the heart is the heart of the matter.

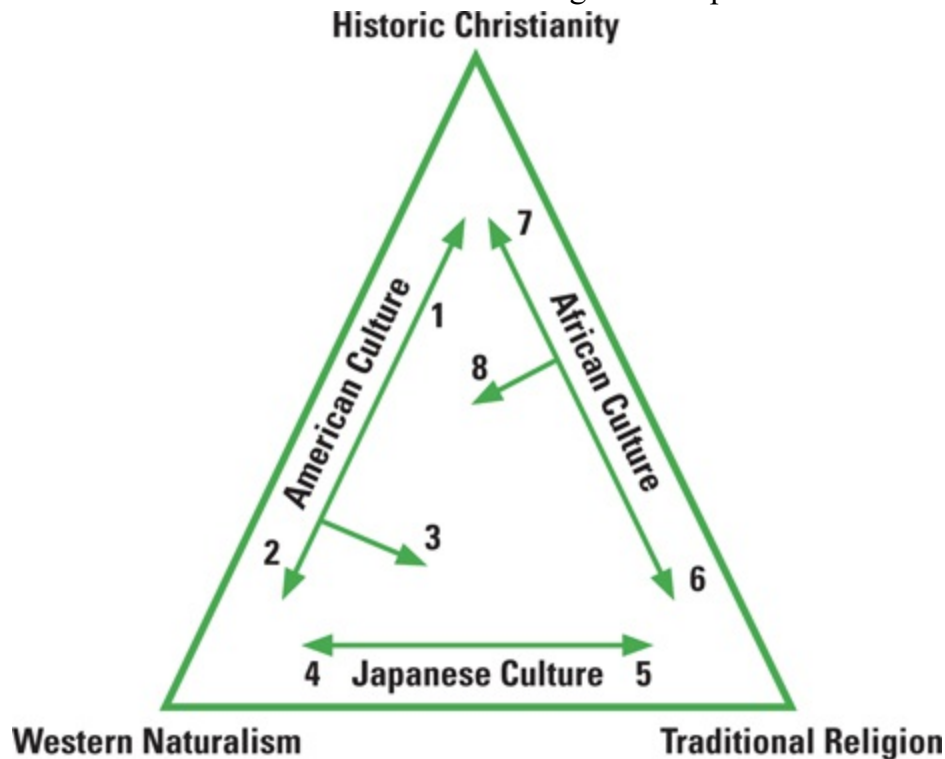
THE WAY AHEAD

Most poverty alleviation efforts involve a collision of metanarratives. The various stakeholders—donors, staff, volunteers, and poor people—have internalized different understandings of the nature of God, human beings, and how the world works. Consequently, each of the stakeholders brings stories of change into the initiative that often differ greatly from one another. One of the first steps in poverty alleviation, then, is to identify the religious perspectives of *all* the stakeholders. This seems daunting due to the host of gods and religions out there.

Fortunately, as missiologist Gailyn Van Rhee has noted, there are really only three foundational metanarratives in the world: *historic Christianity*, *Western Naturalism*, and *traditional religion*. As shown in [Figure 2.3](#), other religious perspectives, including major world religions (Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, etc.) can be understood as blends of these three foundational perspectives.¹⁹

FIGURE 2.3

Three-Part Model of World Religious Perspectives



1) American Christians; 2) American Secularists; 3) New Agers in North America; 4) Western-influenced Japanese; 5) Shintoists; 6) African Traditional Religionists; 7) African Christians; 8) Secular influences radiating out of Christianity.

Adapted from Gailyn Van Rheenen, "Animism, Secularism, and Theism: Developing a TriPartite Model for Understanding World Cultures," *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 10, no. 4 (October 1993): 171.

Moving forward, we will use these three foundational perspectives to better understand ourselves and the lives of materially poor people in hopes that we all can become more fully human, more whole.

Part 2 will discuss false stories of change: *Western Naturalism*, which has had a major impact on Western civilization and its approach to the poor, and *Evangelical Gnosticism*, a blending of Western Naturalism with historic Christianity that has done considerable harm to the Western church and its poverty alleviation ministries (see point 1 in [Figure 2.3](#)).²⁰ We will also describe what happens when poverty alleviation initiatives shaped by Western Naturalism or Evangelical Gnosticism encounter *traditional religion*, a very common religious perspective among poor people in the Majority World.

Part 3 will then use the perspective of *historic Christianity* to correct these false stories so we may better understand God's story of change.

* * *

Identifying and Removing the Idols in Our Lives

In his *Christianity Today* article entitled “How to Find Your Rival Gods,” Pastor Tim Keller echoes the themes of this book when he says, “It is impossible to understand your heart or your culture if you do not discern the counterfeit gods that influence them.”²¹

Keller argues that because our hearts are idol factories, we should all expect that one or more idols are having some impact on our lives, proposing four tests that we can use to try to identify them:

1. *What do we habitually think about?* When we stop and sit still, what do we naturally daydream about? Career advancement? A dream home? Sex? As Keller notes, “One or two daydreams do not indicate idolatry. Ask rather, what do you habitually think about to get joy and comfort in the privacy of your heart?”

2. *How do we spend our money?* Jesus said, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matt. 6:21). Where we spend our money shapes our hearts. What do your expenditure patterns reveal about the direction of your heart?

3. *How do we respond to unanswered prayers and frustrated hopes?* When we don't get what we have asked God for repeatedly, it is okay to be disappointed and sad. But if we go into despair, it suggests that our “functional god” is not the one true God.

4. *What are our most uncontrollable emotions?* Are there any emotions—anger, fear, anxiety—that never seem to go away and that sometimes drive us to do things that we know are wrong? Often, these emotions reveal that an idol we are worshiping is being threatened. Keller urges us to examine these emotions, because as we pull them up by the roots, we will often find idols clinging to them.

We should not apply these tests blindly, as idolatry is not the only explanation for all the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors described above. For example, uncontrollable emotions can be due to various physical and mental

illnesses that have nothing to do with idols in our lives. Hence, it is often wise to seek help from pastors, counselors, and medical professionals to help us sort through the issues: we are whole people, so we often need holistic help.

If we do identify an idol, what should we do? Citing Colossians 3:1–5, Keller advises,

Idolatry is not just a failure to obey God, it is a setting of the whole heart on something besides God. This cannot be remedied only by repenting that you have an idol, or by using will power to try to live differently. Turning from idols is not less than those two things, but it is also far more. “Setting the mind and heart on things above” where “your life is hid with Christ in God” (Colossians 3:1–3) means appreciation, rejoicing, and resting in what Jesus has done for you. It entails joyful worship, a sense of God’s reality in prayer. Jesus must become more beautiful to your imagination, more attractive to your heart, than your idol. That is what will replace the idols of your heart. If you uproot the idol and fail to “plant” the love of Christ in its place, the idol will grow back.

In other words, we can’t just try to reject the idols of this world. We need to replace these idols with worship of the one true God, immersing our hearts—our minds, affections, and wills—in His beauty and wonder.

In the same vein, Thomas Chalmers, the nineteenth-century Scottish pastor after whom the Chalmers Center at Covenant College is named, once gave a famous sermon on this topic entitled “The Expulsive Power of a New Affection.”²² See also Tim Keller’s bestselling book *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope that Matters* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009), from which this article was excerpted.

* * *

Back to the Nursing Home

Everybody in the nursing home had changed over time.

Mr. Gordon had worshiped the triune God his entire life and was increasingly conformed to the image of Christ. As a result, his face simply

beamed with joy.

It was never clear to me exactly what god Scrooge was worshiping, but it must have been a hateful god. At the end of his life, Scrooge had become more hateful than ever.

And Mrs. Anderson? I learned that she had recently become a Christian, at the age of eighty-three. She was no Mr. Gordon yet, but the changes in her were striking nonetheless. She had been going in one direction her entire life, but now her personality and entire demeanor were moving in the polar opposite direction.

Of course, we must be careful when we analyze people and their spiritual condition in the final stages of life. Due to the devastating impacts of the aging process, many godly people do not act like themselves in their final days. A host of physical, mental, and emotional ailments can mask the underlying spiritual realities, making people seem very different from who they really are in Christ Jesus.

That said, one of the many factors involved in the aging process is that all humans—both rich and poor—are being transformed into something. We all become what we worship. Not only that, we shape the world into that same image. Therefore, worship of the one true God is central to effective poverty alleviation, to helping people and communities to become whole.

Worship and Poverty Alleviation

Human beings are transformed into the image of whatever god they worship, so at the core of poverty alleviation is worship of the one true God.

Before we consider how God's story can bring positive change, let us consider the false stories we have embraced and how that has affected our lives and our poverty alleviation strategies.

Reflection Questions

1. Cultures are transformed into the image of whatever god(s) the people in that culture are worshiping. What does your answer to [Question 1](#) in the Initial Thoughts at the start of Part 1 suggest about the nature of the god(s)

that America is worshiping?

2. We are transformed into the image of whatever god(s) we are worshiping, so our conception of God greatly impacts the type of person we are becoming. Look back at your answer to [Question 2](#) in the Initial Thoughts at the start of Part 1.

a. Did your answer reflect the Bible's teaching that the heart of God is love? If not, explore why not.

b. What qualities of God did your answer emphasize, and how might this conception of God be shaping you?

c. Consider memorizing and meditating on Zephaniah 3:17.

3. Reflect on your answers to [Questions 3](#) and [4](#) in the Initial Thoughts at the start of Part 1. What do you appear to be worshiping in your life? For additional help in answering this question, work through the questions in the sidebar in [chapter 2: "Identifying and Removing the Idols in Our Lives."](#)

4. What actions do you commit to pursuing so that you may orient your heart to deeper worship of the triune God?

PART 2

**WHEN FALSE
STORIES MAKE
HELPING HURT**

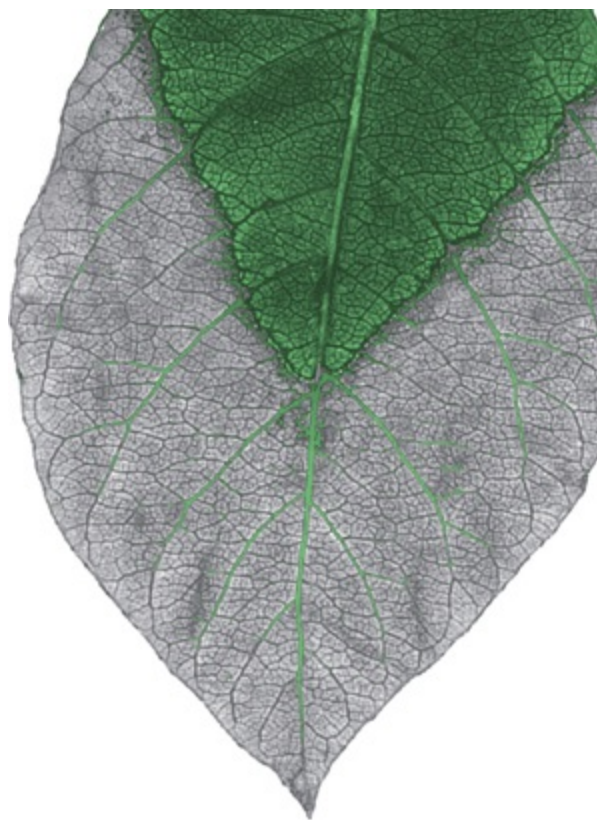
INITIAL THOUGHTS

1. *How often do you pray, and what do you pray about? Try to be honest and specific.*

2. *What is the story of change you believe is guiding the following groups of which you are a part? To answer this, think about the explicit and/or implicit goals, messages, and practices of each of the following:*

a. Your church

b. A poverty alleviation ministry with which you are familiar



CHAPTER THREE

YOU CAN BECOME A CONSUMING ROBOT

What many people call “psychological problems” are simple issues of idolatry. Perfectionism, workaholism, chronic indecisiveness, the need to control the lives of others—all of these stem from making good things into idols that then drive us into the ground as we try to appease them. Idols dominate our lives. ¹

—TIM KELLER, THEOLOGIAN AND PASTOR, 2009

American culture is probably the least Christian culture that we’ve ever had because it is so materialistic and it’s so full of lies.... The problem is people have been treated as consumers for so long they don’t know any other way to live.²

—EUGENE PETERSON, SCHOLAR AND PASTOR, 2011

As discussed in the introduction, something has gone wrong in Western civilization. While we have achieved unprecedented levels of material prosperity, our social fabric is falling apart. We are less and less happy, and our physical and emotional health are deteriorating. This indicates that our culture is shaping us into something that we simply aren’t designed to be. Our story of change and the systems and formative practices that it fosters are trying to force us to be square pegs in round holes. We just can’t do it. We don’t fit. Our bodies and minds are screaming out against this dehumanizing process.

Our story is wrong. That means our metanarrative—our basic understanding of the nature of God, of human beings, and of the world—must be wrong, too.

Western civilization and its approaches to poverty alleviation throughout the post-WWII era have been dominated by Western Naturalism.³ As influential as naturalism is, however, it’s not the only perspective shaping Western civilization.⁴ America consists of subcultures that, to varying degrees, draw on all three of the foundational religious perspectives (see points 1, 2, and 3 in [Figure 2.3](#)). As you read this chapter, therefore, it’s likely that you will find descriptions of some facets of the people and culture

that you have encountered, but it will not capture all their features, for naturalism is not the only story out there.

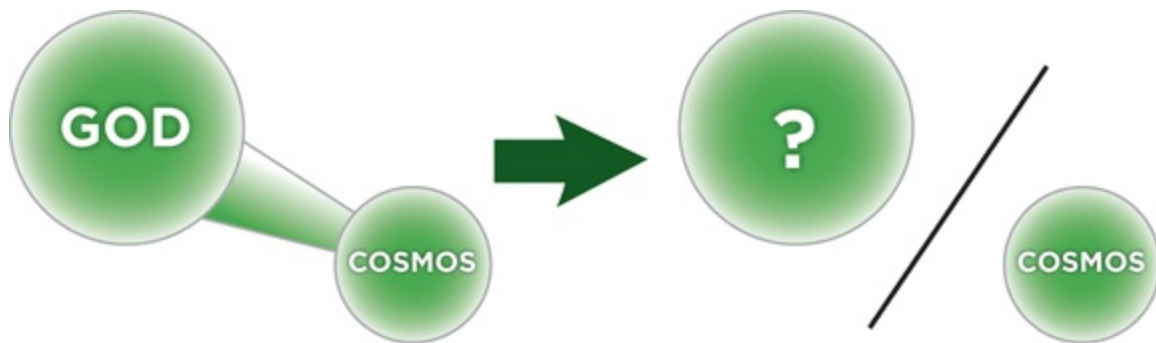
THE NATURE OF GOD AND HUMAN BEINGS IN WESTERN NATURALISM

As a relational being, God is deeply and actively engaged with His world. Moment by moment, He holds the atoms in place, empowers the deer to dart through the forest, and directs the course of nations. And as a tender Father who's always present, He guides every step of His beloved children. God is interested; God is involved; God intervenes.

Conversely, as pictured in [Figure 3.1](#), Western Naturalism doubts that God exists and believes that even if He does exist, He is irrelevant to the everyday working of the cosmos. The cosmos is viewed as a closed machine that is solely material in essence and operates according to fixed laws of nature without any divine intervention.

FIGURE 3.1

Western Naturalism's Attempt to Remove God from His Throne

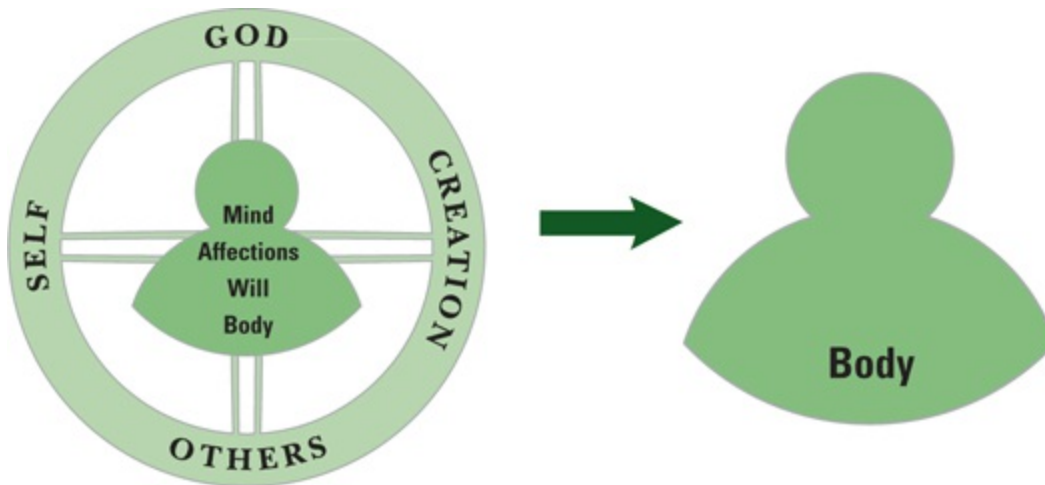


Adapted from Darrow L. Miller with Stan Guthrie, *Disciplining Nations: The Power of Truth to Transform Cultures* (Seattle: YWAM, 2001), 3–4.

Western Naturalism's material understanding of the cosmos shapes its perspective on human beings. Western Naturalism reduces the mind-affections-will-body-relational creature to a mere physical being that has no soul and that is completely individualistic, not needing relationships in order to flourish (see [Figure 3.2](#)). Because this creature is purely material, it derives its happiness from consuming material things in order to gratify its sensual

nature. And because this creature is not primarily relational, it selfishly pursues its own interests without regard for the effects it might have on its relationship with God, self, others, or the rest of creation.

FIGURE 3.2
Western Naturalism's Deformation of the Human Being



Because Western Naturalism creates a vacuum by denying a divine being, it necessarily elevates this material, self-interested creature: humans take the place of God. Indeed, humans are viewed as the masters of the universe, creatures who use their superior intelligence to create technological advances that master the material world. Creatures replace the Creator.

The heart of this story of change is fundamentally arrogant. Given that God does not exist and that human beings are in charge, any material prosperity is necessarily the result of human ingenuity. And those who have accumulated the most wealth must be the smartest of all, preeminent over the rest of humanity.

Unfortunately, Western Naturalism's false god is not just some abstract philosophical concept. Despite the fact that this god does not exist, this god dramatically impacts our daily lives to the extent that we embrace naturalism. Remember, human beings are transformed into the image of whatever god they worship. And the god of Western Naturalism is a purely material, individualistic, self-interested, consuming machine.

Consider the contrast between the images of [Figure 3.2](#). You are created to be like the image on the left, an integrated body and soul that is wired for

intimate relationship, deep communion, with God, self, others, and the rest of creation. When your entire being, your body and your soul, experiences these relationships as God intended, you experience the good life: you become whole. But Western Naturalism would like to reshape you by deforming you into the image on the right. Denying the centrality of relationships for a human and failing to treat her as an integrated body and soul causes a person to shrivel up—key aspects of her humanity are stripped from her, leaving her in a robotic state that is less than fully human. This doesn't seem like the path to human flourishing. In fact, it's only a path to destruction.

What does this have to do with poverty alleviation?

Because Western Naturalism has so deeply influenced Western civilization, Westerners *unconsciously* and *automatically* spread the virus of Western Naturalism to poor people. The ways that poverty alleviation strategies are designed, the things that they do, the formative practices that they foster, and the goals for which they strive can deform poor people, transforming them—at least partially—into the material, individualistic, self-interested, consuming machine described above. A person's full humanity is compromised in this deformation. Western Naturalism is a clear instance of *when helping hurts*.

To see how this deforming process works, let us consider the two primary strategies that Western civilization has used to help poor people, both of which have been heavily influenced by Western Naturalism. Many readers will agree that the first of these strategies is dehumanizing, but that the second strategy is deforming is less obvious and may be harder to embrace for many people.

POVERTY ALLEVIATION STRATEGY #1: HANDOUTS OF MATERIAL RESOURCES

If people are wired like the consuming robots on the right side of [Figure 3.2](#), then it's pretty simple to improve the lives of poor people: just give them money or other material things such as food or clothing. This will enable them to consume more, and *presto!* with full bellies, they are better off.

But people simply aren't wired this way. We are made like the creature on the left side of [Figure 3.2](#): image bearers created for relationship. And a key

component of the proper *relationship to creation* is being able to work and enjoy the fruits of that work. Approaches that undermine this relationship—no matter how well-intended—harm the very people they’re trying to help.

Many Christians have criticized the federal government’s welfare programs in this regard. But many churches and ministries in their food banks, soup kitchens, homeless shelters, and short-term mission trips also adopt this approach. Certainly, when a person experiences a crisis and needs *temporary* emergency assistance, it is appropriate for governments, churches, and ministries to give poor people material resources. But continually giving handouts to able-bodied people over time can create unhealthy dependencies and undermine people’s dignity and work. As a result, they are worse off than before they received handouts. It is for this very reason that the Bible strongly warns against giving handouts to able-bodied people (2 Thess. 3:6–15; 1 Tim. 5:9–13).

The negative impact of a poverty alleviation strategy that undermines work is not superficial. As we saw in chapter 2, a faulty story of change reshapes people, deeply impacting the very core of their being, and deforms them into a different sort of creature altogether. In terms of our wheel analogy, any approach that undermines work removes the “relationship to creation” spoke. The wheel won’t be able to support itself, and the spokes and hub will become damaged. Research has found that people without work often suffer a loss of self-esteem (“relationship to self” spoke),⁵ strained marriages (“relationship to others” spoke),⁶ and a host of mental and physical health problems (hub).⁷ Poverty alleviation strategies that undermine work do *real* harm.

We need to make a few caveats before moving on:

- Note that we are emphasizing *able-bodied* people. Ongoing support is appropriate for people who are unable to work due to chronic physical or mental health problems.
- One can also make a strong case for providing ongoing financial support to able-bodied people, as long as the support incentivizes work. Nothing in our fallen world guarantees that the free market will provide a living wage. For example, the earned income tax credit essentially acts as a wage subsidy for low-income workers, enabling them to earn more

dollars per hour than they would otherwise. There is some biblical precedent for this, as the gleaning laws in the Old Testament amounted to an ongoing subsidy to those who were willing to work (Lev. 23:22).

- In practice, we must pray for wisdom, because the effects of any handouts are likely to vary dramatically depending on the nature of the person's poverty and even culture. For example, giving money to the working head of a two-parent household is likely to have very different consequences than giving money to a person who is chronically homeless and struggling with alcohol addiction. And giving money to a poor person in rural Tanzania will yield very different results altogether.⁸

Those caveats notwithstanding, simply giving ongoing handouts to able-bodied people is the classic case of *when helping hurts*.

POVERTY ALLEVIATION STRATEGY #2: ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT⁹

Because ongoing handouts are politically unpopular and financially draining, Western civilization has pursued a second strategy to help able-bodied people who are poor: Economic Empowerment.

At the macro level, this strategy promotes and establishes institutions and policies that generate economic growth, thereby creating job opportunities for poor people so they can achieve greater consumption via their own work. Generally speaking, this amounts to spreading capitalism by establishing property rights, enforcing contracts, strengthening financial institutions, investing in public infrastructure, and allowing for freedom of exchange.

At the micro level, this approach includes initiatives that aim to enable poor people to have greater success in the expanding marketplace: GED courses, jobs training programs, after-school tutoring programs, healthcare, financial education, microfinance, improved farming techniques, and more. Perhaps your church or ministry is providing some of these types of initiatives.

The Economic Empowerment Strategy seems better than the Handouts Strategy, doesn't it? Surely, an approach that enables able-bodied people to

support themselves through work is more consistent with God's story of change, as it moves people closer to living in right relationship with creation. Moreover, since the industrial revolution of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, using markets to promote rapid economic growth has helped most of Western civilization escape material poverty. And as globalization spreads Western-style economics and growth to the Majority World, dramatic reductions in material poverty are taking place there as well. *Simply put, in terms of lifting people out of material poverty, there is no better strategy than Economic Empowerment.*

At the same time, a subtle but deadly danger lurks behind the Economic Empowerment Strategy, one that should give Christians considerable pause.¹⁰

The Foundations of Western Economics

The story of change, systems, and formative practices of the global economy are based on the teachings of mainstream Western economics (neoclassical economics), the very embodiment of Western Naturalism.

Mainstream Western economics describes human beings as *homo economicus*, which is none other than the self-interested, individualistic, materialistic, consuming robot at the heart of Western Naturalism (the right side of Fig. 3.2).¹¹ In the absence of the true God, mainstream economics assumes that the purpose of life is to serve *homo economicus*, the false god of Western economics.

The happiness of *homo economicus*, a purely material creature, can be increased indefinitely by consuming more and more, so economists believe that the key to greater human flourishing is never-ending increases in income achieved through unmitigated economic growth. This is the story of change according to Western economics, the top oval in [Figure 3.3](#).

Western civilization creates systems consistent with this story of change (see the left side of [Figure 3.3](#)). Formal institutions like the World Trade Organization, private property, freedom of exchange, corporations, and schools seek to stimulate economic growth. And informal institutions, including messages from advertising, television, music, social media, and the workplace, all communicate that earning more to consume more will lead to the good life.

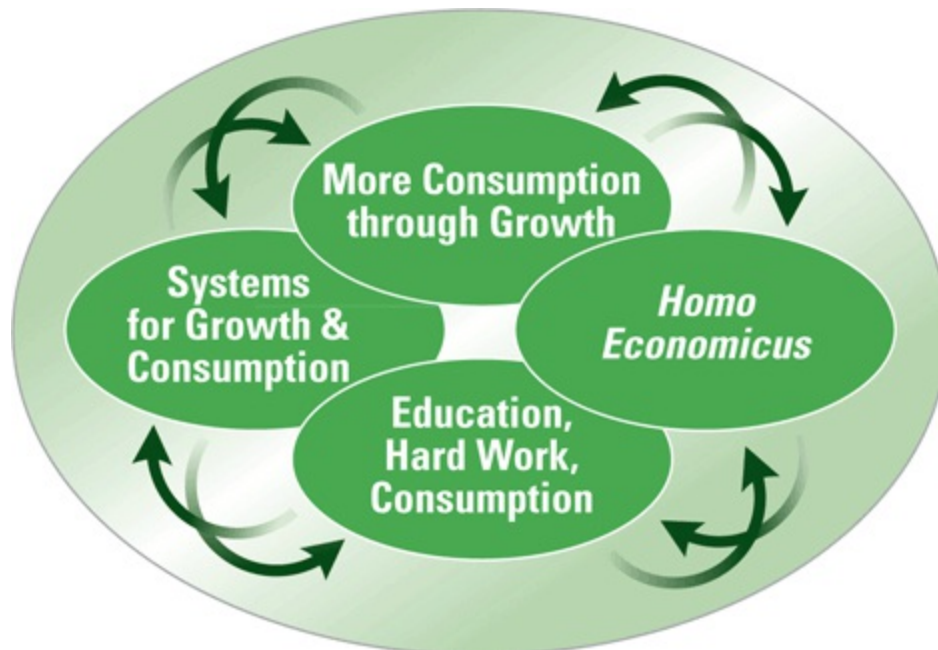
Moving to the bottom of [Figure 3.3](#), we see that mainstream economics encourages formative practices that are consistent with its story of change:

we get more education and work harder and harder so we can spend more and more money on ourselves.

And finally, as we see on the right side of [Figure 3.3](#), the economy reshapes individual personhoods—minds, affections, wills, bodies, and relationships—making people more and more like material, individualistic, self-centered, consuming machines. Human beings are transformed into the image of whatever god they worship, and the god of the global economy is *homo economicus*.

FIGURE 3.3

Individual and Cultural Formation in the Economic Empowerment Strategy



Adapted from Brian Fikkert and Michael Rhodes, “*Homo Economicus Versus Homo Imago Dei*,” *Journal of Markets and Morality* 20, no.1 (Spring 2017): 106.

Most of us are completely unconscious about what is happening, never even stopping to question the deforming effects of the current marketplace. Most of us think about market forces in the same way that we think about gravity—as a fixed law of nature that cannot be changed and for which we are not responsible. We just take the law as a given and live in strict adherence to it, knowing that if we try to violate it by, say, jumping off a tall building, we will get hurt.

Similarly, many of us live as though the current economic system cannot

be violated, cannot be changed, and is not our responsibility. While it would be foolish to ignore market forces—for instance, by starting a business that has no chance of succeeding—it is wrong to put economic life in the same category as a law of nature. Unlike the cases of gravity or inertia, human beings create economic systems and have choices regarding how to behave within them, making us morally responsible before God for our economic decisions.¹²

Unfortunately, the discipline of mainstream economics taught in Western universities and colleges—the discipline that provides the story of change, formative practices, and systems for the global economy—removes the possibility of any moral obligation. The first chapter of every introductory textbook claims that economics is a value-neutral field, a field that just describes the way the world really is without passing any judgment. And the idea that people act like *homo economicus* is one of those facts that “just is.” Mainstream economics teaches that it is “normal” to act like self-interested, consuming robots in the marketplace and increasingly in all aspects of life, including marriage, child-rearing, and even religion.¹³ Human beings are assumed to be *homo economicus* everywhere, selfishly pursuing their own self-interests wherever they go. And to the extent that we internalize this model, we actually make it true by acting like *homo economicus* in our daily lives. In the process, we shape economic life and culture as a whole in the image of the hideous god we are worshiping.

Is it really any surprise that America’s celebrities aren’t the Mother Teresas of this world, people who sacrifice their lives for others, but rather flamboyant hedonists and reality TV stars? The god of the global economy, the god of Western Naturalism, is a grotesque distortion of the image bearers that humans were created to be.

Although she does not write from a distinctly Christian perspective, F. S. Michaels echoes these considerations in her award-winning book, *Monoculture: How One Story Is Changing Everything*:

In these early decades of the twenty-first century, the master story is economic; economic beliefs, values, and assumptions are shaping how we think, feel, and act. The beliefs, values and assumptions that make up the economic story aren’t inherently right or wrong; they’re just a single perspective on the nature of reality. In a

monoculture though, that single perspective becomes so engrained as the only reasonable reality that we begin to forget our other stories, and fail to see the monoculture in its totality, never mind question it. We accept it as true simply because we've heard its story so often and live immersed in it day after day. The extent to which we accept that monoculture unquestioningly and live by its tenets is the extent to which our lives are unconsciously shaped by it.¹⁴

We disagree with Michaels' assertion that the "beliefs, values, and assumptions that make up the economic story aren't inherently right or wrong," for serving *homo economicus* is idolatry. But we do agree that our lives are increasingly shaped by the story of mainstream economics, a story to which many of us are *unconsciously* and *automatically* defaulting. Consider the following story of Anna, a typical American worker.¹⁵

Anna works at a company that has been recently bought out. The company always made a good profit, but the new owners and managers have decided that it can make more. They have taken the "normal" view of mainstream economics: they want to extract as much wealth as quickly as they can. They reinforce this goal through the corporation's organizational culture: Managers who increase the company's profits are praised as heroes and as people of virtuous character, even though they cut salaries and benefits to employees. Human resources policies are changed to foster cutthroat competition amongst the employees, pitting them against one another in a vicious race for the top-paying positions. Finally, the goal is reinforced through the corporation's formative practices, as the employees engage in tasks that are designed to maximize shareholders' profits by increasing sales and cutting costs.

Anna spends the majority of her waking hours immersed in a community whose story of change, systems, and formative practices is centered on the goal of increasing profits in order to increase consumption for *homo economicus*, which, in this case, is embodied in the company's shareholders and herself, for she wants to keep her job. Anna can't help but be deformed by the materialistic, individualistic, self-centeredness of such a community. Indeed, psychologists are finding that some common corporate practices fundamentally conflict with factors that are known to promote human

flourishing.¹⁶

Unfortunately, the deforming process of Western Naturalism doesn't end when Anna leaves work each day. As she relaxes on the couch every evening in front of the television, she is bombarded with programing and advertising intentionally designed to create dissatisfaction within her, thus encouraging her to engage in more materialistic behaviors than ever before.¹⁷

Sadly, Anna's increasingly materialistic lifestyle never satisfies her. Rather, it launches her onto a consume-earn-consume-earn treadmill in an exhausting quest for happiness. This treadmill is time-consuming, reducing Anna's and her husband's availability for family and other relationships. And Anna is not unique. Research shows that during the last two decades of the twentieth century, there was a 33 percent decline in family meals in America and a 45 percent decline in entertaining friends in homes.¹⁸ As Anna's relationships deteriorate, she is likely to become more materialistic, seeking to fill the relational void in her life with more material things.¹⁹ And so the consume-earn-consume-earn treadmill turns faster and faster, increasingly deforming Anna from a mind-affections-will-body-relational creature into a frightfully unhappy, materialistic individual.

Unfortunately, Anna's materialistic individualism doesn't just harm her and her family. She is just one of millions of Americans engaging in the same lifestyle. Collectively, our behaviors change the systems, creating both formal and informal institutions that both reflect and reinforce our core values of self-interested, materialistic individualism.

With respect to formal institutions, research has shown that rising materialism and individualism is causing Americans to withdraw from participating in parent-teacher associations, nonprofit organizations, religious institutions, the political process, and more, thereby contributing to an overall breakdown in the social fabric of the community, which in turn leads to increased individualism.²⁰ We've lost our sense that we all are in this together, that my flourishing is bound up with yours, and that we're called to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Informal institutions both express and reinforce Anna's lifestyle as well. For example, as she runs to and fro, Anna joins millions of Americans in never losing sight of her smartphone. Responding to the values of highly individualistic consumers, the tech industry and social media platforms have created a whole new ecosystem of self-expression. At the push of a button,

we can instantly share our “unique” pictures, stories, and experiences with the world. But rather than fostering relationships, recent studies link smartphone usage to increases in individualism, loneliness, and depression, particularly for America’s youth.²¹

Anna is economically empowered—and that is good—but she is far from fully flourishing. *Why would we want poor people to become just like Anna?*

We Are Richer, but We Aren’t Flourishing

It is a mistake to equate material progress—even material progress that comes from hard work and ingenuity—with full human flourishing. Recall the “paradox of unhappy growth”: *countries that have experienced the greatest success from the Economic Empowerment Strategy are not getting happier, even though their hard work and ingenuity have created unprecedented wealth.* Again, despite increases in material wealth, mental health problems are rising in the US, indicating that our personhoods are crying out in some sort of pain. Our bodies and souls—our hearts!—are trying to tell us that something is wrong with the Economic Empowerment Strategy, something doesn’t fit, something is moving in the wrong direction—and we need to listen.

* * *

Gross National Happiness Versus Gross National Product

Throughout the post-WWII era, Gross National Product (GNP) per capita, which is equal to the average income per citizen, has been used as the primary measure of a country’s well-being.²² For example, global institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund rank countries according to their GNP per capita: countries with lower levels are considered “less developed” and those with the highest levels are deemed “developed.” Similarly, national policy makers regularly use growth in GNP as the primary measure for whether the country is improving. Simon Kuznets won the Nobel Prize in Economics for coming up with the measure, and the U.S. Commerce Department declared GNP to be “one of the great inventions of the 20th century.”²³ In the world of national indicators, GNP is king.

While GNP per capita is certainly a very useful measure, it is also reflective of the materialistic worldview of Western Naturalism and mainstream economics. *Homo economicus*'s happiness is determined by his or her consumption, so the source of human flourishing is never-ending increases in income achieved through relentless growth in GNP per capita.

There is no doubt that policies promoting growth in GNP per capita have resulted in unparalleled reductions in material poverty. But there is also an increasing sense, even among some economists, that something has gone profoundly wrong, as economic growth seems to be accompanied by rising inequality, environmental degradation, a loss of community, and an explosion of mental illness.

In response to these concerns, Bhutan, a small, Buddhist country nestled between India and China, adopted an alternative measure of national well-being in 2008: Gross National Happiness (GNH). The GNH Index is constructed from seventy-two indicators that seek to measure people's flourishing in nine dimensions: psychological well-being, health, culture, ecology, community vitality, living standards, education, time use, and good governance.²⁴ Bhutan surveys its population annually to construct the GNH Index, which it uses to guide its national policy decisions.

While GNH is nowhere close to replacing GNP, it is gaining considerable traction. Britain and France have started to use variations of GNH to supplement GNP in their policy making. And in 2011 the United Nations General Assembly passed a resolution urging countries to move away from GNP to broader measures of well-being such as GNH. In response, the *World Happiness Report* has been annually ranking countries using measures of overall happiness that are similar in spirit to the GNH. According to the 2018 report, the top ten happiest countries are:

1. Finland
2. Norway
3. Denmark
4. Iceland
5. Switzerland
6. Netherlands
7. Canada
8. New Zealand

9. Sweden

10. Australia

What about the United States? It ranked eighteenth in 2018. Moreover, from the period 2008–2010 to 2015–2017, the United States experienced the thirty-fourth highest decline in happiness out of 141 countries.²⁵ Something has gone wrong in America, and we all can feel it.

* * *

What exactly are our personhoods trying to tell us? An expert team of scientists gathered at Dartmouth Medical School to develop an explanation for the rise in mental health problems amongst America's youth. After examining the leading empirical evidence, mostly from the field of neuroscience, the scientists concluded that

the human child is “hardwired to connect.” We are hardwired for other people and for moral meaning and openness to the transcendent. Meeting these basic needs for connection is essential to health and human flourishing. Because in recent decades we as a society have not been doing a good job of meeting these essential needs, large and growing numbers of our children are failing to flourish.²⁶

We are wired to be like the mind-affections-will-body-relational creature depicted on the left side of [Figure 3.2](#), but the Economic Empowerment Strategy is transforming us into the subhuman creature on the right side.

What exactly is causing this breakdown of relationships with other people and with the “transcendent”? Jean Twenge, professor of psychology at San Diego State University, explains, “We have become a culture that focuses on material things and less on relationships.”²⁷ Considerable evidence suggests that America's dramatic economic growth during the post-WWII era has been accompanied by substantial increases in individualism and materialism, which research has found to be highly destructive, resulting in lower self-reported happiness, poorer interpersonal relationships, higher levels of anxiety and depression, greater antisocial behavior, and poorer health.²⁸ The

future looks even bleaker when we look at the emerging millennial generation—an age cohort that researchers are finding to be far more materialistic, self-centered, and depressed than previous generations.²⁹ Something is apparently wrong with the Economic Empowerment Strategy, for its greatest success story—the United States—is struggling terribly. Don't you think we should at least have some pause before we blindly impose this strategy onto poor people?

We were not created to be wealthy, autonomous consuming machines, so as the deadly virus of Western Naturalism strips away our relationships—as the spokes in the wheel are removed—our minds, affections, wills, and bodies are distorted as we collapse in on ourselves. Of course, this stripping, collapsing, distorting process is painful, causing our personhoods to cry out in agony. But, unlike most forms of oppression, the victims of this oppression don't even realize it's happening. Indeed, we gladly tell ourselves that this is the good life. And we tell poor people that this is the good life for them as well.

To be clear, no human being is ever fully transformed into *homo economicus*. The basic wiring of our mind-affections-will-body-relational personhood resists this complete transformation. And despite the increasing dominance of the marketplace, Western Naturalism's story of change is not the only story shaping our lives. Narratives of love, of family, of community, and of various forms of spirituality are also present in Western civilization—and, to some degree, they dilute the impact of Western Naturalism. As we saw in [Figure 2.3](#), American culture is not completely located in Western Naturalism's corner of the triangle.

* * *

The Causes of America's Recent Decline in Happiness

The *World Happiness Report 2017* tries to explain the decline in America's happiness that has been observed from 2006–2015 (See [Figure I.2](#) on [page 32](#)). Researchers estimated the impacts of six variables on self-reported happiness for 155 countries: 1) income per capita; 2) healthy life expectancy; 3) social support;³⁰ 4) freedom to make life choices; 5) generosity;³¹ and 6) perceived corruption of government and business. The first two variables get

at people's material well-being, while the last four variables capture the overall social climate.

America's material condition (variables 1 and 2) improved over this decade. All else equal, this would have caused happiness to increase. But not all else was equal: the four social variables declined substantially, more than offsetting the effects of the increases in material well-being. As a result, happiness declined overall.

To offset the reduction in happiness caused by the decline in the four social variables, the report estimates that average income per capita would have to increase from \$53,000 to \$133,000, an astronomical rise that would require decades to accomplish. And this assumes that such growth would not cause any further deterioration in the social variables, which is highly unlikely. An alternative strategy would be for America to pay more attention to repairing its social fabric, for as the authors of the report state, "America's crisis is, in short, a social crisis, not an economic crisis."³²

* * *

The Final Verdict on Western Naturalism's Economic Empowerment Strategy

So, is Western Naturalism's Economic Empowerment Strategy a good or a bad approach to poverty alleviation?

As mentioned earlier, globalization is spreading Western values and institutions to the rest of the world. Many countries, therefore, are now reaping the same benefits from economic growth that the West has enjoyed since the Industrial Revolution, including a dramatic reduction in global poverty.³³ Since 1990, for example, the number of people living on less than \$1.90 per day—the World Bank's poverty line—has declined by more than half, falling from 1.95 billion in 1990 to 896 million in 2012.³⁴ Moreover, researchers are finding that the vast majority of this reduction in poverty is due to rapid economic growth,³⁵ as Majority World countries have adopted the institutions and policies of Western Naturalism's Economic Empowerment Strategy. In fact, many global leaders believe that, should such growth continue, it may be possible to lift the entire world above the \$1.90 poverty line by the year 2030.³⁶ *Undoubtedly, the massive reduction in global poverty over the past three decades is one of the most dramatic events*

in all of human history, so there is definitely much to appreciate about the spread of the Economic Empowerment Strategy.

Should we promote macroeconomic growth? Yes! Should we work at a micro level to empower poor people to benefit from such growth? Yes! Are our ministries' job training courses, microenterprise development initiatives, and after-school tutoring programs—all of which help poor people to be more successful in the marketplace—worthwhile initiatives? Yes!

Yet, somehow we need to do all these differently, for the body and soul of Western civilization is screaming out that something has gone terribly wrong: we are both increasingly rich and increasingly unhappy. And through our efforts to alleviate poverty, we are bringing *both* these realities to poor people. Evidence shows that as Majority World countries successfully pursue Western Naturalism's Economic Empowerment Strategy, they too are experiencing the "paradox of unhappy growth," becoming simultaneously richer and less happy.³⁷

Consider China, for instance, whose move toward a more market-based economy has resulted in both mind-blowing economic growth and colossal reductions in poverty over the past twenty-five years. As economist Richard Easterlin and his colleagues explain:

In the past quarter century China's real [income] per capita has multiplied over five times, an unprecedented feat. By 2012 virtually every urban household had, on average, a color TV, air conditioner, washing machine, and refrigerator. Almost nine in ten had a personal computer, and one in five, an automobile. Rural households lagged somewhat behind urban, but these same symptoms of affluence, which were virtually nonexistent in the countryside in 1990, had become quite common by 2012. In the face of such new-found plenitude, one would suppose that the population's feelings of well-being would have enjoyed a similar multiplication. Yet ... well-being today is probably less than in 1990.³⁸

China is becoming just like us, in the sense that they too are experiencing the paradox of unhappy growth. And similar results have been found for a number of other Majority World countries, which led economist Carol

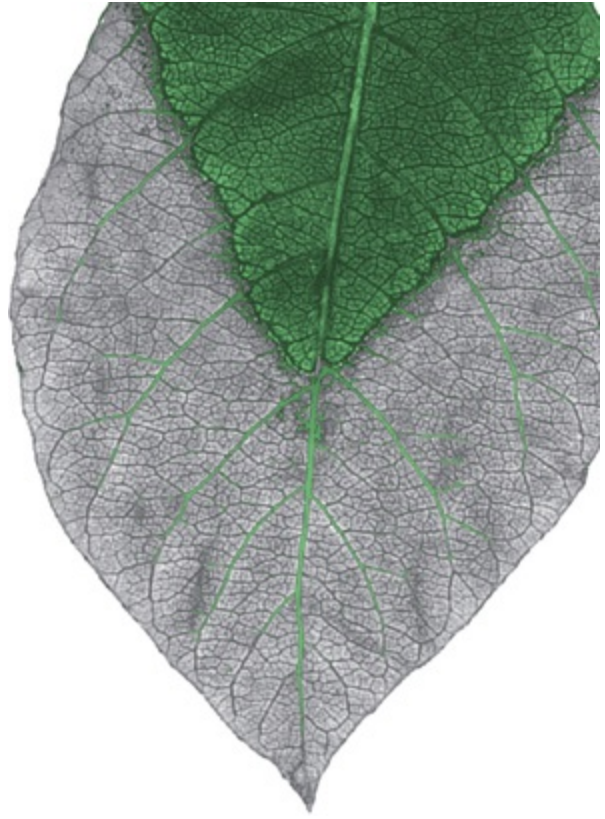
Graham to write the provocatively titled book, *Happiness around the World: The Paradox of Happy Peasants and Miserable Millionaires*.³⁹

And closer to home, research has shown that low-income children in the United States are even more materialistic and more susceptible to consumerist messages than their wealthier peers, making them even more likely to be seduced by the lie at the heart of the Economic Empowerment Strategy: happiness comes from consuming more material things.⁴⁰

So what's the final verdict on the Economic Empowerment Strategy? On one hand, being economically empowered seems better than being enslaved by either disempowering handouts or by material poverty. On the other, despite its apparent success, the individualistic, materialistic consumerism at the very foundation of the Economic Empowerment Strategy has its own form of enslavement, making it a very subtle, albeit incredibly dangerous, case of *when helping hurts*.

We need a different story of change for poor people—and for ourselves—than that of Western Naturalism. At its worst, this story of change provides ongoing handouts of material resources to able-bodied people, thereby undermining their dignity and capability. At its best, it runs the risk of putting poor people onto the same consume-earn-consume-earn treadmill that is destroying the very fabric of mainstream Western civilization. Both outcomes tend to transform poor people into the god of Western Naturalism: a materialistic, individualistic, self-centered, consuming machine.

We become what we worship, and the god of Western Naturalism and its poverty alleviation strategies is less than human. Again, the goal isn't to turn Zimbabwe into the United States or to turn decaying neighborhoods into wealthy suburbs. Rather, the goal is to turn all these places into the New Jerusalem. To achieve that goal, we need a different story of change, one that is centered on the person of Jesus Christ. But as we shall see in the next chapter, immersing ourselves in that story is easier said than done.



CHAPTER FOUR

YOU CAN BE A HARP-PLAYING GHOST FOREVER

A piety that sees death as the moment of “going home at last,” the time when we are “called to God’s eternal peace,” has no quarrel with powermongers who want to carve up the world to suit their own ends. Resurrection, by contrast, has always gone with a strong view of God’s justice and of God as the good creator. English evangelicals gave up believing in the urgent imperative to improve society (such as we find with Wilberforce in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries) about the time that they gave up believing robustly in resurrection and settled for disembodied heaven instead.¹

—N. T. WRIGHT, *THEOLOGIAN*, 2008

If Christ’s sovereignty is not recognized in the world of economics, then demonic powers take control.²

—LESSLIE NEWBIGIN, *MISSIONOLOGIST*, 1991

I am a pastor’s kid. As such, I was expected to be in church every time the doors were unlocked, no matter what. Whenever I objected to these expectations, my well-intentioned mother would say, “You must be an example for the other kids. They need to be in church. You want your friends to grow spiritually, don’t you?” Believing that my entire generation’s salvation rested upon my young shoulders, I did my best to fulfill my awesome responsibility.

Although being the pastor’s kid often felt like martyrdom to me, there was one sacrifice that topped them all: wearing a hideous robe and singing in the junior choir in the third grade. And as if that wasn’t enough of a trial, God orchestrated the circumstances so that my older sister was the choir director, putting her in the ideal position to regularly humiliate me in front of my peers. But apparently not even that was enough suffering in God’s eyes, as He gave me the opportunity to earn even more jewels on my crown: my sister

made me sing a solo in front of the entire congregation, threatening to report me to our parents if I complained even once. But the height of this entire torturous experience—the thing that made it almost more than I could bear—was that I believed this is what heaven would be like—forever, and ever, and ever. Somehow I had gotten the idea that when I died, my soul would go to heaven, where I would spend all eternity as a ghost, wearing a choir robe, singing in the junior choir, and playing a harp.

I didn't want to go to hell, but to be completely honest, heaven sounded only marginally better. And whenever I would sheepishly express these concerns about my eternal destiny, adults would tell me that God would change my heart so that I'd enjoy it. Quite frankly, staying on earth sounded better to me. I liked cheering for the Green Bay Packers, playing with my friends, fishing in the river, riding my bike to the shore of Lake Michigan, and eating bratwurst. I liked being me, fully me, not some ghostlike, harp-playing version of me. And I enjoyed my life, at least when I didn't have to sing in the junior choir. Although I tried to have faith that God was all powerful, I had trouble believing that even He was strong enough to make me enjoy being a ghost in the junior choir—forever, and ever, and ever.

Like many Western Christians, I had absorbed ideas that are a mix of Western Naturalism and biblical truth. As a result, I had a highly distorted view of God, human beings, and life in general. Some of these erroneous ideas have plagued me well into adulthood, doing considerable damage to me and some of the people I've impacted. And I'm not alone. Western Christianity has some deep flaws, flaws that hurt us and that we often *unknowingly* and *unconsciously* impose on others, including the poor people we are trying to help. There is a better way of being human in the world, for both ourselves and materially poor people. Unfortunately, we've been immersed in Western Christianity's distorted understanding of reality for so long that we don't even know what that better way of being in the world looks like, much less how to attain it. We have been so thoroughly influenced by the dominant story of change of Western Christianity that our minds, affections, wills, and bodies can't even imagine an alternative set of goals or way of achieving those goals. Poor people aren't the only ones who need transformation. You and I need transformation as well.

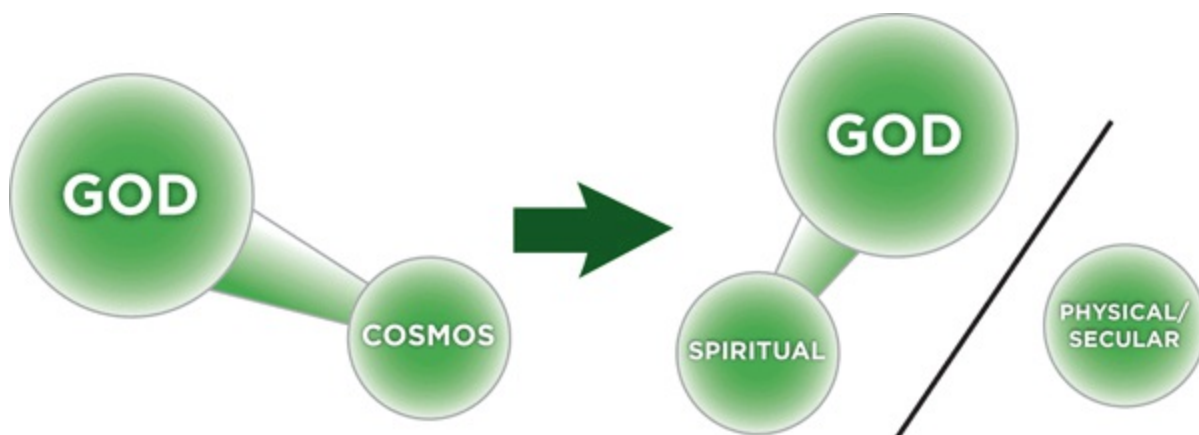
EVANGELICAL GNOSTICISM'S STORY OF CHANGE

As we saw previously, Western Naturalism says God probably doesn't exist. And even if He does exist, He is irrelevant to daily life. The cosmos is solely material in nature and operates on its own according to the laws of nature. Hence, using our hard work and ingenuity, human beings can master the universe so we may enjoy ever-increasing levels of material consumption.

Western Christians rightly reject this materialist perspective, but many of us haven't rejected it fully. Rather, we have mixed some ideas of Western Naturalism with biblical revelation, producing a highly distorted understanding of reality, which poverty expert Darrow Miller refers to as "Evangelical Gnosticism."³ Dating back to the first century AD, Gnosticism (pronounced like 'noss) is a heresy that separates the spiritual realm, which is viewed as good, from the material realm, which is seen as bad. Similarly, as pictured in [Figure 4.1](#), Western Christians have engaged in a sort of Evangelical Gnosticism, confining God to the spiritual dimension of reality and trusting in the laws of nature to run the rest of the cosmos on a daily basis. Hence, Western Christians worship God on Sunday mornings, but we tend to live like Western Naturalists Monday through Saturday, acting as though God is largely irrelevant to our daily lives.

FIGURE 4.1

Evangelical Gnosticism's Limitation of God's Reign



Adapted from Darrow L. Miller with Stan Guthrie, *Discipling Nations: The Power of Truth to Transform Cultures* (Seattle: YWAM, 2001), 3–4.

It's easy to see the patterns of Evangelical Gnosticism when one spends

time with Christians from the Majority World of Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Christians in these places are often converted out of various forms of traditional religion, one of the three foundational religious perspectives in [Figure 2.3](#). There is tremendous diversity across the world's traditional religions, but they all share a belief that personal spiritual beings (creator gods, lesser gods, ancestral spirits, ghosts, or demons) and impersonal spiritual forces (universal life energy or a force) control the material realm. Much of life, then, is spent trying to determine which beings or forces are impacting one's life and to manipulate their power.⁴

In many ways, traditional religion is the polar opposite of Western Naturalism. While the latter denies the existence and relevance of spiritual forces to the material world, traditional religionists believe that all of life is controlled by the spiritual realm. Hence, when a person gets sick, traditional religionists believe that demons or other spiritual beings have caused the illness, so they will often go to a witch doctor for help in appeasing these spirits. Similarly, when traditional religionists want their businesses to prosper, they likely go to shamans to enlist the help of these spiritual beings. The shamans will often give the business owners a good luck charm to hang in their shops and a powder that they can use to sprinkle curses on their competitors' products. In traditional religion, the spiritual and material realms are integrated.

Given their background, Christian converts from traditional religion naturally seek God's help in all aspects of their lives. When my family and I lived in Uganda, we were humbled by the regular, all-night prayer vigils that took place on Friday evenings. And throughout the week, we saw the Ugandans praying and fasting frequently for help with the details of their lives—for crops, for sickness, for jobs—faithfully living out the command to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thess. 5:17 ESV). As one woman in a Ugandan slum explained to me, “If you aren't fasting, you aren't serious.” Even my young children noticed the difference, saying, “God seems more real here than He does back home.”

Things do seem different in the US. For example, when I get sick, I often go to the doctor numerous times before I remember to pray for healing. Yes, we should go to the doctor and we should take medicine, but we should also pray that the Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer of the entire cosmos, the Great Physician, will use either modern medicine or miraculous intervention

to cure our bodies. My prayerlessness reflects Evangelical Gnosticism. I ask God to save my soul, but I often treat Him as though He is irrelevant to my everyday, physical life.

Similarly, the students I teach at Covenant College often reflect the Evangelical Gnosticism of Western Christianity. These students are some of the brightest and most godly young people in the country. The vast majority of them have grown up in solid Christian homes and Bible-believing churches, and many of them have received Christian education from grades K–12. These are wonderful young people, and they regularly minister to me in all sorts of ways. However, they also exhibit some of the symptoms of Evangelical Gnosticism.

For example, each year in one of my classes, I conduct an experiment, asking the students to tell me what they should do to get a job. They invariably provide the following sorts of answers:

“We should study hard.”

“We should major in a field with good career options.”

“We should learn how to write a résumé.”

“We should use our parents’ connections.”

There is truth in all these answers, but notice that the students’ entire focus is on techniques, on those things that *they* can do to control the material world. I’ve done this exercise with approximately 750 students over the years, and only *one* of them has ever said, “We should pray.” Think about the horror of this: some of the godliest young people in America—at least at the outset—don’t instinctively prioritize falling on their knees to pray to the Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer of work for help with finding a job. It’s all about résumés, connections, etc. This is Evangelical Gnosticism: God is Lord over our spiritual lives, but the rest of life is governed by natural forces that we can master through our hard work and ingenuity.

Please do not misunderstand us. We are not arguing that the Christian life should be one of expecting miracles to happen every other minute. Rather, we are simply arguing that the Christian life should be one of recognizing the truths of James 1:17:

Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.

“Every good and perfect gift” includes both the normal way that God works in His world—creating and sustaining what are commonly called the “laws of nature”—and the unusual ways that He sometimes intervenes through “miracles.” When the penicillin works time and again, in exactly the same way each time, that is God’s handiwork. And when studying hard in college leads to a good job, that’s Him again. And when people with “incurable” cancer are suddenly cancer free for reasons that doctors can’t explain, that’s Him too. A biblical perspective recognizes that God is active all the time, that we are completely dependent upon Him, and that we should thank Him for His provision, whether He has acted “naturally” or “supernaturally.”

As pictured in [Figure 4.2](#), the separation of the physical and the spiritual extends to Evangelical Gnosticism’s understanding of human beings. There are three key points to note here:

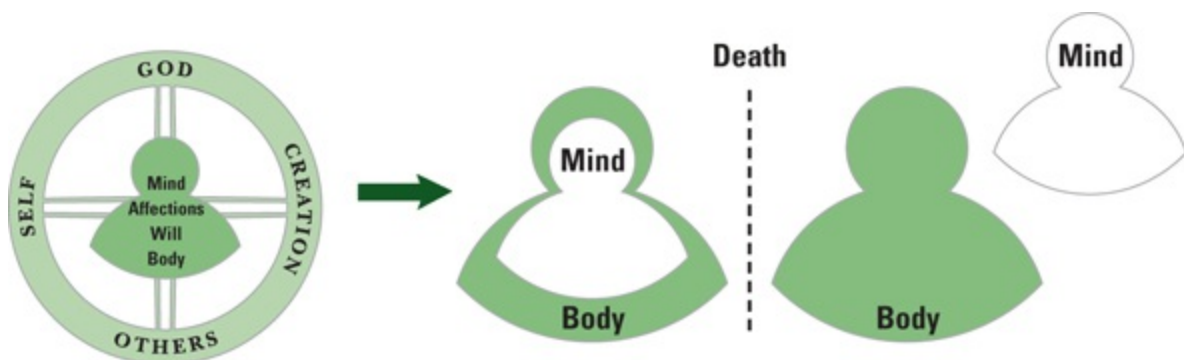
First, Evangelical Gnosticism typically views the soul as being superior in importance to the body. The soul is seen as eternal, destined to sing in the junior choir forever. While we have vague notions that our bodies will be resurrected, somehow they don’t seem to be that important in our thinking. Perhaps this is related to the fact that many Christians erroneously believe that the present world will be completely destroyed and that our future selves will live in some sort of vacuum in which our bodies seem pretty irrelevant. After all, who needs a body if there is no food to eat, no mountains to climb, no oceans to swim in, and no footballs to throw around? We will discuss more about this error later, but for now, note that throughout the Bible, the image of our futures is *not* an ethereal land of disembodied spirits but rather a new creation, a fully embodied existence in a physical place that will include the best food ever (Isa. 25:6–8)! Moreover, while many parts of the present world will be destroyed, the Bible teaches that some parts of this world will make it to the next one, albeit in a purified state (Rom. 8:18–21; 1 Cor. 3:12–14; 2 Peter 3:10; Rev. 21:24–26).⁵

Second, Evangelical Gnosticism tends to reduce the soul to just the mind, rather than a mind, affections, and will that are fully integrated both with each other and with the body. As will be discussed further in Part 3, this singular focus on the mind negatively impacts the way that training is conducted in many poverty alleviation programs. Information is disseminated as if program participants are just “brains on sticks” rather than as whole

people whose affections, wills, bodies, and relationships must be impacted, not simply their minds.

Finally, Evangelical Gnosticism tends to view the human being as autonomous, not needing relationships to flourish. This individualistic conception results in numerous flaws in program design—and in our lives in general—resulting in a serious underappreciation of the importance of fostering supportive groups, an issue that will be discussed further in Part 3.

FIGURE 4.2
Evangelical Gnosticism's Deformation of the Human Being



Adapted from Brian Fikkert and Russell Mask, *From Dependence to Dignity: How to Alleviate Poverty through Church-Centered Microfinance* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 83.

Given this understanding of the nature of God and of human beings, the goals of Evangelical Gnosticism's story of change can be summarized as follows:

1. The primary goal of life is to get the soul to heaven for all eternity;
2. A secondary goal is to pursue the American Dream, making the body happy in this life through self-centered, material consumption.

Because the spiritual and material aspects of the human being are viewed as separate from one another, Evangelical Gnosticism's goal for the body is identical to that of Western Naturalism, which doesn't believe in the spiritual aspect at all! In Evangelical Gnosticism, the gospel is good for saving the soul for eternity, but it actually brings nothing unique to the table when it comes to addressing the material aspects of poverty, or of life in general:

Western Naturalism can address people's physical needs just fine.

The erroneous concepts of Evangelical Gnosticism are not just abstract philosophical matters. They shape every aspect of our lives, deforming us as image bearers of the triune God from the creature on the left side of [Figure 4.2](#) to the one on the right side. Rather than living like highly integrated, physical and spiritual creatures that experience deep communion with God, self, others, and the rest of creation, we live dis-integrated lives. We worship on Sunday and then largely live like Western Naturalists the rest of the week, chasing the American Dream and becoming increasingly individualistic, materialistic, and self-interested.

Moreover, we *automatically* and *unconsciously* incorporate these faulty ideas into our poverty alleviation ministries, impacting every aspect of their design: the selection of interventions, staffing, implementation, funding sources, marketing, and metrics. And we can hurt materially poor people in the very process of trying to help them. Like Western Naturalism, Evangelical Gnosticism is a case of *when helping hurts*.

To see this, let us consider the two primary strategies that Evangelical Gnosticism uses to help poor people achieve its goals of saving the soul for eternity and of pursuing the American Dream in this life.

POVERTY ALLEVIATION STRATEGY #1: HANDOUTS OF MATERIAL RESOURCES + EVANGELISM

As we saw in the previous chapter, Western Naturalism has often tried handouts of material resources in order to achieve its goal of making the body happy by increasing people's consumption. Evangelical Gnosticism often employs a similar strategy with two added twists. First, it adds evangelistic activities to the handouts in order to save the soul of the materially poor person. Second, in addition to addressing the person's immediate physical needs, the handouts of material resources are often used as a hook to get the chance to address what really matters: the soul. This strategy—and the faulty story of change behind it—drives many poverty alleviation efforts of Western Christians both at home and abroad.

For example, Western churches and ministries regularly dispense food, clothing, and money to the same poor people over long periods of time. There

is an appropriate time and place for providing such resources. But when ongoing handouts to able-bodied people are devoid of empowering relationships that build on the people's own gifts and efforts, they tend to create unhealthy dependencies. And even when a particular church's or ministry's handouts are only provided occasionally—on a short-term mission trip or from a benevolence fund, for example—they are often just one of the many handouts being provided by many churches and ministries to the same low-income individual or community. That woman asking for help with her electric bill may also be getting help from the church down the street. Collectively, all the individual handouts by churches and ministries can add up to one, big, dependency-creating system.

Unfortunately, when confronted with these truths, churches and ministries commonly say, “Yes, we know these handouts are not really helping poor people get out of their situation, but we just want to show the love of Jesus any way we can. As people feel Christ's love, we hope to get a chance to share the gospel. After all, it's their eternal destiny that really matters.”

In a similar vein, a large Christian organization gives away tons of used clothing to poor communities around the world.⁶ The organization pins tracts about Jesus' love to the front of each piece of clothing. In addition to potentially damaging the dignity and capacity of the clothing recipients, dumping used clothing into a village can depress clothing prices, drive local tailors out of business, and undermine the village's economy, thereby reducing the availability of jobs. In other words, this organization is using a strategy that undermines work, and work is central to a proper relationship to creation. When I asked the head of this organization for his feelings about this, he replied:

Yes, but who cares? We don't really care about the local economy. It's all going to burn up anyway. We just want people to know that Jesus loves them, no matter what the cost, so that they can trust in Him for salvation. The eternal destiny of their souls is at stake. That's all that matters.⁷

Ironically, these approaches are *not* demonstrating Jesus' love. Jesus cared for whole people—body, soul (mind, affections, and will), and relationships. Jesus cared deeply enough about every square inch of the cosmos to be

tortured unto death to save it. Moreover, these approaches are *not* sharing the gospel, which is the good news that Jesus' kingdom is bringing healing as far as the curse is found. The gospel is *not* that Jesus is beaming our souls up out of this world into some ethereal mass of harp-playing ghosts. Consider how Colossians 1:15–23 describes both Jesus and the gospel:

The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him *all things* were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; *all things* have been created through him and for him. He is before *all things*, and in him *all things* hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself *all things*, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation—if you continue in your faith, established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant. (emphasis added)

Note that Jesus Christ is the Creator, Sustainer, and Reconciler of *all things*. He isn't Lord over just our souls. Rather, He reigns over every cell in our bodies, over the cracks in the sidewalk, over Netflix, over schools, over businesses, over governments, and even over the New England Patriots (as hard as the last one is for us to believe). And with the authority and power that He has as King, He is reconciling *all* of creation, putting *all things* back into proper relationship. This gospel has been proclaimed—not just to the souls of human beings, but to “every creature under heaven.” *This* is the gospel. *This* is the good news that we have to tell. *This* is far better news than the news of Evangelical Gnosticism.

In the face of malnutrition, AIDS, and sexual abuse, the message of Strategy #1 of Evangelical Gnosticism boils down to this: *Yes, you are hurting. This handout will deaden your pain for a while. See how much Jesus loves you! Accept Him as your Savior so your soul can go to heaven when you die.*

This story isn't compelling. It isn't hopeful. It isn't loving. And it simply isn't the gospel. We have a much better story to tell and embody than this. We have a story of total healing, of comprehensive reconciliation, of restoration to being fully human and fully alive.

Moreover, the Gnostic story and the practices it fosters contribute to the transformation of poor people from the creature on the left side of [Figure 4.2](#) to the one on the right side. It pains us to state this, but the truth must be told: some of the hardest places to work effectively with poor people are places where the American church has been active—places such as Haiti or the Kibera slum outside of Nairobi—places where the church has lavishly handed out resources to able-bodied people and shared the “gospel” of getting one's soul beamed up to heaven.

If American Christians visit these places today, they are greeted enthusiastically, for Santa Claus has returned for another visit. Soon, requests for handouts are made, even though no evidence suggests that any progress was made with the handouts that were provided on the previous visit. Rather than empowering the local people to see themselves as image bearers of the triune God who are called to steward their gifts, the local people have been reduced to the groveling materialists depicted on the right side of [Figure 4.2](#): pathetic, consuming machines who are merely trying to deaden the pain while they wait for their souls to go to heaven when they die.

Finally, this story is profoundly insulting to King Jesus, for it limits His work to the spiritual realm, thereby ceding the rest of the cosmos to the reign of Satan. In contrast, as theologian Abraham Kuyper famously stated, “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, Mine!”⁸ King Jesus, please forgive us for not recognizing the full domain of Your kingdom.

Giving ongoing handouts and an evangelistic message to able-bodied people is a terribly common case of *when helping hurts*.

POVERTY ALLEVIATION STRATEGY #2: ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT + EVANGELISM

A growing number of Christians are realizing that providing ongoing handouts to able-bodied people can be detrimental. So, like many Western Naturalists, they are increasingly adopting Economic Empowerment strategies that seek to help poor people attain greater success in the marketplace: GED courses, jobs training and placement, healthcare, financial education, microfinance, improved farming techniques, and more. In doing so, they are definitely taking steps in the right direction, for helping people to support themselves through their own work is more consistent with the goal of God's story of change than dependency-creating handouts.

However, as we saw in the previous chapter, there is a subtle but deadly danger lurking behind the Economic Empowerment Strategy. When employed by Western Naturalists, Economic Empowerment amounts to pursuing the American Dream, which does not promote human flourishing. Becoming a materialistic, individualistic, self-interested, consuming machine is contributing to an explosion of mental health problems.

Unfortunately, succumbing to Evangelical Gnosticism's separation of the material and the spiritual realms, many ministries simply adopt programs that are identical to those of Western Naturalism's Economic Empowerment Strategy and then tack on a simple evangelistic message to save people's souls. One of the key advantages of this approach is that it allows for the "spiritual" part of the program to be separated out from the "economic empowerment" part of the program, thereby enabling the ministry to obtain government funding for the latter. Many organizations have used this approach to scale up their operations all over the world, impacting the lives of millions of poor people.

And what could be wrong with this? While this approach is understandably attractive, at the end of the day, it confines the lordship of Jesus Christ to the spiritual realm. Jesus is presented as the one who saves people's souls, but when it comes to getting an education, finding a job, or starting a business, hard work and ingenuity will do just fine. God has little to nothing to do with those parts of life. This approach not only insults King Jesus, but also fails to promote all that is entailed in human flourishing.

The implicit assumption of Evangelical Gnosticism's Economic

Empowerment Strategy is that poor people should do what so many of us do: pursue the American Dream in this life and trust that Jesus will take our souls to heaven when we die, hoping that heaven will miraculously be more fun than it sounds. But this approach does not lead to full human flourishing, for Evangelical Gnosticism is poorly equipped to resist the idolatry at the heart of the global marketplace. By limiting the lordship of Christ to the spiritual realm, American Christians are largely shaped by Western Naturalism in the physical realm. Thus, while Jesus is ostensibly worshiped on Sunday morning, *homo economicus* reigns, for many of us, Monday through Saturday. Moreover, given the entertainment-driven, “me-centered” culture that increasingly shapes the Sunday morning “worship experience,” we must ask whether *homo economicus* actually reigns on that day as well.⁹

This way of being in the world simply isn’t working. Indeed, it is profoundly deforming.

EVANGELICAL GNOSTICISM’S DEFORMATION OF THE HUMAN BEING

Consider again the contrast between the images on the left and right of [Figure 4.2](#).

We are created to be like the image on the left, an integrated body and soul that is wired for intimate relationship, deep communion, with God, self, others, and the rest of creation. This deep communion is to be experienced every day. We are designed to have a deep sense of God’s loving presence as we work, play, eat, and sleep, and we are to do all these activities to the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31). And as we enjoy this intimate walk with God in our daily lives, we gain confidence in who we are as His beloved children, thereby enjoying a proper relationship with ourselves. Moreover, the deep love and security we experience with God gives us the freedom to express love to others, and thus enjoy community with coworkers, family members, and friends. Finally, we are able to rightly steward creation as image bearers of our loving Father by protecting and developing it as an act of worship to Him.

Evangelical Gnosticism trades all this in for the creature on the right, a creature whose body is a materialistic, individualistic, self-interested,

consuming robot in this life and whose soul must be saved for an eternal life that is very mysterious to us. In essence, we hop on the same consume-earn-consume-earn treadmill as Western Naturalists, with the added benefit that our soul will enjoy eternal rest. This is not what we were created for. This is not the best way of being in either this world or the next one. This is not full human flourishing. We have a better story to tell and a better life to live.

Again, nobody is fully transformed into the creature on the right. As we saw in the previous chapter, our structure as mind-affections-will-body-relational beings resists complete deformation. Moreover, the Evangelical Gnostic story of change is not the only story influencing us. Most of us have some sense that God is sovereign over all aspects of our lives, and we often pray for His intervention. Furthermore, narratives and practices regarding intimacy with God, dignity, community, and stewardship are part of most of our lives, diluting the impact of Evangelical Gnosticism. But these caveats notwithstanding, Evangelical Gnosticism still negatively affects us in many ways.

It's scary to live in the world pictured on the right side of [Figure 4.1](#), a world in which God isn't really in control Monday through Saturday. I know this from personal experience. When facing a test in school, an obstacle in my career, a financial struggle, or a health issue, I tend to default to a worldview in which God isn't really in charge. Sure, I trust Him for my salvation—to get my soul to heaven when I die—but when it comes to the affairs of my daily life, I act like I'm in control. After all, somebody has to be in charge, and the god of Evangelical Gnosticism doesn't seem up to the task. Sure, I pray for help with daily affairs, but so often my prayers feel like messages in a bottle that I throw into the sea. I hope somebody will find the bottle and respond to my message, but I don't really have much confidence that it will actually happen. All this managing life alone is a heavy responsibility to bear. Indeed, it is impossible to bear, which is probably one of the many reasons that I have struggled with anxiety ever since I was a child.

I'm not alone. The story of change, systems, and formative practices of Western Christianity, which isolates God from everyday life, can't help but transform people into creatures who often look a whole lot like Western Naturalists, people who are also living as though God is irrelevant to everyday life. When our story from Monday through Saturday is the same as

that of unbelievers—“pull yourself up by your bootstraps and pursue the American Dream”—should we really expect to look much different from them?

And we don’t look different. About a dozen years ago, Ron Sider drew attention to this crisis in his book *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience: Why Are Christians Living Just Like the Rest of the World?* Sider cited a host of disturbing evidence, mostly from the 1990s, showing that evangelical Christians looked amazingly similar to our unbelieving neighbors:

To say there is a crisis of disobedience in the evangelical world today is to dangerously understate the problem.... Self-centered materialism is seducing evangelicals and rapidly destroying our earlier, slightly more generous giving. Only 6 percent of born-again Christians tithe. Born-again Christians justify and engage in sexual promiscuity (both premarital sex and adultery) at astonishing rates.... This is scandalous behavior for people who claim to be born-again by the Holy Spirit and to *enjoy the very presence of the Risen Lord in their lives*.¹⁰ (emphasis added)

But we aren’t enjoying the “very presence of the Risen Lord in our lives.” Rather, we often act as if He’s irrelevant to our daily lives. While we worship God an hour or so on Sunday mornings, that one hour can’t compete with the deforming process that dominates the other 167 hours per week.

And the younger generation can see the inconsistencies. Millennials read a Bible that talks about meekness, self-sacrifice, and care for the poor. Unfortunately, they then see churches that, like the culture around them, often seem to be power-hungry, self-serving, and indifferent to the poor and marginalized. It doesn’t add up, giving a cynical generation just the data it needs to justify abandoning the church in droves. Recent Barna research finds that only 20 percent of all millennials believe church attendance is important, and more than 50 percent of all millennials have not attended a single church function in the past six months. Why? Millennials state three key factors for their opting out of church: one-third cite the church’s irrelevance, one-third mention its hypocrisy, and one-third highlight the moral failures of its leaders.¹¹

Of course, as they leave the church, millennials often just become more immersed in American culture. Researchers have found that millennials are more individualistic, materialistic, and narcissistic than any generation in American history,¹² trends that are reflected in their religious perspectives. Using data from a large-scale survey, sociologist Christian Smith finds that the vast majority of America's youth have replaced historic Christianity with "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism," a new religion that is "supplanting Christianity as the dominant religion in American churches."¹³ Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is a form of religion that views *God as distant from and largely irrelevant to everyday life*, the one exception being that He can be called on like some sort of "Divine Butler" to meet people's never-ending desires.¹⁴

No one can serve two masters (Matt. 6:24). If we serve *homo economicus* for 167 hours per week, we will, in fact, be serving this god for 168 hours per week. And since human beings are transformed into the image of whatever god we worship, we eventually become just like our Western Naturalist neighbors.

What does this have to do with poverty alleviation? Again, we *automatically* and *unconsciously* bring our story of change into our poverty alleviation strategies, for we assume that our way of life is the best way to live in the world. If we are Evangelical Gnostics, that will be the story of change we bring with us into our poverty alleviation efforts. And in the process, our strategies will deform poor people into what we have become, the creature on the right side of [Figure 4.2](#). Evangelical Gnosticism's Economic Empowerment Strategy is a very subtle and very dangerous case of *when helping hurts*.

Again, this deformation is never complete, for poor individuals and communities bring their own stories of change into any poverty alleviation initiative. As a result, the overall impact of the initiative will largely depend on what happens when Evangelical Gnosticism's story of change and poor people's story of change encounter one another.

When Evangelical Gnosticism Addresses Poverty in the Majority World

A Christian relief and development organization wants to help traditional religionist farmers in a Majority World country adopt a modern agricultural system to increase their crop yields. Because the program uses government

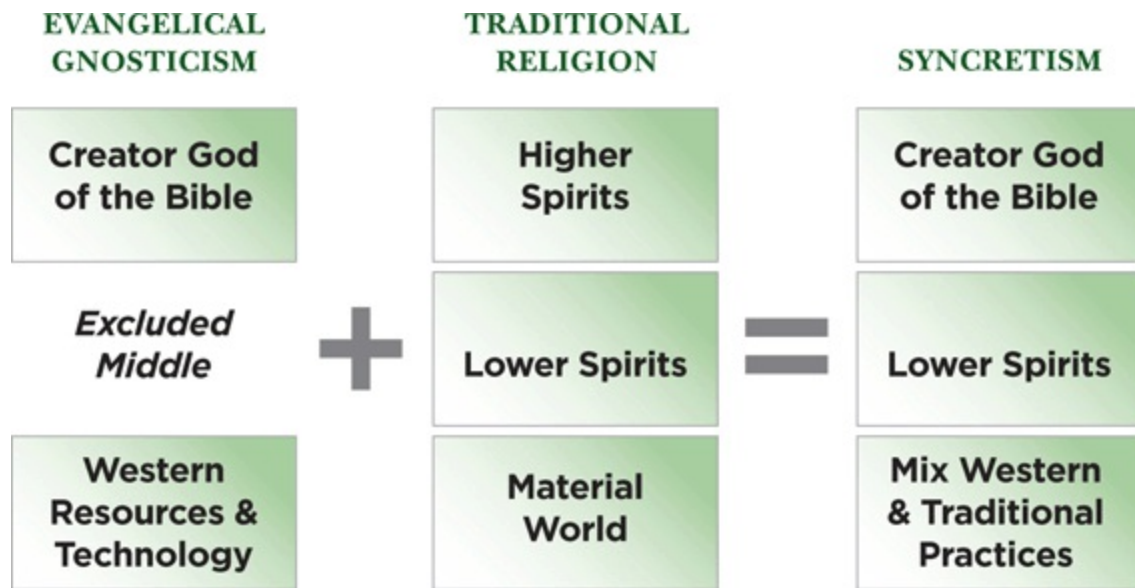
funds, the organization is prohibited from incorporating any evangelism or discipleship in the program. Hence, the organization obtains funds from Christian donors to pay for Bible studies that focus on evangelizing the farmers about how to get their souls saved. As long as these activities are separated by time and location from the agricultural program and as long as the farmers are not required to listen to an evangelistic message, tacking on such a program does not violate the terms of the government grant. The resulting program design is a classic case of Evangelical Gnosticism's Economic Empowerment Strategy: Western technology is presented as the answer for problems in the material world, while Christ is presented as the Savior of souls.

What will be the outcome of such an approach?

When Evangelical Gnosticism collides with traditional religion, the results are far from ideal. As missiologist Paul Hiebert explains, Western Christianity's failure to connect the spiritual and material realms—the “excluded middle”—provides no answer for the primary question that plagues the traditional religionist: How do I deal with the spiritual forces that are wreaking havoc in my life?¹⁵

History has shown that traditional religionists respond in several ways to an Evangelical Gnostic poverty alleviation strategy. First, some simply remain in traditional religion, since the witch doctors seem to have a better answer for their problems than Christianity does. Others start to put their hope in Western technology, rejecting both Christianity and traditional religion in favor of Western Naturalism. Finally, as pictured in the panel on the right side of [Figure 4.3](#), some will engage in syncretism, professing Christianity's Creator-God on Sunday but using the practices of traditional religion to control the spirits throughout the rest of the week.¹⁶

FIGURE 4.3
When Evangelical Gnosticism Meets Traditional Religion



Adapted from Bryant Myers, *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011, ed.), 8. Originally derived from Paul G. Hiebert, “The Flaw of the Excluded Middle,” *Missiology* 10, no.1 (January 1, 1982): 35–47.

In the end, Evangelical Gnosticism is unable to move traditional religionists away from the idolatrous practices of their culture because it has no real answer for how the gospel impacts the material world.¹⁷ *Evangelical Gnosticism can’t move us away from the idolatrous practices of our own culture for the very same reason.* We all need a better hope than singing in the junior choir—forever, and ever, and ever.

* * *

Bringing the Whole Gospel to the Irish

During the second half of the fifth century, an English priest named Patrick felt called to go as a missionary to the Celtic peoples of Ireland—people who had once kidnapped and enslaved him! From the perspective of many church authorities, this was an impossible task, for they believed the Celts were “barbarians” who were too illiterate and irrational to understand Christianity. Several generations later, Ireland had become substantially Christian, and Celtic missionaries spread the gospel to Scotland, much of England, and a substantial portion of Western Europe.¹⁸

How was this all possible? In *The Celtic Way of Evangelism: How Christianity Can Reach the West... Again*, George Hunter identifies two keys to the success of the gospel amongst the Celts.

First, Celtic Christians established communities in which the gospel was lived out, not just by the clergy on Sunday, but by the laity as they shared their daily lives together as scholars, craftsmen, farmers, teachers, husbands, wives, and children. These communities emphasized the presence and providence of the triune God in nature and in the routine affairs of life rather than a distant and unapproachable deity unconcerned with the regularities of life. Unlike some of the monastic communities in other regions, the Celtic communities were not seeking to be cloistered off from the world. Rather, they were trying to reach the world through hospitality and a demonstration of the ability of the gospel to transform all aspects of life.¹⁹ True spirituality could be discovered and fostered around the table with strangers and friends.

Second, in terms of [Figure 4.3](#), Celtic Christianity had no excluded middle. Hunter explains, “Celtic Christians had no need to seek out a shaman. Their Christian faith and community addressed life as a whole and may have addressed the middle level as specifically, comprehensively, and powerfully as any Christian movement ever has.”²⁰ One of the key ways that the Celts avoided the problem of the “excluded middle” was by using contemplative prayers throughout the day that reminded them of the triune God’s active presence in all aspects of life. “The Celtic Christians learned prayers to accompany getting up in the morning, dressing, starting the morning fire, bathing or washing clothes or dishes, ‘smoothing’ the fire at the day’s end, and going to bed at night.”²¹

For example, a prayer for starting the morning fire begins as follows:

I will kindle my fire this morning
In the presence of the Holy angels of heaven,
God, kindle Thou in my heart within
A flame of love to my neighbor,
To my foe, to my friend, to my kindred all,
To the brave, to the nave, to the thrall.²²

And a bedtime prayer calls upon the presence of the Trinity:

I lie down this night with God,
And God will lie down with me;
I lie down this night with Christ,
And Christ will lie down with me;
I lie down this night with the Spirit,
And the Spirit will lie down with me;
God and Christ and the Spirit
Be lying down with me.²³

Can such a holistic and imminent understanding of the gospel win the West again?

* * *

When Evangelical Gnosticism Addresses Poverty in Rural Appalachia

The recent election of Donald Trump to the presidency has brought much attention to the plight of Appalachia's white, rural poor. Although this population is typically viewed as backward, its culture has, in some ways, actually anticipated where the rest of America is heading.

In his bestselling book, *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis*, J. D. Vance describes his experiences growing up in a poor family in rural Appalachia. While recognizing that a host of economic, social, and political factors have contributed to his family's multigenerational poverty, Vance places much of the blame on certain aspects of the Appalachian culture itself: domestic violence, drug and alcohol abuse, divorce, sexual promiscuity, machismo, out-of-wedlock births, consumerism, lawlessness, and an inadequate work ethic. A number of scholars have noted that these dysfunctions were present in early eighteenth-century Scots-Irish culture, the culture that the Appalachian settlers brought with them and doggedly maintained when they migrated.²⁴ Disturbingly, most people in Appalachia profess to be Christians. Shouldn't we expect the gospel to have more transformative impacts on their culture? We should, but the religion of rural Appalachia that Vance describes is simply not the gospel. Rather, it's a syncretism between Evangelical Gnosticism and the American Dream that foreshadowed current trends in mainstream American culture.

To understand this, it's important to note that, despite the Bible Belt's

reputation, church attendance there is actually very low. In southwestern Ohio, where Vance was born, the rate of church attendance is about the same as “ultraliberal” San Francisco.²⁵ Most residents there simply are not participating in the corporate body of Christ.

Moreover, when rural Appalachians do attend church, they often encounter some of the most extreme forms of Evangelical Gnosticism. For a brief period of time during his early teenage years, for example, Vance attended church with his estranged biological father. Using apocalyptic images, the preaching emphasized retreating from this evil world and reduced the Christian life to combatting evolutionary teaching, avoiding extramarital sex, not listening to rock music, and sharing the “gospel.”²⁶ As Vance explains, “Dad’s church required so little of me. It was easy to be a Christian. The only affirmative teachings I remember drawing from church were that I shouldn’t cheat on my wife and that I shouldn’t be afraid to preach the gospel to others. So I planned a life of monogamy and tried to convert other people.”²⁷

Like Evangelical Gnosticism, the preaching that Vance encountered in this church failed to acknowledge that Christ is king over the entire cosmos, thereby making God irrelevant to daily life (see [Figure 4.1](#)). Thus, as Vance explains,

Faith becomes what I’d call a cultural [trinket]. It’s like something you wear on your breast or that you pin to your identity. But it isn’t actually that significant to you in a lot of ways. The point is that for at least a fair number of people in these areas, Christian faith isn’t motivating their behavior. It’s just another identifier. They listen to country music, live in a rural area, like to fish, and they’re also Christians.²⁸

If Christ isn’t really King, then another god with another story of change is needed to get through the day. Describing the religion of his grandmother, Vance writes, “Mamaw [Grandma] always had two gods: Jesus Christ and the United States of America.”²⁹ The latter god clearly took precedence, as life was dominated by a quest for achieving the American Dream against a backdrop of nationalistic patriotism.³⁰ So what role does Jesus Christ play? “By Mamaw’s reckoning, God never left our side. He celebrated with us when times were good and comforted us when they weren’t.... God helps

those who help themselves. This was the wisdom of the book of Mamaw.”³¹

We have seen this pathetic god before. He is not the King of kings and Lord of lords. Rather, he is like the Divine Butler of the millennial generation’s Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, a friendly chap who assists people in the pursuit of their ultimate god: the materialistic, individualistic, self-centered, consuming robot at the heart of the American Dream. Ironically, Mamaw and many others in rural Appalachia were at least two generations ahead of the millennials.

Sadly, the Appalachian god—who is becoming America’s god—has failed them, for the American Dream has eluded the rural Appalachians’ grasp. The ensuing loss of hope and purpose has been devastating, resulting in the crisis in Appalachian culture that Vance so aptly describes. There is something worse than being transformed into a materialistic, individualistic, consuming machine: namely, being transformed into a materialistic, individualistic, consuming machine with no money to spend on your god because the economy has tanked. Preaching the message of Evangelical Gnosticism—that is, pursue the American Dream in this life and get your soul to heaven in the next—in the context of the declining economy of rural Appalachia is a particularly painful form of *when helping hurts*.

We need a different story of change for poor people, and for ourselves, than the one offered by Evangelical Gnosticism. At its worst, this story of change provides ongoing handouts of material resources to able-bodied people, undermining their dignity and capability in the hope of getting their disembodied souls to heaven. And at its best, this story of change does not offer poor people any relief from the same consume-earn-consume-earn treadmill that is destroying mainstream Western civilization. Instead, it offers only the anesthetic of assurance that their souls are eternally secure. Both strategies wear away at the humanity of poor people, as both strategies stem from an erroneous view of God. *We become what we worship, and the god of Evangelical Gnosticism and its poverty alleviation strategies reflect a distorted understanding of the nature of God and of His work in the world.*

Reflection Questions

1. Look back at your answer to [Question 1](#) in the Initial Thoughts at the start

of Part 2.

a. Do you see any evidence of Evangelical Gnosticism in your answer?

b. What specific actions might you take to reduce the influences of Evangelical Gnosticism in your life?

2. List ways in which the culture around you—your workplace, the media, your family, your friends, and so on—is promoting the worship of *homo economicus*, a self-interested, individualistic, materialistic, consuming robot.

3. Reflect on your answer to the previous question and on your own thoughts, choices, and behaviors. Can you discern any ways in which you are being transformed into the image of *homo economicus*? If so, be specific in your answer.

4. What specific practices will you pursue to resist the deforming influences of *homo economicus* in your life? For more help with this, consider reading *Practicing the King's Economy: Honoring Jesus in How We Work, Earn, Spend, Save, and Give* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2018) by Michael Rhodes and Robby Holt with Brian Fikkert.

5. Look back at your answers to [Question 2](#) in the Initial Thoughts at the start of Part 2. Is there any evidence of Evangelical Gnosticism in the following:

a. Your church? Be specific.

b. The poverty alleviation ministry with which you are familiar? Be specific.

c. Pray that God will show you how you can help in a positive and gracious way to strengthen your church and this poverty alleviation ministry.

PART 3

**GOD'S STORY
OF CHANGE**

INITIAL THOUGHTS

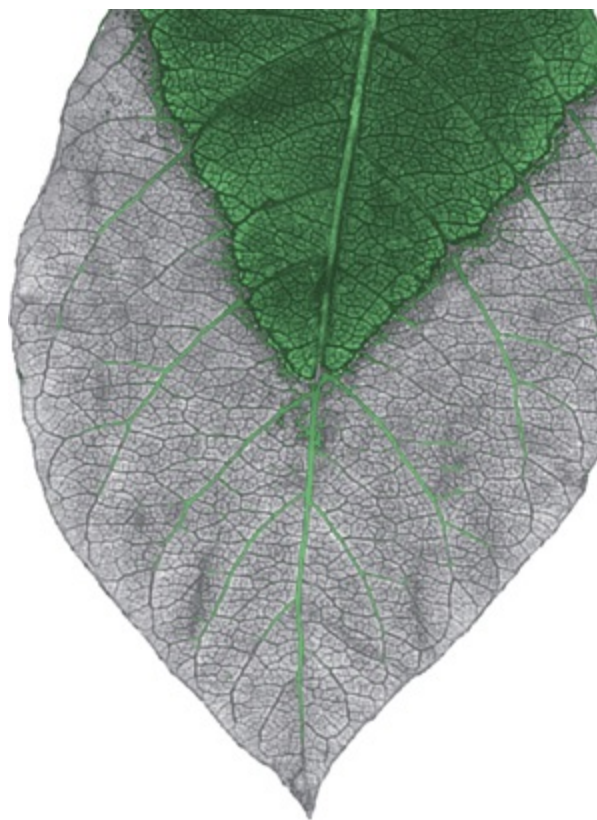
1. *Why did Jesus come to earth?*

2. *What is the gospel?*

3. *What do you think it will be like when Jesus comes again and we get to go to heaven?*

4. *What does the Lord's Supper have to do with poverty alleviation?*

5. *What is the local church?*



CHAPTER FIVE

ESCAPING FLATLAND

The laws of nature are in a certain sense little different from the miracles; both occur within the same familiar categories, and yet both are wonderful. If we take this lesson to heart, whenever we look at the world, we will see a miraculously upheld wonder in all of creation; we will see Christ behind both the mundane and the miraculous, or in our common terminology, the natural and the supernatural.¹

—TIM MORRIS AND DON PETCHER, PROFESSORS OF BIOLOGY AND PHYSICS, 2006

When somebody [in the Majority World] gets sick, the first thing they do is pray and anoint them with oil. If somebody falls out of a third-floor window, they don't dial 911; they ask, "What did the Christians do in Acts?"²

—PAUL BORTHWICK, MISSIOLOGIST, 2012

As we have seen, every effort to alleviate poverty embodies—either explicitly or implicitly—a story of change, a story about what the good life is and of how that good life can be achieved. The story of change shapes all aspects of the poverty alleviation effort: the selected intervention, program design, staffing plan, marketing, funding strategy, and metrics. We have also seen that the story of change ultimately reflects the implementing organizations' understanding of the nature of God and of human beings.

In chapters 3 and 4, we examined two stories of change that have shaped the poverty alleviation strategies that most of us have encountered: Western Naturalism and Evangelical Gnosticism, neither of which are producing true human flourishing for either the materially poor or non-poor. Because we humans are transformed into the image of whatever god we worship, and because both Western Naturalism and Evangelical Gnosticism have erroneous views of God, these stories of change necessarily deform humans into creatures we simply are not designed to be. We need a different story of change—one that is rooted in the worship of the triune God—for both ourselves and the poor people we're trying to help. We need to be

transformed by being immersed every moment of every day in the only story of change that is actually true: God's story of change. Unfortunately, such a transformation is easier said than done. To see why this is so, consider the following example.

A Very Unusual Approach to Poverty Alleviation³

Reconciled World (reconciledworld.org) is a Christian organization that seeks to see God's kingdom overcome poverty and injustice. One of Reconciled World's initiatives is called Truth Centered Transformation (TCT), which equips very poor, Majority World churches to understand and live out the narrative and practices of God's kingdom in their communities. TCT brings in no financial resources to help these churches. Rather, the TCT program introduces churches to the good news of God's kingdom and encourages them to depend on God to help them steward their own gifts, resources, and creativity in order to bring His kingdom to bear on their communities.

Twelve years ago, Reconciled World used TCT to train very poor churches in an Asian country whose oppressive government heavily restricts religious freedom. These churches live in fear of persecution and are almost completely cut off from access to the outside world and its resources. It's difficult to imagine, then, that they could do anything to alleviate poverty in their communities. Indeed, it's hard to imagine that they could even survive.

But God used TCT to equip His church to unleash His kingdom in dramatic fashion. Praying fervently for God to act, these churches helped their communities to use their own resources in all sorts of creative ways, and within seven years, over 500 communities moved out of poverty with no assistance from foreigners! The government took notice of these dramatic developments and decided to conduct a study to understand what was causing these incredible reductions in poverty. The director of Reconciled World explains what happened next:

The government employed a team of PhD students—all of whom were non-Christians—and sent them to various villages where we had been training churches in the TCT program to find out what had caused them to move out of poverty. The PhD students

commented that they were shocked to see how different these villages were compared to other villages that had not received the TCT training, and they couldn't believe that the TCT villages had actually moved out of poverty.

The PhD students completed the research and reported their findings: *The reason the TCT villages had moved out of poverty was that the church members had understood their Bibles and had started to apply the Bible's teaching to their lives.*

The government didn't seem to be too happy at the results of the study and invited another group of PhD students to visit different TCT villages. The government said to them, "Make sure you interview everyone, from the oldest to the youngest. We want to know the real reason that these villages moved out of poverty."

The PhD students visited these additional TCT villages, completed the research, and wrote up their findings: *The real reason that the communities had moved out of poverty was the Christian God. As the people in the villages had followed God and sought to walk in obedience to Him, He had lifted them out of poverty.*

God's work in these communities seemed to be miraculous, impacting even the land. Reconciled World's director explains:

Then one year we had a huge drought. All over the country the crops were dying. In the TCT villages they grew root vegetables, and they were watching the tops turn brown and wither. They would meet in churches and pray, asking God to send rain but no rain came. Finally, it was time for harvest. Everything appeared to be dead. But they decided to go and dig up the ground in case God had saved anything. As they went to dig they discovered not the normal harvest but three times the normal harvest. God had not only saved but multiplied their crops. He had healed their land. Throughout the rest of the country the crops had died so the price that year skyrocketed, and the TCT communities all got two to three times the normal price. So not only did they grow more, everything they grew was worth more.

What is your reaction to this story? If you're like us, your first reaction is one of skepticism. It's pretty tough to believe that with no foreign assistance and in the face of a hostile government, very poor rural churches could lift their entire communities out of poverty. No outside aid? No technical assistance? Come on! And we are even more skeptical that God showed up in these miraculous ways. Sure, God will lift our souls to heaven when we die, but that's a far cry from believing that He miraculously intervenes to lift entire communities out of poverty right now. And healing the land? Today? Really?

The fact that we're so skeptical underscores the core of the problem mentioned earlier: We need to be transformed by being immersed every moment of every day in God's story of change. Unfortunately, most of us have been immersed in the lies of Western Naturalism and Evangelical Gnosticism for so long that we are nearly incapable of believing, hearing, and living the truths of the biblical narrative. Our imaginations are so compressed that we can't even see, much less comprehend, the drama that is being revealed right before our eyes, a drama in which the triune God is intimately and actively involved with His world every single moment of every single day.

Let us be abundantly clear: we are definitely *not* suggesting that outside aid and technical assistance are always bad. Neither do we believe that the only thing poor people need to do to escape poverty is read the Bible, do what it says, and pray. Nor do we think we should expect God to perform such spectacular miracles every day.

But we *are* saying that our skepticism at Reconciled World's experience reveals a deep problem that prevents us from applying the biblical story of change to our poverty alleviation efforts. The problem is this: *Western Christians are living two-dimensional lives in a three-dimensional cosmos.*

THE TWO-DIMENSIONAL COSMOS OF WESTERN CHRISTIANITY

Western Christians Are Flatlanders

To illustrate this problem in Western Christianity, theologian Carl F. Ellis Jr. draws on Edwin Abbot's fable of Flatland,⁴ an imaginary country that is only

two dimensional, like a piece of paper.⁵ The residents of Flatland are shapes: lines, triangles, circles, and squares that live in pentagon houses. The Flatlanders can think, see, and live in only two dimensions—north, south, east, and west across the flat plane, having no notion of either up or down. So if a three-dimensional object is placed into Flatland, the Flatlanders can only see the part of the object that intersects the two-dimensional plane in which they live.

One day a sphere from Spaceland enters the country of Flatland, but, from their two-dimensional perspective, the Flatlanders can see it only as a circle. The sphere talks with one of the Flatlanders, Mr. Square, eventually helping him to see the fullness of his entire being as a three-dimensional sphere. And over time, the sphere reveals more of Spaceland to Mr. Square, showing him the many wonders of a three-dimensional world: cubes, cylinders, and so on. Unfortunately, when Mr. Square tries to tell his fellow Flatlanders about the reality of Spaceland, they ridicule him and throw him into prison to prevent him from spreading any more falsehoods. The Flatlanders refuse to believe in anything that they cannot conceive from their two-dimensional perspective.

We have been immersed in the stories of Western Naturalism and Evangelical Gnosticism for so long that we are like Flatlanders, having lost the ability to conceive of a world in which the spiritual is really real Monday through Saturday. It's like we live in two dimensions rather than three. Spending 0.6 percent of our lives acknowledging God's existence on Sunday mornings is simply not enough to overcome the 99.4 percent of our lives that are deeply shaped by the narratives, systems, and formative practices of naturalism. We can hardly even imagine a world in which God is both transcendent and immanent, actively upholding the laws of nature, suspending those laws whenever He chooses, making nations rise and fall, and actually dwelling inside of us (see 1 Cor. 6:19).

In other words, as Flatlanders, we are unable to believe in, or even imagine, the real world: the world that, in the words of philosopher Charles Taylor, is "enchanted" by the triune God.⁶ Deep down we all sense there must be more than a "disenchanted world." We know there is more going on than meets the eye. But rather than slowing down to discover these realities, we busy ourselves, seeking distractions that might ease the pain of this Flatlander existence.

Western Christians are Indoor Baseball Fans

Philosopher James K. A. Smith provides a similar analogy, stating that Western Christians are like fans watching a baseball game in Toronto's SkyDome.⁷ When the roof of the stadium closes, fans can no longer see the stars in the sky. But the fans don't lament this loss because their eyes are so firmly focused on the field that they don't even notice the roof has been closed.⁸ For all practical purposes, the fans' focus has resulted in their world being reduced from three dimensions to two.

Similarly, our eyes have been fixed on the things of the natural world for so long that we fail to look at the spiritual realm and realize just how intimately intertwined it is with the material realm. And this distorted perspective of reality affects everything, including our poverty alleviation strategies. We think and act as though we are living inside the closed SkyDome, a world that is shielded off from the triune God, and through our poverty alleviation strategies, we invite poor people to join us inside. Certainly, it's better inside the closed SkyDome than in some places outside it. But living inside the closed SkyDome for long periods of time has its own problems: the air quality deteriorates, the sanitation is inadequate, the food in the concession stands isn't healthy, and people start to feel claustrophobic. Over time, this environment reshapes people into something less than they were created to be. Welcome to the worlds of Western Naturalism and its close cousin, Evangelical Gnosticism, both of which create environments that are *de-formative*. We need to let poor people out of the closed SkyDome—*and we need to be let out of the closed SkyDome ourselves*—for a different dimension really does exist.

The problem is we don't know how to do this. We've been living inside the Flatland-SkyDome world for so long that we can't even imagine there is a three-dimensional world out there, much less what flourishing in that world looks like.

We Don't Even Know That We Don't Know

Pause and reflect on that last sentence again. It's not just that we haven't achieved the good life; it's that we don't even know what the good life is. Moreover, we've been living in the world of Flatland-SkyDome for so long that we don't even know that we don't know! We actually think that Flatland-SkyDome is the real world when it's not. And to make matters even worse,

we've *unconsciously* designed a story of change—for both ourselves and materially poor people—that makes sense for the imaginary Flatland-SkyDome world, but not for the real world in which we actually live.

That truth should give us all some pause. Perhaps we should slow down the waves of short-term mission trips in order to give ourselves a chance to reflect on what we are doing. Perhaps we should take some time to ask ourselves:

- What do our daily actions reveal about whom we are worshiping in our own lives?
- What do our actions indicate we believe is the goal of life?
- What do our actions show we believe is the way to achieve this goal?
- What are we implicitly or explicitly communicating in our poverty alleviation ministries about the nature of human flourishing?
- What is the nature of the god whom we are inviting the materially poor to worship? Is this god the true God?

Note that we said we all should “pause.” This is different from being “paralyzed.” We should not be so fearful of doing harm that we completely withdraw from trying to help materially poor people. On the contrary, as the richest people to ever walk the face of planet Earth, we have a tremendous responsibility to act! Indeed, throughout the Old and New Testaments, the Bible is very clear that helping materially poor people is absolutely paramount for God’s people. Consider Isaiah 58:6–10, for example:

“Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:
to loose the chains of injustice
and untie the cords of the yoke,
to set the oppressed free
and break every yoke?
Is it not to share your food with the hungry
and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—
when you see the naked, to clothe them,

and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?
Then your light will break forth like the dawn,
and your healing will quickly appear;
then your righteousness will go before you,
and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard.
Then you will call, and the LORD will answer;
you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I.

“If you do away with the yoke of oppression,
with the pointing finger and malicious talk, and if you spend
yourselves in behalf of the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the oppressed,
then your light will rise in the darkness,
and your night will become like the noonday.”

And 1 John 3:17–18:

If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.

The point is *not* that we should be doing less to help materially poor people. Indeed, we should likely be doing so much more. Rather, the point is that, as we do more, we should conduct our initiatives *differently* from how we have in the past, *differently* from how our default story of change would lead us. Western civilization, including the evangelical church, is deeply broken. We have closed the roof of the SkyDome, living most of the week as though God is largely irrelevant, deforming ourselves and blinding ourselves to the reality that is right outside the stadium. This is no small problem.

And this fact returns us to the point that we made earlier: The goal is not to turn Zimbabwe into the United States or to turn decaying neighborhoods into wealthy suburbs. Nor is the goal to reshape the world into the image of Western Christianity. We are not the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. Rather, the goal is to seek to be as much like the New Jerusalem as possible. And to achieve that goal, we need a different story of change, one that is

centered on the gospel, the good news that most of us don't really understand.

Toward that end, the rest of this book reconsiders the grand drama of Scripture: Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Consummation. While this drama is familiar to many of us, we have often viewed it from the erroneous perspectives of Flatland and the closed SkyDome, from the distorted perspectives of Evangelical Gnosticism. As a result, we have often failed to understand the fullness of this drama and its implications for our daily lives.

REDISCOVERING THE ENCHANTED WORLD

As we examine the biblical story of change, there are several common errors we need to avoid.

On one hand, most of us Westerners have been heavily influenced by naturalism. One of the consequences of this is that many of us have difficulty imagining that God miraculously intervenes in His world. The Bible sometimes describes such interventions as God's "mighty acts" (Deut. 3:24; Ps. 145:4). God really is involved in our world. He really does intervene in unusual ways, and we should pray for Him to do miracles. He can turn a heart of stone into a heart of flesh (Ezek. 11:19; 36:26), and He can make a virgin become pregnant (Luke 1:26–38)! That is the same God we worship, and so He can still calm the storm and heal the blind. Nothing is too hard for God (Deut. 1:17; Jer. 32:17, 27).

On the other hand, it is a mistake to imagine that God is active among us only when something is recognized as a "miracle." As mentioned earlier, the usual way that God acts in His world is by consistently upholding the regular functioning of His creation—what are commonly referred to as the "laws of nature." If there were no God, such "laws" would not exist or be upheld. Unfortunately, naturalism has distorted our thinking here too; many of us see these laws as independent of God. We mistakenly imagine that these "laws" are eternal, unchangeable, and ultimate, and that even God is somehow subject to them. This puts the Creator under His creation. But God is eternal, unchangeable, and ultimate. He created the universe, and He makes it function so unbelievably consistently that it appears to follow "laws."

In this light, we need to rediscover that we live in an "enchanted" world, a world in which the hand of God guides every drop of rain as it falls to the

earth and upholds every single brick in a towering skyscraper. In rediscovering this truth, we rediscover wonder.⁹ Recognizing the enchantment of the world encourages us to stand in awe before the complexity, beauty, and majesty of creation in all its intricacies and interconnections, and ultimately to stand in awe before the Creator and Sustainer of it all.

And once we begin to recognize the enchantment of our world, we will also become more open to the surprising yet undeniable ways God works mysteriously in our daily lives, as He answers prayers and makes His presence known to us. From unexplainable financial provision to the softening of the heart of a stubborn coworker for whom we've been praying, from the giving of needed courage to apply for a job to the unexpected insight gained in prayerful meditation, God is always active. Even when we may not call such activities "miracles," we nevertheless should stand in wonder at the clear care He provides for His people and world. It takes spiritual eyes to see God's active presence all around us, and it takes ears to hear of God's presence and action in our daily lives.

God is actively involved with His world every single millisecond. Normally, He does this by upholding the regular functioning of the universe, and occasionally He does it through miracles. And if we are really paying attention, we will notice His activity even between the two ends of the spectrum—His regular "upholding" all things and His "miracles." We might start to sense His nudges, recognize little ways He is active, and see His fingerprints in places we would easily miss if we were not paying attention. We should praise Him all the time for both the usual and unusual ways in which He works to give us "every good and perfect gift." The question is not, "Is God working?" but rather, "Do we recognize and praise Him for His work?"

The fact that nature has laws was an amazing discovery. In a way, the recognition that the world acts in dependable ways is the foundation of all Western philosophy and science. The sun may occasionally go behind the moon, but it will come back—and unlike the ancient world, we don't have to fear that some monster has eaten it. Eclipses are part of a bigger system that is so reliable that we can predict exactly when the next one, and the one after that, will happen. We can turn iron into steel the very same way in different places around the world. Water always freezes at the same temperature. We

can rely on all the stuff around us to behave in knowable and predictable ways.

Unlike the ancient world, we no longer need to insert “Zeus” into our understanding of lightning or “Neptune” into our understanding of the oceans. Our modern world’s view of God’s relation to nature has therefore changed. The world works with great regularity, so it appears that the material world is independent of supernatural intervention. The physical sciences all assume that it is the nature of the world *itself* that they measure and study, that *its* behavior is regular and knowable, and that *it* is describable in terms of equations and simple cause and effect.

Basing their work on these assumptions, the natural sciences have given the world impressive gifts, which include refrigeration, clean water, vaccines, cures for disease, and improved crop production. None of these improvements appear to need prayers to Ba’al or Marduk or Zeus or Jesus. Thus, we have a dominant philosophy of naturalism coexisting with Evangelical Gnosticism, which is unable to explain any link between the material and spiritual realms.

But the world is a large, complex place. Might it be that, away from the thermometers and telescopes of the scientists, odd little things happen? Is it possible that the regularity of the cosmos is itself an act of a faithful God? Is it possible that God’s hand is actively engaged in every aspect of His creation, moment by moment, so that the world is enchanted with His presence? The church through the ages has answered these questions with a resounding “yes,” calling these acts God’s “providence.”

There Are Miracles, and Then There Are “MIRACLES!”

God is present everywhere (Ps. 139:7–10; Col. 1:16–17). Jesus is intimately connected to, and thus present with, every Christian (John 15:5; Col. 3:3). Jesus promised to be with His disciples “where two or three gather in my name” (Matt. 18:20; see also 28:20), and He is intimately connected to the church as its head (Col. 1:18).

These verses give us a spectrum of the presence of God: God is everywhere, upholding the working of the universe. But He is present in a slightly different, more intense way to the people He has brought to Himself, giving them His own life and bearing fruit through them. Scripture takes this truth a step further: Jesus has this intimate, organic connection with His

church as its head, so that our worship is not an independent gift we hope will please God, but a participation in His ongoing love of His Father. Not only do we worship Jesus, but Jesus is our lead worshiper (Heb. 2:11–12). This reality is especially brought home as His real, spiritual presence is manifest in the preaching of the Word and in the administration of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper.

This spectrum of different kinds and intensities of God's presence to His children is paralleled by His work in the world. Most fundamentally, the cosmos that He has created "hangs together" in Him (Col. 1:16–17). We may not directly see Him in the world, but that doesn't mean He is absent. It may at times appear that He is behind a curtain, but we should never forget, as Creator and Sustainer, this God is most certainly present and active. His working in the world is so consistent that physicists can describe it with equations; and His working is so regular that the world is a safe place for us to abide. He doesn't visibly appear on the main stage of the daily functioning of the laws of nature any more than Shakespeare appears as a character in *Hamlet*. We could call this everyday, predictable, steady work of God "nature," but if we think about the fact that "nature" itself requires God's intervention, we could just as easily call it "nature, an everyday miracle," because it is a direct work of the living God.

But, thankfully, there are also times in which He is not so hidden behind the curtain. He meets us in fellowship with other Christians, in worship, in the sacraments, in the preaching of the Word, as we read the Bible, and in prayer. He walks with us. He hints, "Go this way," and we go and it changes our day. He responds to prayer because He is alive and He is faithful and He loves us. We can't always trace these sorts of interruptions of the "natural order," because the natural is so vast and complicated that we can't possibly sort out in every situation what is regular and irregular. And one might even question whether such categories are helpful. But we do know that God is working in ways that are less regular than laws of nature, even when these ways are not easily identified. So, we can call these type of actions "untraceable miracles."

Further, we experience the continuing work of God in our lives, which transforms us increasingly into the image of Christ and enables us to love Him and our neighbors in new, deeper ways. We can call this "the miracle of sanctification."

And then there is the parting of the Red Sea, the feeding of the multitudes in Galilee, and the resurrection of Christ from the dead. We can call these “MIRACLES!” These don’t happen as often, but when they do, they are so big and so visible that even unbelievers sometimes recognize them as occurring outside of the normal script.

We hope this outline of God’s presence and actions will show that having one category called “nature” (where God stops working) and another called “miracle” (where nature stops working) results from a false understanding of the world. And this gives us at least the start of a workable alternative to Western Naturalism, Evangelical Gnosticism, and traditional religion.

* * *

What Can Be Learned from Progressive Pentecostalism?

Bryant Myers, Professor of International Development at Fuller Theological Seminary and a former vice president at World Vision International, has pointed to the growing interest among leading secular, academic researchers in the apparent effectiveness of Progressive Pentecostal churches in alleviating poverty in the Majority World.¹⁰ Sometimes called the third wave of the charismatic/Pentecostal movement, Progressive Pentecostal churches are indigenous, grassroots, deeply contextual, and nondenominational. Moreover, they are very committed to using social ministries to alleviate poverty in their neighborhoods or villages.

Both Myers and the secular researchers he reviews note that the story of change of the Pentecostal churches is quite different from that of secular, nongovernment organizations (NGOs) working to alleviate poverty in the same contexts. The NGOs are working out of the framework of Western Naturalism, believing that the world is fundamentally material and that the goal is to improve people’s physical well-being through money, technology, and better public policy. By contrast, the Pentecostal churches believe that the world is “enchanted” by spiritual forces, so that poverty is due to Satan’s enslaving people both in traditional religion and in immoral behaviors that lead to poverty, such as drinking and sexual promiscuity. Seeing the goal as living in proper relationships with God, self, others, and the rest of creation,

the Pentecostal churches use vibrant worship, evangelism, discipleship, and the power of the Holy Spirit to call people out of darkness and to empower them for godly and productive living (see [Figure 5.1](#)).¹¹

FIGURE 5.1

The Story of Change of Progressive Pentecostalism



Figure 1 from Bryant L. Myers, “Progressive Pentecostalism, Development, and Christian Development NGOs: A Challenge and an Opportunity,” *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 39, no. 3 (July 2015): 115–20.

While the secular researchers lack the theological framework to fully understand the Pentecostals’ approach, they are impressed with the results. For example, Dena Freeman, an anthropologist at the London School of Economics, notes that Pentecostal Christians “begin to see themselves as part of God’s people, a ‘somebody’ rather than a ‘nobody,’ a victor, not a victim. Most important, they begin to move beyond a passive fatalism and come to realize that they have agency in their lives.”¹² Freeman compares the impacts of five Pentecostal churches with that of secular NGOs working in the same cities and concludes that the churches are more effective because the NGOs are not able to promote the personal transformation that is necessary for poverty alleviation.¹³

Myers notes that the story of change of Progressive Pentecostalism also differs from that of international Christian relief and development with Western origins:

For most evangelical organizations, evangelism is seen as

something Christians are obligated to do but, if working in a development organization, something they need to do “sensitively,” since evangelism is a taboo issue for some of the organizations’ funders and may be even for some people in the Western sectors of their own organizations. For Progressive Pentecostals, in contrast, evangelism is central, urgent, and Spirit driven; it is considered to be the central contributor to the effectiveness of development work. The development practices of the two types of organizations have similarities, yet with differences, as well. Progressive Pentecostals are comfortable with emergent, affective, and nonlinear processes of change in which the Holy Spirit acts and people follow. Evangelicals, reflecting their captivity to modernity, tend to approach development planning in a more linear, rational frame ... and to believe that technical interventions are the drivers of development change.¹⁴

In other words, many Christian relief and development organizations exhibit the tendencies of Evangelical Gnosticism. It is not that rational thinking and technology are bad; rather, the point is that they should not be worshiped as though they have power apart from their Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer. Furthermore, because human beings are highly integrated mind-affections-will-body-relational creatures, it takes far more than rational thought and technology to achieve human flourishing.¹⁵

* * *

In his essay “Miracles,” C. S. Lewis elegantly illustrates these points, contrasting biblical truth with the erroneous perspectives of both traditional religion and Western Naturalism:

God creates the vine and teaches it to draw up water by its roots and, with the aid of the sun, to turn that water into a juice which will ferment and take on certain qualities. Thus every year, from Noah’s time till ours, God turns water into wine. That, men fail to see. Either like the Pagans they refer the process to some finite spirit, Bacchus or Dionysus: or else, like the moderns, they attribute

real and ultimate causality to the chemical and other material phenomena which are all that our sense can discover in it. But when Christ at Cana makes water into wine, the mask is off. The miracle has only half its effect if it only convinces us that Christ is God: it will have its full effect if whenever we see a vineyard or drink a glass of wine we remember that here works He who sat at the wedding party in Cana.¹⁶

What Is This Stuff Really Good For?

By now, you may be thinking, *What is this stuff really good for? I just want to help poor people, and I'm having to read all this philosophical and theological mumbo jumbo. I just want to know what to do when that homeless person asks me for money!* We hear you, and we feel your pain. If we didn't believe these concepts mattered, we wouldn't have written this book. As we shall see, this stuff has incredibly practical implications for how we help poor people—and ourselves.

So, let us reconsider the biblical drama. But before we do so, let's stop and pray for ourselves the same prayer that the apostle Paul prayed for the church in Ephesus:

I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is the same as the mighty strength he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. (Eph. 1:17–21)

Yes, Lord, open the eyes of our hearts, that we may see three dimensions rather than just two.



CHAPTER SIX

RECONSIDERING CREATION: THE KEY TO UNDERSTANDING HUMAN FLOURISHING

All peoples have kept some recognisable memory of what happened in Paradise, be it ever so distorted. In particular, those people that we usually call primitive have numerous myths telling of a glorious primeval age in which god and men had free [communion]. And according to the myths this blessed period was finished by some blunder or accident.¹

—J. H. BAVINCK, **MISSIOLOGIST, 1949**

God, who is a worker, ordained work so that humans could worship Him through their work. [Poverty alleviation] efforts applied inappropriately often cause the beneficiaries to abstain from work, thereby limiting their relationship with God through distorted worship or through no worship at all.²

—ALVIN MBOLA, **KENYAN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT WORKER, 2007**

Remember those pictures of the Garden of Eden you've likely seen in children's Bible story books? There stand Adam and Eve, with their naked bodies covered by shrubbery, surrounded by friendly animals and holding fruit in their hands. Adam and Eve are always smiling in these pictures because they are experiencing pure human flourishing. While these pictures contain some truth, they also reflect the distorted ideas of Flatland-SkyDome, reinforcing the central lie of the two-dimensional perspective: human flourishing can be achieved solely through the natural order of bodies, trees, animals, and fruit. The central feature of the Garden of Eden—the very thing that made it *the* place for human flourishing—is that Eden was the dwelling place of God.

THE DWELLING PLACE OF GOD

The Garden of Eden as a Temple

Drawing on numerous passages from the Old and New Testaments, recent biblical scholarship has demonstrated that the garden of Eden functioned like a temple.³ The center of the garden was analogous to the Holy of Holies in Israel's temple. As such, it was an "enchanted" place, a place both natural yet saturated with the supernatural, a place where God dwelt, a place filled with His presence, and a place from which He ruled. God was so present in this place, so present in this material world, that Adam and Eve could actually hear God as He "was walking in the garden in the cool of the day" (Gen. 3:8). At the risk of sounding sacrilegious, not only was the roof open on the SkyDome, but God was actually standing on the pitcher's mound!

In this light, the garden of Eden was far more than just a place where Adam and Eve watered plants and cared for animals. It was a temple-garden in which the first humans served as priests and kings.⁴ As priests, they were to protect the "temple" from any corruption and lead others into worship of the one true God. As kings, they were to promote the welfare of others and the rest of creation by ruling as God's vice-regents, His assistant rulers. As priest-kings, then, humans were to lovingly serve God, others, and the rest of creation. Finally, they were to see themselves as participants within the matrix of worship and love, and so a healthy view of "self" was also part of the original design.

Living in a temple 24/7 implies that worship wasn't confined to one hour per week. On the contrary, all of life—working, playing, resting, eating, and so on—was lived before the face of God, so all of life was to be an act of worshiping Him. The first task given to Adam and Eve, the so-called "cultural mandate" of Genesis 1:28, was actually the first "Great Commission"—a command to extend the temple and the worship of God throughout the entire world:⁵

God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground." (Gen. 1:28)

As theologians G. K. Beale and Mitchell Kim explain,

The command to “fill the earth” implies that the earth is not yet filled with images that reflect God’s glory. While the boundaries of the Garden are clearly delineated (Gen 2:10–14), the call to multiply images of God would expand the boundaries of that Garden sanctuary until it filled the whole earth. Our mission is to be used in God’s hand to bring about more worshipers in the image of God who might multiply and fill the earth with even more worshipers.

... God calls Adam not only to “work and to keep” the Garden of Eden (see Gen 2:15) but also to expand that Garden and “fill the earth” (Gen 1:28).... God wanted to expand that sacred space and dwelling place from the limited confines of the Garden-temple of Eden to fill the entire earth. As Adam multiplied children in his image, then they would expand God’s dwelling place of his presence ... until it filled the earth, and the whole earth reflected God’s order and his glorious presence.⁶

That human beings’ work would have expanded the garden-temple, the very dwelling place of God, so that His intimate presence would have been felt throughout the whole earth is an amazing truth to ponder. As a result of this expansion, all of creation—including human beings and the cultures we create—would have lived in God’s presence as an act of worship to Him. When we got out of bed in the morning to make a cup of coffee, we would have done so as an act of worship in the very presence of God Almighty!

It’s important to note that a river flowed from Eden outward to the surrounding world. This river gave life to many trees, including the Tree of Life, which was located in the middle of the garden (Gen. 2:8–14). This is not the last time in Scripture that we shall see the Tree of Life and a river in the place where God dwells.

So, what does this have to do with poverty alleviation? Everything. You see, being priest-kings who live in God’s dwelling place and extend His presence wasn’t just something in the past, something for Adam and Eve. Yes, the fall happened, which we will explore in the next chapter. But the grand drama of God’s story doesn’t end with the fall. The goal of God’s story of change for all people—including the annoying panhandler, the little girl sold into the brothel, and even the brothel owner himself—is to restore us as

priest-kings, image bearers who extend God's presence throughout the whole earth. Living, worshiping, and working in a temple wasn't just something in the past for human beings; it's our future.

Back to the Future

At the start of Part 3 you were asked: What do you think it will be like when Jesus comes again and we get to go to heaven? If you haven't done so already, stop and jot down your answers to this question.

If you are like me, you wrote something like *There will be no more pain, sickness, hunger, or sin.*

There are two problems with my answer.

First, I asked you a trick question. When Jesus comes again, we won't live in "heaven," at least not the current one. Indeed, the current "heaven" is the experience of believers after we die (see Luke 23:43; 2 Cor. 5:6–8; Phil. 1:21–23; 1 Thess. 4:14; Rev. 6:10). When Christians die we will be with God, but the ultimate Christian hope is the resurrection of the dead. When Christ returns, our bodies will be resurrected and reunited with our souls, and we will once again live as fully integrated persons—bodies and souls—in a renewed creation (1 Cor. 15:12–50; Rev. 21:1).⁷ The Christian hope has never ultimately been the immortality of the disembodied soul but rather the resurrection of the body. Theologian N. T. Wright describes it this way:

The ultimate destination is ... *not* "going to heaven when you die" but being bodily raised into the transformed, glorious likeness of Jesus Christ. (The point of all of this is not merely our own happy future, important though that is, but the glory of God as we have come to fully reflect his image.) Thus, if we want to speak of "going to heaven when we die," we should be clear that this represents the first, and far less important, stage of a two-stage process. Resurrection isn't life after death; it is life *after* life after death.⁸

And what will this new creation be like? It will consist of a new heaven and a new earth that, unlike the current heaven and earth, will no longer be separated from one another (see Eph. 1:9–10; Rev. 21:1–5). And this truth gets at the second problem with my answer. Note that I immediately thought

of negative things that we will not experience some day: *no more pain, sickness, hunger, or sin*. It is true that we will no longer experience those things, but I skipped over the most important truth. When John was given a vision of the new heavens and new earth, he wrote,

Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “*Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.*”

He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!” Then he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.” (Rev. 21:1–5; emphasis added)

My answer failed to acknowledge this astounding truth: God’s dwelling place will be with His people again! We are created to dwell with God, and in the new creation we will be fully restored to His presence. And because God is there, everything else is right again as well: there is no more pain, sickness, hunger, or sin. But the key to all this flourishing is that God once again dwells with His people and His creation.⁹ This is humanity’s past, and it is redeemed humanity’s future.

But wait, there is more. At the centerpiece of the conjoined new heaven and new earth is a temple, one that looks like something we’ve seen before:¹⁰

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. (Rev. 22:1–2)

This is Eden restored.¹¹ In the garden-temple of Eden, a river flowed from God's presence, watering the earth, including the Tree of Life. Similarly, in the coming temple in the new heavens and new earth, a river flows from the throne of God, watering the new creation, including the Tree of Life (see also Ezek. 47:1–12).

Now, when we say that the future is a restored Eden, we do not mean that it is simply a return to the primitive state of Eden—the days before there was any culture. The Bible passages quoted above state that at the center of the new creation is a city, the New Jerusalem, that will include portions of this world's culture(s): “The kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it” (Rev. 21:24). We are not going from a garden to a garden. Rather, we are going from a garden to a city. And in that city, as in the garden of Eden, God will once again dwell with His people in a world without sin.

And who will we be in the new Eden, in the new temple where God dwells with His people? Consider how the Bible describes God's people there:

You have made them to be a *kingdom and priests* to serve our God,
and they will *reign* on the earth.
(Rev. 5:10, emphasis added)

Believers will be restored priest-kings, worshiping God and ruling with Him in the temple at the center of the new heaven and new earth, just as human beings were created to do in the very beginning. This is Eden restored, and this is a people restored to all that it means to be fully human in the new creation. Commenting on Revelation 21–22, N. T. Wright explains,

There is a sign here of the future project that awaits the redeemed in God's eventual new world. So far from sitting on clouds and playing harps, as people often imagine, the redeemed people of God in the new world will be the agents of his love going out in new ways, to accomplish new creative tasks, to celebrate and extend the glory of his love.¹²

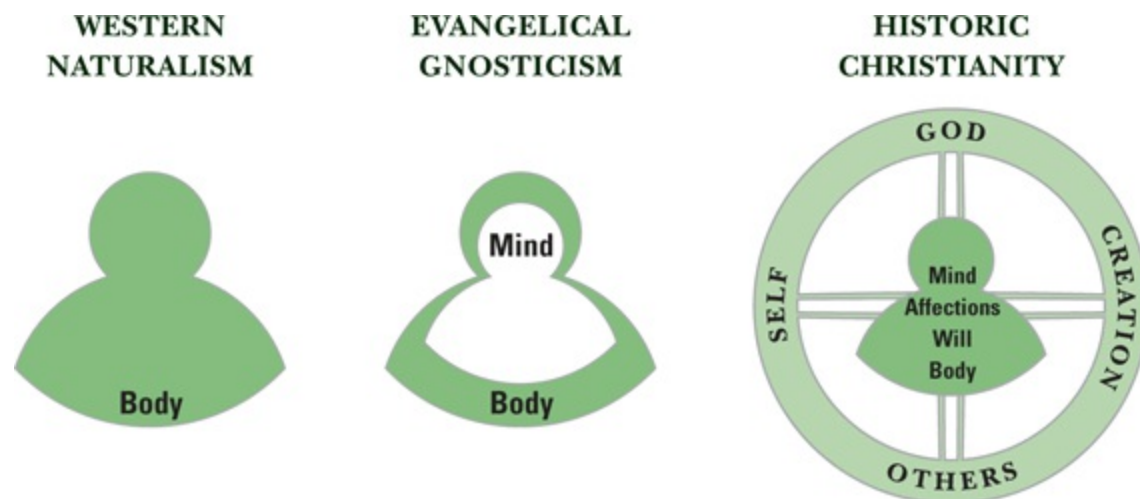
The fact that humanity was given the job of being priest-kings and that believers will be restored as priest-kings reveals a lot about how humans are hardwired. It would be pretty crazy for God to call us to do something and

then not give us the capacity to do it, wouldn't it?

So what are the qualifications to be a good priest-king? First, one must lovingly serve God, others, and the rest of the creation. It's inherently a relational responsibility, requiring relational people to do it well. If a company were conducting job interviews to fill the position of priest-king, the relational being on the right of Figure 6.1 would be qualified, not the autonomous, nonrelational creatures envisioned by Western Naturalism or Evangelical Gnosticism.

FIGURE 6.1

Three Views of the Nature of Human Beings and of Human Flourishing



Adapted from Brian Fikkert and Russell Mask, *From Dependence to Dignity: How to Alleviate Poverty through Church-Centered Microfinance* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 83.

As we've been arguing all along, human beings are creatures who have been designed by God to enjoy loving relationships with God, self, others, and the rest of creation. As such, they are called to be priest-kings, worshiping God and ruling as in His presence. This is human flourishing, so this should be the goal of our poverty alleviation ministries. Thus, we can modify God's story of change as follows:

The Goal of God's Story of Change

*People experience human flourishing **when they serve as priest-kings**, using*

their mind, affections, will, and body to enjoy loving relationships with God, self, others, and the rest of creation.

The fact that human beings were to live out the four relationships in the temple of God sheds light on what these relationships are supposed to look like, on the very nature of what it means to be human. Therefore, let us examine each of these four relationships in more detail, underscoring some implications for the design of our poverty alleviation ministries along the way.

THE NATURE OF HUMAN FLOURISHING

Relationship with God in the Garden-Temple of Eden

As priest-kings in the garden-temple, Adam and Eve were to live all of life as an act of worship in the presence of God Almighty. It's not surprising, then, that God would hardwire human beings to want to love and worship Him above all else. Adam and Eve were created to be the kind of creatures who had both the capacity and the desire to enjoy living in God's presence. Stated differently, the desire to have an intimate, loving, worshipful relationship with God is as much a part of the creature called a "human being" as are this creature's ears, legs, liver, intestines, and blood cells. And Adam and Eve continuously enjoyed such communion with God in Eden, to the extent that it was as much a part of their human experience as other features of their personhood: breathing, eating, speaking, thinking, and so on. In fact, Adam and Eve's relationship with God was the *most* important part of their lives, shaping all other aspects of their being.¹³ As theologian J. Todd Billings states:

To be human is to be in communion with God.¹⁴

Our wheel image tries to capture some aspects of this reality by placing the relationship with God (the top spoke) *inside of the human being*, inside the outer edge of the wheel. Our relationship with God is internal to our being and impacts every aspect of our personhood, including our mind, affections, will, body, and other relationships. In contrast, Western Naturalism denies that such a relationship is possible, and Evangelical Gnosticism separates it

out from the rest of our lives. But the Bible teaches that our relationship with God actually changes who we are internally, affecting even the inner workings of our mind, affections, will, and body. In fact, we are so porous that God Almighty can actually live inside us:

Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? (1 Cor. 6:19)

What an amazing truth to ponder! The Spirit of the living God dwells inside believers. Human beings do not live in a world where God is absent or divided from us. Rather, our entire being is internally hardwired to have a vibrant, intimate relationship with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

All this seems almost unreal, doesn't it? Just as the inhabitants of Flatland could not imagine that the world was really three-dimensional, it is difficult for us to imagine a cosmos that is so enchanted—so saturated in the supernatural—that our daily existence and even our very personhoods are open to the indwelling of God Almighty. But this is really real. As philosopher Francis Schaeffer lamented nearly a half century ago, our retreat from reality is obscuring the very nature of the cosmos:

Little by little, many Christians in this generation find the reality slipping away. The reality tends to get covered by the barnacles of naturalistic thought. Indeed, I suppose this is one of half a dozen questions that are most often presented to me by young people from Christian backgrounds: where is the reality? Where has the reality gone? I have heard it spoken in an honest, open desperation by fine young Christians in many countries. As the ceiling of the naturalistic comes down upon us, as it invades by injection or by connotation, reality gradually slips away.¹⁵

The implications of these truths for poverty alleviation are manifold. But for now, consider the following: *the woman asking for help with her electric bill, the homeless person on the street corner, and the hungry child in the African village all are hardwired to work, eat, sleep, laugh, and play in the presence of—and in loving relationship with—God Almighty in the Holy of Holies.* And because these materially poor people are interconnected mind-

affections-will-body-relational creatures, helping them flourish *spiritually* is necessarily connected to helping them flourish *physically*.

One of the places in Scripture wherein we see this connection between our relationship with God and our physical condition is Psalm 32:1–4, where David grieves about the physical pain he has experienced as a result of his unconfessed sin:

Blessed is the one
whose transgressions are forgiven,
whose sins are covered.
Blessed is the one
whose sin the LORD does not count against them
and in whose spirit is no deceit.
When I kept silent,
my bones wasted away
through my groaning all day long.
For day and night
your hand was heavy on me;
my strength was sapped
as in the heat of summer.

David's strained relationship with God affected his body, weakening his bones and sapping his strength.

A host of modern research in the social and natural sciences suggests that spiritual health contributes to overall well-being, including psychological, social, and physical health.¹⁶ For example, Jonathan Gruber, a world-renowned economist at MIT, has provided evidence that attending religious services in the US appears to *cause* greater material prosperity. His research suggests that doubling the rate of religious attendance raises household income by 9.1 percent and decreases welfare participation by 16 percent.¹⁷ Of course, we should not approach God like some sort of genie to gain increased wealth, but this research does support what we already know to be true from the Bible: spiritual and physical health are deeply connected.

It's extremely important to note that the spiritual help we offer must move beyond merely communicating how people can get their souls to heaven when they die, for human beings are hardwired for so much more. We are

designed to have a regular, intimate relationship with our loving Father—*Abba!*—who walks with us, His beloved children, comforts us with His love, and works all things out for our good. And we are created to respond to this intimacy with lives that worship Him in His temple, 24/7.

Fostering this type of relationship requires ongoing discipleship in how to walk with God and worship Him in all aspects of life—work, marriage, childrearing, eating, playing, voting, and so on—which requires a far more comprehensive approach than a simple Bible study on how to trust in Jesus to get one’s soul to heaven. Again, Evangelical Gnosticism doesn’t work. Materially poor people, like all of us, need to live lives that are completely centered on worship of the triune God. There are no shortcuts, and there are no alternatives, for this is how human beings were created—it is how we are wired.

Worship and Poverty Alleviation

Human beings are transformed into the image of whatever god they worship, so at the core of poverty alleviation is worship of the one true God.

Relationship with Self in the Garden-Temple of Eden

At the center of human beings’ proper *relationship with self* is embracing, deep within our bones, the astonishing truth that, as image bearers, we were created with inherent dignity and worth, and called to represent God as priest-kings throughout the world. This wonderful truth is good news for our poverty alleviation work.

First, many materially poor people are enslaved by a *marred identity*, a sense of inferiority and worthlessness that is both demoralizing and disempowering. These feelings can stem from many sources: previous failures in life; discrimination based on race, gender, or caste; oppressive systems; abusive people; and fatalistic worldviews that say people who are poor will always be poor. It’s difficult for many of us who are not materially poor to understand how enslaving a marred identity can be. As a result, we drastically underestimate the incredible power that can be unleashed by simply helping materially poor people embrace the simple truth that they are made in God’s image.

Second, many people, including many materially poor people, do not have

a sense of calling or vocation. They simply do not know that, as image bearers, they are called by God to be priest-kings tasked with extending His reign over the entire earth. Work is not a curse; it was meant as a good gift.¹⁸ When done to the glory of God, it is of lasting value (see Col. 3:23-24). Again, the impact that can be had from communicating this aspect of image bearing can be substantial.

For example, the two aspects of image bearing just mentioned—dignity and calling—are at the heart of Reconciled World’s training of churches with its Truth Centered Transformation (TCT) program which was described in chapter 5. TCT lessons communicate that, as image bearers restored by Jesus Christ, the church members are loved by God, have dignity and worth, and are called to love their neighbors. Can these basic messages really do much?

While we don’t want to underestimate the miraculous ways that God may have directly intervened in the TCT villages, it is also clear that He used the biblical teachings about image bearing to mobilize His people, which is a miracle in its own right. As they began to understand who they were as priest-kings, the church members reached out to their communities by helping their neighbors in their fields and picking up litter. They then moved on to bigger projects like building wells, houses, and roads, which dramatically transformed their communities, lifting them out of poverty. As the pastors of one of the poor, rural churches explained in their own words:

Before we study the TCT program, our church only care about the spiritual matter but neglect the other area of life. How do we love our neighbor? We go out and we show them in action that we really care, not just talking, show them what love really means.

We have done so many project, but one of the project that really cause people to think is that we decided to collect the money and the resources within the community, and we build a suspension bridge. It helped the community so much. Before it take them more than half a day to walk from their house to their farm. Since they have the bridge, it take half an hour to drive.... Before they will have a couple of months without food. By October-November, they run out of rice. But now they have food for all year round, so it’s a major change in their lives.

The government is so amazed and was shocked. They can’t

imagine that with [our] bare hand, without any machine without any modern tool, that [we] can build such a strong bridge like this. Tons of material. Tons of steel wire. [The government said], “There must be somebody in your church that has engineering background or the skill that they can do this.” But we said, “No, we don’t have anyone who have the skill. We just know how to do it. My brother here, somehow he designed the bridge and he lead people to build the bridge.”

When the government want to build another bridge in different area, they come to our bridge and measure and try to copy the design that we have so that they can build exactly the same bridge in another area. This is just another amazing story that God really used to impact the government.¹⁹

This is sustainable poverty alleviation at its finest: Local people stewarding their own resources to lift themselves out of poverty. No outside money or technical assistance, and no influx of short-term teams. Just the message of image bearing and the power of God bursting forth into this world, bringing an oppressive, atheistic government face-to-face with the only kingdom that will increase without end (see Isa. 9:7).

Relationship with Others in the Garden-Temple of Eden

From all eternity, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have existed in loving communion with one another, and as beings created in His image, we are also designed for love, a love that moves us toward the Creator and His creation. Indeed, God said that it is not good for us to be alone, so He made Eve as a companion for Adam (Gen. 2:18).

Living in communion with others is not just the “icing on the cake” of life in this world. There is a universal human need for healthy relationships, whether we are single or married, young or old, rich or poor. We all are deeply hardwired for community, so much that if we don’t have it our entire personhood, including our bodies, suffers in ways that scientists are just now beginning to understand. For example, a physical therapist describes his biggest challenges as follows:

My biggest challenge is that many of my patients don’t really

believe in some of my remedies for their pain. Some patients have a purely physical problem, and they need physical remedies. But many patients have pain that lasts long after their injuries have healed. Scientists aren't completely sure why the pain persists, but we have learned that being in supportive relationships contributes to the pain going away.

For example, I had a patient who had experienced a minor back injury, but his pain persisted long after the injury had healed. When I inquired about his life, it became clear to me that he was very lonely. I knew he wouldn't believe me when I told him that his loneliness was contributing to the persistence of his back pain. So I told him that he needed to walk for exercise and that he should ask his friend to walk with him every evening to hold him accountable. The patient didn't really need to walk. He just needed to be less lonely. Two weeks later he came back and exclaimed, "The exercise worked! My pain is gone!"²⁰

This is not an isolated incident. Researchers are finding that having positive relationships with others dramatically impacts our bodies, leading to lower blood pressure, heart disease, and cancer, and to more rapid healing from injuries.²¹ The effects are particularly strong for children from the time they are in the womb through age five, as the quality of their relationships, particularly with their parents, dramatically affects the development of their brains and nervous systems, with comprehensive implications for their entire personhoods for the rest of their lives.²² Again, human beings are like interconnected wheels. So, damaging the "relationship with others" spoke damages the hub—the mind, affections, will, and body.

What does a healthy relationship with others entail?

Like the other relationships, at the heart of our relationship with others is deep communion. Human beings are designed to know one another deeply and to love one another as much as we love ourselves. Our relationship to others should reflect the love of God, the same love that exists from all eternity between the Father, Son, and Spirit; this love is what ultimately overflows and is manifested powerfully in the sacrifice of Christ on a cross for us. In our fallen world, this love now normally requires identification and sacrifice. God so loved *he gave* (John 3:16).

This vision of God and His work shapes our Christian lives. Believers are told to imitate God (Eph. 5:1) and to follow the example Christ left for us (1 Peter 2:21). So how do we imitate Christ? What does it look like to follow “in His steps?” This isn’t about becoming carpenters or trying to imitate Jesus’ clothing. Instead, the image consistently employed by Scripture to shape our imagination of what it looks like to imitate Christ is the *cross*. Again and again (Mark 8:34; John 15:12–13; Eph. 5:1–2). ²³ Why? Because the cross uniquely communicates several truths at once. Here love and pain are held together, without undermining either truth. We see in stunning fashion the depth of God’s love, and we also see in unmistakable form the depth and gravity of human sin and suffering. The cross draws us to an unexpected vision of God: rather than a distant and apathetic deity, we discover a God whose love is so radical that the Father sends the Son in the Spirit. God comes, He enters in, and through the Son He enters into solidarity with us. But He comes not merely to relate to us, but to enter into our pain and suffering—and ultimately, to absorb our sin that it might be overcome. He dies that we might live.

So, throughout the Scriptures, this stunning image of sacrificial love is held up as a central image that shapes the Christian imagination. “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters” (1 John 3:16). By the Spirit, we are united to Jesus, the perfect image of God; this reality now animates our lives. Secure in His acceptance and love for us, we are renewed in the image of Christ who has set us free to love others, including those who might naturally be considered our enemies. All of us stand before God as the weak, the needy, the broken, and the hurting. So we stand before one another, not in arrogant judgment, but as sinful humans all dependent upon the grace of God. All of this liberates us to love others well.

The fact that sacrificial giving is central to human flourishing turns standard approaches to poverty alleviation upside down. In both Western Naturalism and Evangelical Gnosticism, human flourishing in this life is believed to come from greater consumption. Indeed, one of the primary metrics that economists use to evaluate the effectiveness of a poverty alleviation initiative is the extent to which the program increases poor households’ consumption expenditures. Of course, there is considerable merit in using this metric, because people who are extremely poor typically do need

greater consumption of food, clothing, shelter, and so on. But human flourishing entails more than just consuming. If we want to promote true human flourishing, our poverty alleviation ministries should encourage poor people to sacrificially give to others. In fact, one could argue that a primary measure of success in our poverty alleviation ministries should be the extent to which sacrificial giving is increasing for everybody involved: the poor people, the staff, the volunteers, and the donors.

* * *

Giving Poor People the Chance to Give

Consider the following story from Justin Borger, who was the research assistant for Kelly's book *The God Who Gives: How the Trinity Shapes the Christian Story*:

I remember meeting a homeless woman a few years ago. I was walking down Broad Street in front of the library in Chattanooga, Tennessee, when this woman came up to me and began asking for money. Not knowing who she was, I decided not to give her any cash. But when I told her that I'd buy her anything she needed, she took me up on the offer. In fact, she said she needed many things: a coat, some clothes, and shampoo to begin with. Her name was Tammy, and she was living under a bridge.

After helping Tammy that night, I didn't hear from her for a few weeks until she called me, right in the middle of church one Sunday morning. She said that she had been raped and needed someone to take her to the hospital. After that, Tammy started coming to our church, and our deacons' fund started helping her out.

One of my jobs at church at the time was to fill out these small slips of paper that we gave Tammy and others to exchange for groceries at the local food bank. The only problem was that Tammy liked to share.

"Don't give this away," I can remember telling her as I would hand her the slip for the food bank. "You need to keep this for yourself. Otherwise you'll run out and have nothing to eat." But

after a while, Tammy grew tired of being told not to share the food that our church gave her. “I want to give some away too,” she replied.

Living under the bridge meant living with other needy people, and so she let me know that it would be unthinkable for her to return there without sharing her groceries. “So, why can’t I share some of it?” she asked with an incredulous stare. “Why can’t I give some too?”

I found myself taken aback. Why shouldn’t Tammy be allowed to give some of what she’d received? Wasn’t that exactly what I was doing? I paused for a moment. But then I gave her a very pragmatic answer, telling her that our church deacons’ fund wasn’t set up for that. “We’re giving this to you,” I told Tammy, “not to everyone else you meet.” Yet, I recognized the deeper problem: to only receive and never to give is to be belittled—to be humiliated. Over time, I had begun to think of Tammy as a kind of pet project in which I was always the giver and she was always the recipient.²⁴

God so loved, He gave. Hence, in God’s story of change, human flourishing is not just consuming more; rather, it means living as priest-kings, participating in God’s mission of extending divine generosity. In fact, sacrificial giving is so central to a proper relationship to others—so central to human flourishing—that even secular researchers are discovering the biblical truth that “it is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35). For example, several recent studies have found that the health benefits are actually greater for the givers than for the receivers in various forms of assistance.²⁵ Perhaps one of the primary metrics we should use in our poverty alleviation ministries is the extent to which sacrificial giving is increasing for everybody involved: the financial supporters, the staff, and the poor people themselves.

* * *

Relationship with the Rest of Creation in the Garden-Temple of Eden

Adam and Eve were commissioned to protect creation and unpack the potentialities that God has placed in it. While God made the world *sinless*, He

left it *incomplete*. This means that while the world was created to be without defect, God *called* human beings to interact with the creation, to make possibilities into realities, and to sustain ourselves with the fruits of these labors.

Note that work isn't a necessary evil that we have to endure to make a living. On the contrary, we are hardwired for work. Consistent with this biblical teaching, the empirical finding that being employed greatly increases people's overall well-being "is one of the most robust results to have come out of the economic study of human happiness."²⁶

While there are so many implications of this for our poverty alleviation ministries, here are the top five:

1. Poor people need work that pays!
2. Poor people need work that pays!
3. Poor people need work that pays!
4. Poor people need work that pays!
5. Poor people need work that pays!

Poor people need ministries that launch them into meaningful work, enabling them to support themselves and their families, and to share with others (Eph. 4:28). Human beings are designed for this!

Note also that the command to work in Genesis 1:28 was given in the context of deep, loving relationships with God, self, and others. The American Dream praises the autonomous individuals who pull themselves up by their own bootstraps through their entrepreneurial drive and hard work, an attitude that often shapes our attitudes toward poor people: "Why don't you get a job? There are plenty of jobs available. Just apply." And when poor people fail to follow through with these instructions, we conclude that they are lazy and don't really want to work.

But not even God Almighty functions in isolation. Before the triune God created the world, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit existed in loving communion. God is love: the Father, Son, and Spirit dwell in eternal love. Out of His loving communion, the triune God creates and acts. And this is how God wired us as His image bearers: He establishes human beings' intimate relationships with God, self, and others before He commands us to work. Remember, God said it was not good for humans to be alone in this

work (Gen. 2:18). Our being in communion precedes our doing.

While human beings always needed community in order to be able to work, the fall of humanity into sin has dramatically accentuated this need. Again, many poor people have a marred identity and a diminished sense of vocation. They have internalized messages like: “You are worthless,” “you can’t do it,” and “work is stupid anyway.” Hence, they need a community in which the triune God and loving people communicate: “You are loved. You have gifts. You are precious. You bear the image of God Almighty. You are called to work. God is with you. We are with you. And when you fail, God still loves you, and we do too.” These are not just sentimental words. By God’s grace, these words actually change people—and they change us. They help the listener realize who they are, who God is, and how they fit into His kingdom and world. Over time, these messages of grace—communicated in the context of deep community with God and others—provide the support necessary for poor people to find and keep work. They discover who they are, not in isolation, but within the security of God’s family. The autonomous, rugged individualism at the heart of the American Dream is simply the wrong model for materially poor people.

And it is the wrong model for materially non-poor people as well. Even though Western individualism has resulted in unprecedented material prosperity, it is not producing human flourishing. Work divorced from proper relationships is contributing to an explosion of mental health problems and a dysfunctional society. Without a proper anchoring in our relationships with God, self, and others, work becomes an idol. We worship work to prove our worth, justify our existence, acquire more material goods, and deaden the pain of our loneliness and isolation. We need all four spokes in the wheel to be properly aligned, not just one of them.

CULTURAL FORMATION IN A SINLESS WORLD

As human beings engaged in the task of developing God’s creation in a sinless world, they would have made culture: art, business, sports, music, science, and more. In contrast to the views of some Christians, culture is not inherently evil. Rather, it is the natural result of human beings fulfilling their callings as priest-kings, using their creativity to unleash the potentialities of

creation into realities in awe, wonder, and worship of the Creator.²⁷

What would this culture have looked like?

We don't know exactly, but we can get some idea by employing the model of individual and cultural formation that we first introduced in chapter 2. As always, this model starts with considering the story of change. In a world without sin, human beings would have seen the purpose of life—the goal of their story of change—as living all of life as an act of worship to God in all four relationships. Hence, the formative practices in which human beings engaged and the cultural systems that they created would have enabled people to live in proper relationship with God, self, others, and the rest of creation. Governments, economies, schools, families, arts, sports, neighborhood associations, language, and cultural norms would have functioned in ways that supported true human flourishing. In terms of our wheel analogy, the road (systems) on which the wheel (individuals) traveled would have been smooth.

We now need to augment our “natural” model by recognizing the “supernatural”—the active presence of God in the world (see [Figure 6.2](#)). Consider again Colossians 1:15–20:

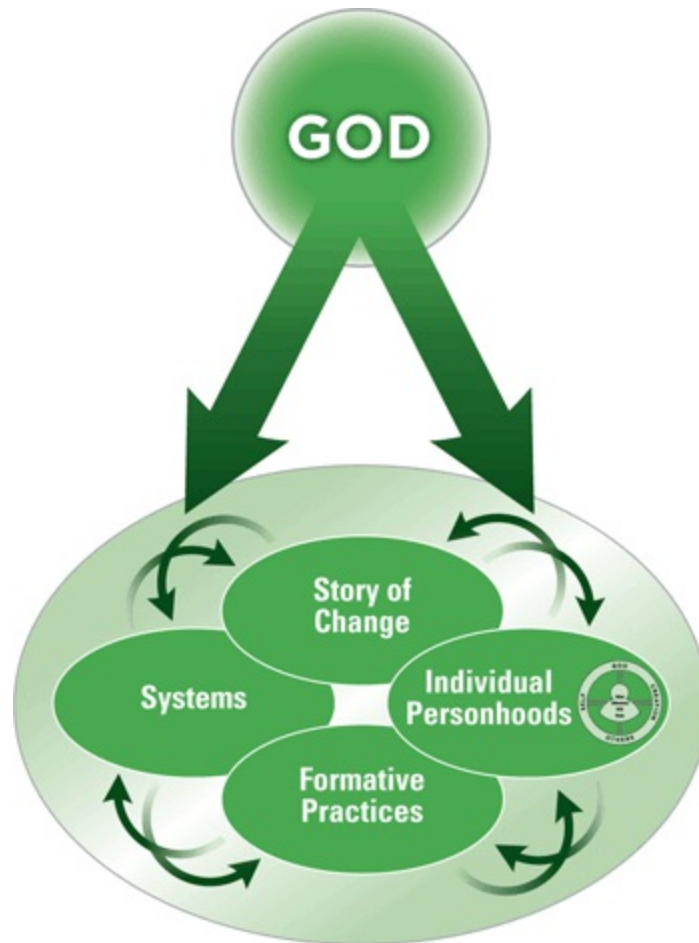
The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him *all things* were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; *all things* have been created through him and for him. He is before *all things*, and in him *all things* hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself *all things*, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.(emphasis added)

Jesus Christ is the Creator, Sustainer, and Reconciler of *all things*. Hence, while human beings have real *agency*—namely, the calling, ability, and freedom to develop the creation—we must do so within the bounds of God's providence. He determines the story of change. He determines the formative practices that work. He upholds and transforms cultural systems, including

governments, economies, schools, families, and farms. And He has every hair on our heads numbered. The roof on the SkyDome is open.

FIGURE 6.2

The Active Presence of God in Individual and Cultural Formation



Adapted from Brian Fikkert and Michael Rhodes, "*Homo Economicus Versus Homo Imago Dei*," *Journal of Markets and Morality* 20, no.1 (Spring 2017): 106.

The fact that the King of kings and Lord of lords is intimately involved with His cosmos should impact every aspect of our story of change. Because both Western Naturalism and Evangelical Gnosticism separate Christ from His world, they must necessarily rely on only material resources and improved technology to alleviate poverty. But the truths of Colossians 1 change everything, opening up a whole new set of possibilities. In an enchanted world—in a world that is created, sustained, and being reconciled by Jesus Christ through the Spirit²⁸—it is entirely possible, even expected,

that God would use rural, isolated churches in a closed-access Asian country to restore His people as priest-kings, enabling them to lead 500 TCT communities out of poverty without *any* additional material resources or technology. Indeed, “with God all things are possible” (Matt. 19:26), because the roof on the SkyDome is open. In reality, it has never been closed. We just need to open our eyes to see.

But before we can delve deeper into exploring just how expansive Christ’s rule and redemptive work truly are, we must consider—or rather *reconsider*—the fall, which has changed our world and us, including our relationships with God, self, others, and the rest of creation.



CHAPTER SEVEN

RECONSIDERING THE FALL: MORE THAN JUST A LEGAL PROBLEM

At some point each [low-income country] came into intimate contact with the [high-income countries] in the world-system, and its economy was altered to benefit the Europeans rather than the natives.... And all of this was accomplished initially by the use at “suitable” points of force of arms. Europe did not “discover” the underdeveloped countries; on the contrary, she created them.¹

—NICHOLAS WOLTERSTORFF, CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHER, 1981

So why are people poor and hungry? Except for catastrophic events such as war, drought, or flood, physical poverty doesn’t “just happen.” It is the logical result of the way people look at themselves and the world, the stories that they tell to make sense of their world. Physical poverty is rooted in a mindset of poverty, a set of ideas held corporately that produce certain behaviors.... Those with a poverty of mind see the world through glasses of poverty. They say, or their actions say for them, “I am poor. I will always be poor, and there is nothing I can do about it.”²

—DARROW MILLER, CHRISTIAN DEVELOPMENT THINKER, 1998

Jane Doe is a single parent who is very poor. We want to help Jane and her daughter. But how?

As we have learned, what we do to help Jane flows out of our story of change: What is the goal of life? and How can this goal be achieved? In the last chapter, we answered the first question as follows:

The Goal of God’s Story of Change

People experience human flourishing when they serve as priest-kings, using their mind, affections, will, and body to enjoy loving relationships with God, self, others, and the rest of creation.

We will now explore the answer to the second question in two stages. Stage 1, the present chapter, diagnoses the cause(s) of Jane's poverty. Stage 2 (chapters 8–10) explores how Christ's redemption provides the foundations for addressing all the causes of Jane's poverty so that she can achieve the goal. The companion to this book—*A Field Guide to Becoming Whole: Principles for Poverty Alleviation Ministries*—then applies these concepts by articulating key principles that can be used to design poverty alleviation initiatives that are consistent with God's story of change.

So let's begin by exploring the question, "Why is Jane poor?"

This is not just an academic question. How we answer this question will shape what we actually do to help Jane. For example, if we believe Jane's poverty is largely due to factors *external* to her—such as economic injustice or racial discrimination—then we will focus our efforts on changing those external factors. Or if we believe her poverty is largely due to factors *internal* to her—such as her own sin or lack of training or emotional issues—then we will focus on activities such as evangelism, discipleship, education, and counseling. The way that we diagnose the problem of poverty informs the remedies we use to alleviate that poverty.

The external-internal debate has caused significant rifts within the American political system. Democrats tend to act as if poverty is due to external forces—economic, political, and social injustices. So, they have often focused on creating government programs to address those external problems. Conversely, Republicans tend to act as if people are poor due to their own values and behaviors. So, they have tended to resist government programs, encouraging poor people to address their personal deficiencies.

And as the quotes from two highly-respected Christian thinkers at the start of this chapter illustrate, the external-internal divide is present when considering Majority World poverty as well. The first quote emphasizes an external factor (the impacts of colonialism), while the second emphasizes an internal factor (the faulty thinking and actions of poor people themselves).

So why is Jane poor? We haven't given you much information about her yet, but it might not matter if we do. The reason for this is that we all tend to *automatically* and *unconsciously* function out of our default story of change. Hence, the way we interpret the world is largely determined by the ways that our minds have been preconditioned to do so. This preconditioning results in what psychologists refer to as "confirmation bias," which means that our

brains don't operate objectively when they process information from the world around us. Rather, the data that our brains selectively search for and the way that our brains interpret and remember that data is biased in ways that tend to confirm what we already believe to be true.³ So, you may already have a sense as to whether Jane's poverty is largely due to external or internal factors, even though you don't know much about her yet.

Unfortunately, as we have already seen, our default theories of change can be very wrong, giving us highly distorted understandings of the reasons for Jane's poverty. It is vital, then, that we immerse ourselves in a biblical perspective, praying for the Holy Spirit to illuminate our inner beings so we can see clearly, through the eyes of God. To do so, we need to understand the second act in God's story of change: the fall. In particular, we need to understand the effects of the fall on each component of our model of individual and cultural formation, using Jane's story to illustrate the concepts. So, let's begin by learning more about Jane.

PARVATAMMA'S STORY

Jane's real name is Parvatamma, a prostitute in India who is dying of AIDS and is too sick to work. As a result, Parvatamma and her little girl are extremely poor.

It sure sounds like Parvatamma's poverty is due to internal forces—namely, her own sin—doesn't it? But Parvatamma's story is much more complicated than first meets the eye.

For many generations, Parvatamma's family has been part of the "Untouchables" caste, the lowest rung in India's traditional social classification system. As such, Parvatamma's mother, who was also a single parent, was a social outcast, forbidden from even entering the village near her home in rural India. The caste system's unofficial cultural norms prohibit Untouchables from holding all but the most disgusting and low-paying jobs. So, from the time of their birth, they are destined to lives of excruciating poverty. Desperate for income, Parvatamma's mother offered her to be a *devadasi*, a servant of the goddess Yellamma, when Parvatamma was only ten years old. Per the *devadasi* custom, when Parvatamma reached puberty, she was sold as a sex slave to the highest bidder. Her mother, who was

essentially acting as her pimp, was therefore provided a source of income.

When Parvatamma had a daughter at the age of fourteen, she was sent to work in the red-light district of Mumbai. There she contracted AIDS, and at the age of twenty-six, she is too weak to work.

“We are a cursed community. Men use us and throw us away,” says Parvatamma. Looking at her daughter, she says, “I am going to die soon and then who will look after her?”

Parvatamma’s mother was a *devadasi*, and Parvatamma plans to dedicate her own daughter to be a *devadasi* for Yellamma as well. And then the horrendous cycle will repeat itself.⁴

So why is Parvatamma poor?

SHARPENING OUR TERMS

Moving forward, we need to be more precise when we use the term *poor*.

Parvatamma is “relationally poor” in the sense that she is not experiencing full human flourishing. Her relationships with God, self, others, and the rest of creation are not working as God designed them to work. Corresponding to each of these relationships are four types of relational poverty: a poverty of spiritual intimacy (with God); a poverty of being (with self); a poverty of community (with others); and a poverty of stewardship (with creation).

Relational Poverty

A person experiences relational poverty when they are unable to enjoy a proper relationship with God, self, others, and the rest of creation.

Parvatamma is also “materially poor” in the sense that she lacks adequate material goods such as food, clothing, and shelter. Throughout the Old and New Testaments, God shows a special concern for the materially poor, and as His people, we must show a special concern for them as well (Isa. 58:1–10; 1 John 3:17–18).

In this book, we are using the terms *poor* and *poverty* as they are commonly used in everyday language: a lack of material things. In some contexts in which we want to place particular emphasis on material things, we use the term “materially poor” as a synonym for *poor*, and we use

“material poverty” as a synonym for *poverty*. In contrast, when we are speaking of falling short of God’s design in the four key relationships, we refer to it as “relational poverty” or as being “relationally poor.”

What is the relationship between relational and material poverty? All people are relationally poor in the sense that nobody is fully experiencing God’s design for the four key relationships. But relational poverty has different implications for different people. For some people, like many in Western civilization, their broken relationship with creation is workaholism, which leads not to material poverty but to anxiety, loneliness, depression, among other negative effects. For other people, like Parvatamma, relational poverty leads to material poverty, as her broken relationship with creation—her inability to work—leads to her being materially poor.

One of the key points of *When Helping Hurts* is that we need to stop treating the symptom—material poverty—and start treating the underlying causes of that symptom. For example, when we see the homeless person on the street corner, putting a quarter in their hands is just treating their symptom. If we really want to bring lasting change to their lives—including ending their material poverty—we need to address the root causes of their condition: their relational poverty with God, self, others, and the rest of creation.

Simply put, material poverty is one of the possible symptoms of relational poverty.

Material Poverty

A person experiences material poverty when they lack adequate material resources such as food, clothing, and shelter. Material poverty is one of the possible symptoms of relational poverty.

Yes, God has a special concern for the materially poor. But as we have seen, God’s goal for them is much bigger than simply eliminating their material poverty by dumping food, clothing, and shelter onto their laps. Rather, His desire for poor people—and for all human beings—is that they are restored to full human flourishing: He wants them to serve as priest-kings who enjoy proper relationships with God, self, others, and the rest of creation. And as relational poverty ends, so does material poverty, for a

proper relationship with creation includes being able to support one's family and to share with others as a fruit of one's labors (Eph. 4:28; 1 Tim. 5:8).⁵ Ending relational poverty ends material poverty, but the reverse is not true, as we saw in chapters 3 and 4.

So why is Parvatamma relationally and materially poor?

We find the answer by examining the effects of the fall on individual and cultural formation.

THE EFFECTS OF THE FALL ON INDIVIDUAL AND CULTURAL FORMATION

Western Christianity has tended to emphasize the legal aspects of the fall of humanity into sin. The story in many of our minds goes something like this:

There is a big courthouse in heaven where God presides as Judge. In that courthouse is a court record for each of us that includes the words, "Guilty of sinning against a righteous and holy God. Sentenced to eternal punishment." Standing soberly before the Judge of heaven and earth, we recognize that we failed to keep God's law. This, we often imagine, is not only our biggest problem, but really our only problem: we are in legal jeopardy before a holy God and in danger of being condemned.

There is much truth in this picture. Certainly, the Bible teaches that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" and that "the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 3:23; 6:23). All human beings really do have a legal problem with a holy God: we all have sinned and deserve His just punishment.

That said, our legal problem is only one aspect of the effects of the fall. So, if we focus on only a legal understanding of sin, we will miss many other important dimensions of the fall, all of which are crucial to answering the question, "Why is Parvatamma poor?" For that reason, we need to examine the effects of the fall on each component of our model of individual and cultural formation: the story of change, individual personhoods, formative practices, and systems.

The Effects of the Fall on Stories of Change

Because God is Creator of heaven and earth, He knows what is best and gives Adam and Eve a story of change that would enable them to flourish as the

type of creatures He created them to be. Unfortunately, the serpent entices Adam and Eve with a false story of change, introducing a misguided and harmful idea: that the gifts of the loving God were insufficient and that His prohibitions were inconsequential. Rather than enjoying the intended good provisions of God, Adam and Eve end up taking what was not given to them: they eat the forbidden fruit (Gen. 3:1–7). Self rather than God becomes central; consequently, everything becomes distorted. Ever since that moment, human beings have been adopting one false story of change after another, trying many alternative ways of achieving happiness.⁶ Rather than flourishing under God's good provision and care, we grab and take, believing we, rather than our Creator, know what is best for us.

The first step in poverty alleviation, then, is to recognize that, due to the fall, our culture is likely to have a distorted story of change, which we may have unknowingly internalized. Hence, rather than *automatically* and *unconsciously* imposing our culture's story of change onto the poor people we are trying to help, we need to be far more reflective and intentional about what we are doing. And we probably have some serious repenting to do.

The second step is to examine the story of change of the materially poor people we are trying to help, for the stories that are governing their lives may be a major contributor—and in some cases *the* major contributor—to their material condition. Stop and think about that last sentence again; it has major implications for how we design our poverty alleviation ministries. In many situations, addressing poor people's story of change may be more powerful than providing them with food, clothing, or malaria nets. In fact, simply giving such resources to able-bodied poor people may reinforce the faulty stories of change that are locking them into material poverty in the first place, stories that tell them they are inferior, inadequate, and helpless.

How does an erroneous story of change contribute to Parvatamma's poverty?

There is tremendous variation in Hinduism across India, so it is difficult to make accurate statements about the precise nature of Hindu beliefs and practices. However, central to Hinduism is the belief that the soul (*Atman*), which is eternal, is trapped in a series of different bodies as it is reincarnated from one life to the next. By fulfilling the duties (*dharma*) associated with one's role, the soul can eventually be liberated (*moksha*) from the illusion of the physical world and achieve the ultimate goal: realization of one's union

with the divine essence (*Brahman*).⁷ Like all of us, Hindus long to return to Eden, the dwelling place of God—though their understanding of Eden and God is warped.

A person's duties in each cycle of life—including the types of jobs, marriages, and social interactions they may pursue—are partly determined by the caste they are born into for that cycle.⁸ Moreover, one's caste in this life depends on how faithfully they fulfilled their duties in their previous life. Simply put, people get what they deserve. Thus, an Untouchable deserves to be a social outcast for the bad things they did in their former life. And a *devadasi* deserves to be sexually exploited. This narrative clearly results in a poverty of being—a type of relational poverty—by undermining people's sense of dignity, value, and purpose.

Moreover, to be reincarnated into a higher caste in the next life, an Untouchable *devadasi* must faithfully perform the duties of being an Untouchable *devadasi* in this life. The story of change is to embrace no change! Clearly, when materially poor people believe their religious duty is to remain materially poor and sexually exploited, they likely will remain materially poor and sexually exploited.

Parvatamma's story of change is one of the reasons that she is poor, both relationally and materially.

The Effects of the Fall on Individual Personhood

Recall that human beings are hardwired for intimate relationship with God in the garden-temple of Eden, the very dwelling place of God. Indeed, working, resting, and playing in God's presence is as central to the human creature as are this creature's lungs and kidneys. Hence, a right relationship with the Creator God isn't an optional luxury: *it's central to humanness*.

In this light, when Adam and Eve are cast out of the garden-temple, it's not just that their mailing address has changed. On the contrary, their very personhood is affected: sin now necessarily reverberates through their entire being, damaging their minds, affections, wills, bodies, and relationships. This is far more than a legal problem, as important as that is. It's a human flourishing problem: Adam and Eve simply lose the ability to fully experience and enjoy humanness. We still have minds, affections, wills, bodies, and relationships, but each of these has been tainted by the intrusion of sin into the world in general and into our lives in particular. *Shalom*—the

original peace, wholeness, and goodness of God's good creation—has been compromised and distorted. Consequently, none of us fully live and function as intended, and this distorts every aspect of our lives.

Genesis 3 records this dehumanizing process. Adam and Eve's failure to trust God's word causes their *relationship with God* to degenerate from one of deep intimacy to one of fear and alienation. The consequences ripple through their entire personhood: their *relationship with self* is marred, as they develop a sense of shame about their humanness and cover their nakedness; their *relationship with others* is strained, as Adam blames Eve for their sin; and their *relationship with the rest of creation* is distorted, as God curses the environment (see also Rom. 8:18–22). And the damage is not limited to their relationships, as the effects of the fall distort human beings' minds, affections, wills, and bodies (Ps. 32:1–5; 38; Rom. 1:18–32).⁹ Yes, the fall gives us a legal problem, but it also gives us a human *being-ness* problem, for it impacts every square inch of our personhood.

We can use the wheel analogy to illustrate the effects that being banished from the garden-temple had on Adam and Eve. As pictured in [Figure 7.1](#), being cast away from God's life-giving presence is like removing the top spoke from the wheel. As the wheel goes down the road, the missing spoke puts pressure on the other three spokes to hold the wheel together. They can't function properly, and they start to bend and break, damaging the hub as well. Over time, the entire wheel, the whole person, starts to cave in on itself, resulting in a highly deformed mind-affections-will-body-relational creature. For some of us, this deformation expresses itself in physical pain or mental illness. For others, it contributes to sexual promiscuity. For still others, it leads to consumeristic behaviors. And for some, it contributes to material poverty. We all are relationally poor. Our relational poverty just expresses itself in different ways.

FIGURE 7.1

The Impacts of the Fall on the Human Being



Adapted from Brian Fikkert and Russell Mask, *From Dependence to Dignity: How to Alleviate Poverty through Church-Centered Microfinance* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 91.

Or to use another analogy, consider the movie *Gravity*.¹⁰ In the film, actors Sandra Bullock and George Clooney portray American astronauts who go for exploratory walks in outer space, tethered to their spaceship by safety cords. Unfortunately, their safety cords break, and the two astronauts go tumbling uncontrollably through space, screaming at the top of their lungs in horror.

Now because the astronauts are detached from the American spaceship, they are no longer on American property. Therefore, there is a sense in which the astronauts have a legal problem. With no passports or visas, they are hurtling through space as undocumented aliens and will be at the mercy of any Martians that they encounter.

But to describe their situation solely as a legal problem misses a big part of what they are experiencing. When their cords break, the astronauts are understandably terrified. Detached from their anchoring, they wildly tumble through space, grasping for anything to steady themselves: meteoroids, space debris, each other, you name it.

And this describes the human condition post-Eden. Fallen human beings are all untethered from God, making us feel insecure, fearful, and lonely, even though we usually don't even know why. So, like untethered astronauts, we grab onto things other than God in a desperate attempt to achieve security: money, sex, power, work, fame, and more. And as we do so, we engage in what the Bible calls idolatry. And over time, idolatry deforms us.

As we've said, we are designed for worship—to love and serve something above all. The human heart is simply incapable of not worshipping. Unfortunately, the fall of humanity into sin distorts our hearts so that we do not now naturally desire to worship God. The Bible teaches that, except for God's saving grace, we all worship things other than Him:

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.

For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles.

Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. *They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator*—who is forever praised. Amen. (Rom. 1:18–25; emphasis added)¹¹

The horrible truth is that, apart from God's saving grace, every one of us is an idolater. In a desperate attempt to fill the post-Eden void in our beings—a void that can be filled only by deep intimacy with God—we all have “worshiped and served created things” rather than our Creator. And as discussed in chapter 2, idolatry impacts our personhoods, deforming us into the image of whatever idols we worship.

How does the brokenness in Parvatamma's individual personhood contribute to her poverty?

Like all of us post-Eden, Parvatamma enters the world as a relationally broken individual. While we don't know all the particular ways in which Parvatamma is relationally broken, it is possible that she, like all of us, could

be born with qualities that could contribute to material poverty: lack of discipline, few skills, laziness, and so on. We just don't have enough information about Parvatamma to know for sure. What we do know is that the horrors of being exploited and abused as an Untouchable *devadasi* are necessarily deforming to every aspect of Parvatamma's personhood—her mind, affections, will, body, and relationships. In fact, researchers have found that *devadasis* typically suffer from a host of physical and psychological problems that contribute to their being both relationally and materially poor.¹²

The Effects of the Fall on Formative Practices

As the above passage from Romans 1 teaches, when human beings pursue idolatry, we necessarily engage in sinful practices. For some of us—greedy materialists, for example—these practices may enable us to accumulate wealth, but we become deformed creatures nonetheless. Indeed, the relentless pursuit of ever-increasing levels of consumption is one of the main problems with the dominant culture in Western civilization. For others of us, our practices contribute to becoming materially poor. While it is politically incorrect to discuss in some circles, the truth is that alcohol and drug addictions, out-of-wedlock births, absentee fathers, violence, and child abuse are major contributors to poverty. While it is a mistake to think that poverty is solely due to these causes, it is equally problematic to act as though these factors are irrelevant. Behaviors have consequences, and for some people, the consequences of their behaviors are material poverty (Prov. 20:13; 21:17; 23:21).

At the same time, we also need to acknowledge that larger structural problems often contribute to these types of behaviors. For example, Parvatamma is a single mother, which contributes to her poverty, but this reality is very much a consequence of the system she is trapped in. To simply condemn her for having a child out of wedlock is to totally misunderstand her context and is naïve and hurtful.

How do formative practices contribute to Parvatamma's poverty?

Normally, formative practices are actions that the community encourages its members to pursue in order to achieve its goals. However, in this case, Parvatamma was actually forced to engage in sexual practices when she was sold to the highest bidder. Further, it is likely that Parvatamma had very little,

if any, choice when she was sent to work in the red-light district of Mumbai.

Like all formative practices, the ones forced on Parvatamma reinforce the operative story of change in her life: *You are materially poor and sexually exploited because you deserve to be materially poor and sexually exploited. There is no hope for you.* It is clear that Parvatamma has internalized this hopeless narrative. After all, she states, “We are a cursed community.” When one feels cursed, escaping material poverty is virtually impossible because one has no hope that hard work or entrepreneurship can improve one’s economic well-being. Additionally, the formative practices that have been forced onto Parvatamma have given her AIDS, which makes her too weak to work, thereby contributing to her material poverty.

The Effects of the Fall on Systems

We explored in chapter 2 that as individuals repeatedly engage in formative practices, they eventually create *systems*: formal and informal institutions that embody the community’s story of change and perpetuate it across time, thereby shaping current and future generations. Because broken individuals repeatedly engage in practices that are inconsistent with human flourishing, they create systems that do not support what human beings are designed to be. In other words, broken individuals create broken systems, and then those broken systems do further damage to broken individuals, leading to an ongoing, self-reinforcing negative cycle.

For example, systemic racial discrimination often makes it difficult for African Americans and other minorities to find employment. In one famous study, economists sent fictitious résumés in response to help-wanted ads, randomly assigning white-sounding and black-sounding names to each résumé. The researchers found that employers were 50 percent more likely to call the white-sounding names for job interviews. Moreover, improving the quality of one’s résumé by listing more experiences had a more positive impact on employment opportunities for whites than blacks, implying that racial disparities actually increase as worker quality improves.¹³ In addition to the fact that such racial discrimination lowers the incomes of African Americans, an inability to find work entails a broken *relationship with creation*, a break that affects every aspect of the mind-affections-will-body-relational creature: self-confidence deteriorates, marriages end, and physical and mental health suffers.¹⁴

A recent comprehensive study that is receiving substantial attention examines the intergenerational mobility of various racial and ethnic groups in the US. Using data on nearly the entire US population from 1989–2015, the research suggests that while Hispanics have relatively high degrees of upward ability, black Americans have substantially lower rates of upward mobility and higher rates of downward mobility than whites, leading to large income disparities that persist across generations. As we should expect, the causes for these results are complex and multifaceted, but even after statistically controlling for numerous factors, the evidence suggests that growing up in an environment in which whites express racist attitudes reduces the upward mobility for black boys. Contemporary, not just historic, racism still matters.¹⁵

And now we have reached an extremely important point:

Because systems are typically created over decades or even centuries, the systems generally shape each individual far more than each individual shapes the systems. This is particularly true for materially poor individuals, who are usually the least powerful members of society. Moreover, individual communities are also powerless to change some macro-level systems. For example, the racial discrimination mentioned earlier is imposed on African American communities by the dominant culture, not from systems created by African American communities themselves.

It is crucial to emphasize again that the broken systems do more than give people a difficult life. Just as potholes reshape wheels, broken systems reshape individuals so that they think, feel, and act in certain ways. Over time, these story-shaped actions become habitual, imprinting themselves on the individual's mind, affections, and will in ways that are often subconscious. This subconscious self then automatically takes actions that are consistent with the way that the systems have conditioned it to act, creating even deeper imprints on the person's mind, affections, and will.¹⁶

For example, in his book *Brown Skin, White Minds*, psychologist E. J. R. David demonstrates that Filipino Americans, who have experienced significant discrimination in the United States, have deeply internalized the systemic lie that they are inferior to white Americans. Indeed, some Filipino Americans seek to become “white” by using products to lighten their skin and pinching their noses to make them less flat; they also “marry-up” by obtaining white spouses and try to dissociate from Filipino culture.¹⁷ David

has conducted psychological experiments in which Filipino Americans are shown various images representing Filipino culture and white American culture, and has found that participants, *unconsciously* and *automatically*, have an inferior perception of anything Filipino and a superior perception of anything white American.¹⁸ These are not superficial issues, as research suggests that this sense of inferiority and loss of identity contribute to Filipino Americans' high rates of depression, suicide, anxiety, substance abuse, school dropouts, and gang violence.¹⁹ Broken systems contribute to broken people, and broken people engage in destructive formative practices, some of which can lead them into material poverty.

Intense debates have raged about the causes for the persistent disparity between incomes of whites and blacks in the US. Many argue that both historic and contemporary discrimination against African Americans is the primary cause. Others claim that discrimination ended long ago, so African Americans shouldn't use discrimination as an excuse for their situation.

Even if there were no discrimination today—and the research cited above shows that there is—it is highly unrealistic to ask African Americans to “just get over it.” America's stories, practices, and systems waged war on African Americans' personhoods for centuries. It will take more than passing the Civil Rights Act to reverse these impacts.

Clearly, sin is more than an individual matter. Over time, sin can become embedded within a society's systems, impacting the entire personhoods of the individuals in that society for many generations. Hence, there is a sense in which sin can be systemic or “structural” in nature. Theologian Christopher Wright's instruction is helpful at this juncture:

We need to be careful here, of course. Some people are very reluctant to speak of “structural sin,” arguing that only *people* can sin. Sin is a personal choice made by free moral persons. Structures cannot sin in that sense. With that I agree. However, no human being is born into or makes his or her moral choices in the context of a clean sheet. We all live within social frameworks that we did not create. They were there before we arrived and will remain after we are gone, even if individually or as a whole generation we may engineer significant change in them. And those frameworks are the result of other people's choices and actions over time—all of them

riddled with sin. So although structures may not sin in the personal sense, structures do embody myriad personal choices, many of them sinful, that we have come to accept within our cultural patterns.... It is not that by living within such structures our sin becomes justifiable or inevitable. We are still responsible persons before God. It does mean that sinful ways of life become normalized, rationalized, rendered plausible and acceptable by reference to the structures and conventions we have created.²⁰

How have broken systems contributed to Parvatamma's poverty?

Embodying and perpetuating the Hindu story of change, India's traditional caste system has locked the lower castes into relational and material poverty for centuries. And as if that wasn't enough, the *devadasi* system singles out the most vulnerable members of the lower castes—young girls—for additional enslavement and degradation.

However, not all India's systemic problems are created by Indians. External forces have played a major role in Parvatamma's story as well. The British Empire had direct or indirect control over all of India from 1848–1947, dramatically impacting India's formal and informal institutions in a host of ways, many of which were terribly harmful. While it is beyond the scope of this book to examine all these impacts, it is important to note that a number of scholars believe the British exacerbated the problems of both the caste and *devadasi* systems.²¹ For example, *devadasis*, who can be traced back to at least the sixth century AD, were originally highly respected members of society, esteemed for the pivotal role they played in religious and cultural life. However, when the British weakened the temple system and its patrons, the *devadasis* were transformed from highly respected women into lowly prostitutes.²² Both the Indians and British contributed systems that oppose human flourishing and that are largely to blame for Parvatamma's relational and material poverty.

As we have just seen, the effects of the fall are comprehensive, impacting each component of individual and cultural formation. But the story gets even worse: the fall introduces another destructive force to which most of us are oblivious.

THE FALL UNLEASHES DEMONIC FORCES

As we have seen, both Western Naturalism and Evangelical Gnosticism have tended to act as though God, even if He exists, is irrelevant to our lives from Monday to Saturday. And the blindness of Westerners to the spiritual dimension of reality is even greater when it comes to the active presence of demonic forces. While Westerners tend to doubt, downplay, or overlook the active presence of demons, the Bible is quite clear that Satan and his legions are actively involved in the affairs of this world.

Yes, God is still sovereign over all things, including demonic forces. But after the fall, the fact that God allows things to happen is not the same thing as God personally doing those things. Throughout the Scriptures we see that God dislikes and opposes a lot of what happens, and He makes it clear there are consequences for disobeying His commandments. God is not a puppet-master, and He allows His fallen creatures to continue to act, even when some of their actions are sinful and destructive.

Under this framework, God gives Satan significant latitude to wage war on humanity, so much that the Bible refers to Satan as the “god of this age,” the “prince of this world,” and the “ruler of the kingdom of the air” (2 Cor. 4:4; John 12:31; Eph. 2:2; see also Gen. 3:15). In fact, Satan has sufficient power over unbelievers that they are described as following his ways and as being under his dominion (see Eph. 2:2; Col. 1:13). Unbelievers do not reside in some neutral, demilitarized zone between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan. On the contrary, while it may sound very strange or even offensive to us, in some sense, at one time all of us were captured by Satan and his legions and needed to be liberated from their powerful grip (Col. 1:13). When we fully acknowledge this, we can begin to appreciate that salvation entails victory, not just over sin and death, but also rescue from the devil (John 16:11; Col. 2:15; Heb. 2:14).

Moreover, even though believers have been freed from Satan’s bondage and have been brought behind the front lines of God’s kingdom, Scripture still warns us to remain on guard against “the rulers, against the authorities ... against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Eph. 6:10–13).

Poverty alleviation definitely is spiritual warfare, for Satan and his legions absolutely love poverty. After all, they want to steal, kill, and destroy (John 10:10). They have a vested interest in keeping that homeless man in the

gutter, in ensuring that inner-city youths remain unemployed, and in spreading famine across Ethiopia.

Why?

Recall that human beings are called to be image bearers, extending the reign and worship of God throughout the whole earth. This calling necessarily puts people at war with Satan, who is opposed to the advancement of God's kingdom. The Bible refers to Satan as the adversary (1 Peter 5:8 ESV), enemy (Matt. 13:39), murderer (John 8:44), tempter (Matt. 4:3; 1 Thess. 3:5), accuser (Rev. 12:10), and the father of lies (John 8:44). Satan is determined to derail human beings from pursuing our mission of expanding God's reign and worship. In this light, the homeless person lying in the gutter isn't just a hungry belly, as significant as that hungry belly is. Rather, he is an incapacitated soldier, a casualty of war, a victory for Satan in his cosmic struggle against God Almighty.

Sound strange? Consider this: the most enduring memory that many of us have of the Second Gulf War is not of powerful weapons, brave generals, or brilliant strategies. Rather, the lasting image for many of us is just a hunk of metal, a simple statue. Broadcast around the world, the scene of American marines and Iraqi citizens toppling the statue of Saddam Hussein and dragging it through the streets remains seared on many of our minds.

Why? It was just a statue. It couldn't walk. It couldn't talk. It couldn't do anything at all. Yet, as this statue towered over the Baghdad square, it made people feel like Saddam was always present, always watching, and always to be feared. Toppling the statue, therefore, was far more significant than just bringing a bunch of metal crashing to the ground. It represented the end of Saddam's reign and the bringing of justice to a tyrant.

As image bearers, human beings are something like that statue. We too represent our King—though our King is gracious and good, of course!—making His presence and reign known throughout the earth. But we are so much more than this statue, for we can actually *do* things—big things! Amazingly, we are created and empowered to subdue the earth on God's behalf. And in the process, we spread the worship of God Almighty. As a result, demonic forces want to incapacitate human beings, toppling us over and dragging us through the streets, just like Saddam's statue. Should we, as Christians, really be so surprised to call it demonic when human beings are too malnourished to function, when there are no jobs available, or when drug

addictions undermine people's ability to work? Demonic forces want to thwart the worship of God, so demonic forces love poverty. If we can't admit something like this, then it is clear evidence we really do live in a two-dimensional rather than three-dimensional world; we still need to escape Flatland.

How do demonic forces promote poverty? The Bible suggests that demons are able to influence each component of our model of individual and cultural formation.

Demonic Forces: False Gods and Erroneous Stories of Change

As we have seen, false gods lead to erroneous stories of change, which transform human beings into something less than priest-kings who spread the worship of God Almighty. So, given Satan's desire to thwart such worship, we might expect that one of his primary tactics would be to lead people into the worship of false gods, including himself (Luke 4:7). This is indeed the case. The Bible teaches that Satan is a liar, and one of his favorite tactics is to lure individuals, communities, and nations into false religions, sometimes including the worship of literal idols (Deut. 32:15–17; 1 Kings 11:7; John 8:44; Acts 19:28; 1 Cor. 10:20; 1 Tim. 4:1).²³

For example, the psalmist describes a close association between Israel's idolatry and demonic forces:

They [Israel] served their [neighbors'] idols,
which became a snare to them.

*They sacrificed their sons
and their daughters to the demons;
they poured out innocent blood,
the blood of their sons and daughters,
whom they sacrificed to the idols of Canaan;
and the land was polluted with blood.*

Thus they became unclean by their acts,
and played the harlot in their doings.

(Ps. 106:36–39 RSV; emphasis added)

Similarly, in the New Testament era, Paul warns Timothy that demons use false teachers to lure people into following them:

The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and *follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons*. *Such teachings come through hypocritical liars*, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron. (1 Tim. 4:1–2; emphasis added)

How does such demonic activity contribute to poverty today? Not all false religions and stories of change originate with demons, as human beings have the ability to create these on their own without demonic influence.²⁴ Thus, it is impossible to state with complete certainty when demonic forces are at work. However, given the focus of this book on poverty, we shall highlight three arenas where demons may be active in promoting idolatry and false stories of change in an effort to perpetuate poverty.

The first arena is among poor people in the Majority World, who are frequently engaged in various forms of traditional religion, which they sometimes mix with elements of more organized religions such as Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam. Believing that personal and impersonal spiritual forces control every aspect of life, traditional religionists try to control the spirits through rituals, divination, witchcraft, magic, herbs, potions, and sacrifices of food, animals, and even humans. While some insights of traditional religion are consistent with biblical revelation,²⁵ the practices just mentioned are clearly forbidden in Scripture and suggest demonic influences (Deut. 18:9–14; Ps. 106:34–39; 1 Cor. 10:20). If one spends time in rural parts of the Majority World, one will likely witness things that are difficult to explain by anything other than demonic activity. Moreover, casting demons out of people is a regular part of ministry for many churches in the Majority World.²⁶

This does not mean, though, that demonic forces have as much influence on the material realm as traditional religionists believe. For example, diseases that are due to natural causes are sometimes attributed to the work of evil spirits in parts of Africa.²⁷ Just as Western civilization is overly naturalistic, pre-modern cultures that have been immersed in traditional religion for thousands of years are likely to be somewhat superstitious. One culture, that of the industrialized West, naïvely ignores the reality of demonic forces, while other cultures, that of pre-modern traditionalists, ascribe too much power and importance to these powers. We should avoid both extremes.

Regardless of their actual level of involvement in the material world, demonic forces probably promote traditional religion. The mere fact that many poor people in the Majority World live in constant fear of spiritual forces is sufficient for these forces to wreak havoc in their lives. For example, instead of seeing themselves as image bearers capable of developing the earth, traditional religionists are often paralyzed by fatalism, believing that spiritual forces—rather than their own creativity and effort—will determine the size of their harvest or the profits from their business. As a result, several leading economists, including Nobel Laureate Robert Lucas, have argued that the prerequisite to unleashing economic growth in the Majority World is a shift from a traditional worldview to a worldview in which human-led innovation and progress are seen as possible.²⁸

The second arena wherein demonic forces may be promoting poverty through a false story of change is among poor people in Western civilization. To see this, we must remember that not all idolatry consists of blatantly worshiping a stone image or even joining a false religion. Rather, idolatry consists of putting anything in the rightful place of God (Ex. 20:3). For example, while Westerners are naturalistic enough that we are not prone to bowing down before a carved image, we are tempted to idolatry nonetheless. Western civilization is highly materialistic, worshiping created things—especially money and sex—rather than the Creator of those things. And the Scriptures are saturated with warnings against these forms of idolatry:

No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money. (Luke 16:13)

But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints. Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving. For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. (Eph. 5:3–5 ESV)

We may reasonably believe, though not with full certainty, that demonic

forces are just as influential in promoting materialistic forms of idolatry as they are in promoting the more spiritual forms of idolatry present in traditional religion. Satan doesn't show up wearing red tights, holding a pitchfork in his hand, and announce, "I am Satan. Come follow me!" Rather, Satan is a deceiver who deceives people into following him (Gen. 3:1–4; 1 Tim. 2:14; Rev. 12:9). And one of the best ways to deceive people is to get them to believe that you don't even exist. C. S. Lewis creatively describes this strategy in *The Screwtape Letters*, a fictional account of an elder demon's letters to a junior demon on the best ways to attack Westerners:

Our policy, for the moment, is to conceal ourselves.... When [humans] believe in us, we cannot make them materialists and skeptics.... I do not think you will have much difficulty in keeping [humans] in the dark. The fact that "devils" are predominantly comic figures in the modern imagination will help you. If any faint suspicion of your existence begins to arise in his mind, suggest to him a picture of something in red tights and persuade him that since he cannot believe in that...he therefore cannot believe in you.²⁹

Satan and his legions work to ensure that Western civilization continues to believe the roof on the SkyDome is closed, sealed off to intervention from either good or evil spiritual beings. When we believe this lie, we increasingly bow down to self-centered materialism and its associated *story of change*: the goal of life is physical pleasure that can be obtained through physical means.

And how does this contribute to poverty? Surprisingly, materially poor people in America are even more materialistic than those in the dominant culture.³⁰ When their relationships break down—due to discrimination, unemployment, divorce, absentee parents, or low self-esteem—poor people, like all Westerners, tend to turn to material possessions in order to deaden their pain and increase their sense of accomplishment and social status.³¹ But when poor people are unsuccessful in obtaining more material possessions, their frustrations increase, leading to various self-destructive behaviors that exacerbate their poverty: violence, sexual promiscuity, out-of-wedlock births, drug and alcohol addiction, dropping out of school, and criminal behavior.³² And then the cycle of poverty continues.

The third arena in which demonic forces may be promoting poverty

through a faulty story of change is among the materially non-poor in Western civilization. Both Western Naturalism and Evangelical Gnosticism are highly materialistic in both their goals for this life and their means of achieving those goals. And unfortunately, the materially non-poor bring these faulty stories of change into their poverty alleviation strategies. At their worst, such efforts use ongoing handouts ([Strategy #1](#) in chapter 3), which can undermine the capacity of the materially poor and enslave them in unhealthy dependencies. And at their best, such efforts run the danger of empowering the materially poor to become highly individualistic, materialistic creatures ([Strategy #2](#) in chapter 3). Satan and his legions, seeking to promote poverty, have a vested interest in keeping the materially non-poor blinded by materialistic stories of change.

Demonic Forces: Individual Personhoods, Formative Practices, and Systems

In addition to leading people to adopt erroneous *stories of change*, demons can influence each of the other components of our model of individual and cultural formation as well:

- *Individual Personhoods*: Demons can directly attack people through physical and mental difficulties, calamities, and temptations (Job 1:1–19; Matt. 12:22; Mark 5:4–5; Luke 4:1–13);
- *Formative Practices*: Demons entice people to engage in destructive behaviors (Eph. 4:26–27);
- *Systems*: Demons can work to make political and social institutions oppressive (Dan. 10:13, 10:20–11:1; Rev. 2:10, 16:13–14).³³

Although demons can attack all aspects of individuals and cultures, they are not the only source of problems in a fallen world. For example, plenty of physical and mental ailments result from completely natural causes. Hence, while it is a mistake to believe that demonic forces are never at work, it is equally problematic to attribute all problems to demonic activity.

Demonic Forces and Parvatamma

While it is difficult to know for sure, there are reasons to suspect demonic activity in Hinduism in general and in the *devadasi* custom in particular. For example, offering sacrifices to idols is a common practice in Hinduism, and, at least in the New Testament era, such sacrifices were said to be offered to demons (see 1 Cor. 10:20). Furthermore, during the initiation ritual to become a *devadasi*, the spirit of the goddess—or perhaps an associated demon?—is believed to permanently enter the girls. Indeed, *devadasis* report seeing spirits that haunt them throughout their lives, particularly when they engage in any rituals that are similar to their initiation ceremonies.³⁴ Moreover, there have been reports of *devadasis* who are actually demon possessed.³⁵

THE AUGMENTED MODEL OF INDIVIDUAL AND CULTURAL FORMATION

As depicted in [Figure 7.2](#), the fall deforms each aspect of our model of individual and cultural formation: *the story of change, formative practices, individual personhoods, and systems at both the community and macro levels*. Moreover, demonic forces have been added to the figure to reflect their ability to attack each component of the model.

* * *

The American Version of Parvatamma

Nadiyah was in and out of juvenile detention (“juvie”) a total of eleven times between the ages of thirteen and fifteen. As a high school dropout with a criminal record, Nadiyah was well on her way to a life of poverty and imprisonment. At first glance, it appears that Nadiyah is solely to blame for her situation, but like Parvatamma there is more to the story.

Nadiyah was born inside the prison where her mother was incarcerated. Two days later she was sent to live with her grandmother in a low-income housing project in San Francisco. As Nadiyah explains, the environment was terrifying:

Every day, on my way to school, I had to navigate through drug dealers,

drug addicts and poor folks looking for their next crime victim. I saw my first shooting when I was 9 years old. My house was accidentally shot into twice, luckily we were not hit. Although shootings were a regular scene where I lived, the instantaneous fear that comes when you hear a gunshot always left me and my family trembling for days and saying things like “we got to get out of these projects.” We all knew it was a very real possibility that one of us could be accidentally or purposefully shot at and killed.

Over the years I witnessed countless murders, many of which were classmates and friends. This made it difficult for me to focus in school and before long I began smoking marijuana and drinking as a way to escape the daily violence....

Inside juvie I met other girls like myself [who] were there for prostitution, assault, theft, and truancy. We were not violent girls. We were girls who were hurting. All of us were from the same neighborhoods, poor families and seemed to have the same disposition of trauma, anger mixed with hopelessness.³⁶

As Nadiyah notes, she is not a unique case. Researchers are finding that children raised in highly stressful environments like Nadiyah’s are likely to develop brains with permanently under-developed “executive functions”—the ability to solve problems, to cope with adversity, to organize their lives, and to exhibit self-control.³⁷ In addition, many children raised in such settings experience psychological trauma, which undermines their capacity to learn and contributes to substance abuse, acts of self-destruction, chronic anger, unstable relationships, and juvenile delinquency.³⁸ Finally, a very high percentage of girls in low-income communities are victims of sexual and physical abuse, which often goes unreported and untreated. Unable to cope with the resulting trauma on their own, the victims often engage in substance abuse, truancy, violence, and voluntary or involuntary prostitution, all of which can lead to incarceration.³⁹

Just as potholes damage wheels, broken systems create broken people. Why are the systems in low-income communities so broken?

The majority of residents of inner-city, low-income neighborhoods are hard-working, law-abiding, God-fearing, and often socially conservative.⁴⁰ However, as Harvard sociologist Orlando Patterson notes, up to 25 percent of

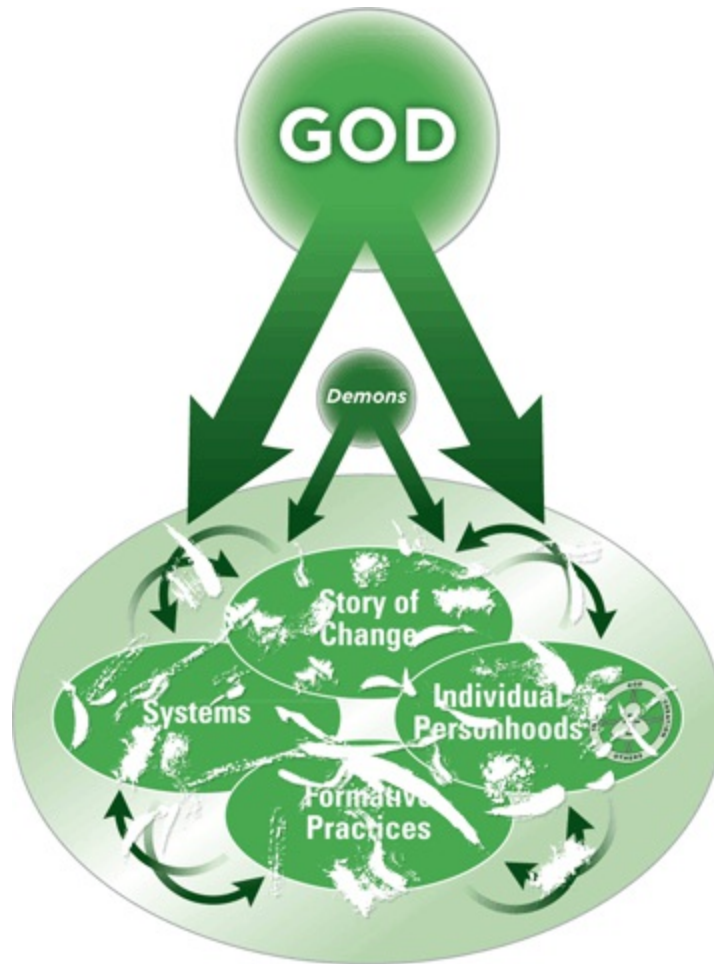
inner-city, low-income neighborhoods are comprised of “disconnected” youth who are neither in school nor working. These young people have been deeply immersed in mainstream media, causing them to embrace many of the values of America’s dominant culture: materialism, aggressive masculinity, success at any cost, and sexual gratification.⁴¹ But complex factors rooted in America’s racial past and present make it difficult for African American youths to achieve these goals through career advancement, so some resort to alternative means: drug trafficking, bootlegging, violence, sexual promiscuity, and physical and sexual abuse of young women.⁴² As a result, poor, never-married, African American young women like Nadiyah are statistically at the greatest risk of being victims of violence nationwide.⁴³

The goals of both mainstream American culture and of disconnected youth are basically the same: self-gratification through personal pleasure. But the systems that enable mainstream American culture to achieve its distorted goals don’t work for the disconnected youth. And as a result, Nadiyah, like Parvatamma, is a victim of her culture’s false gods, which are transforming her into their image. And so the cycle continues.

* * *

FIGURE 7.2

The Model of Individual and Cultural Change in a Fallen World



Adapted from Brian Fikkert and Michael Rhodes, “*Homo Economicus Versus Homo Imago Dei*,” *Journal of Markets and Morality* 20, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 106.

SO WHY IS JANE DOE POOR?

As we have seen, the answer to this question is quite complex: Jane is both relationally and materially poor because the fall is more than a legal problem, resulting in all of the following:

1. False gods and erroneous stories of change
2. Broken individuals
3. Destructive formative practices
4. Broken systems at both the community and macro levels
5. The influence of demonic forces

This answer is profoundly different from the answer given by the Democrats and Republicans! And it is profoundly different from the answers given by the vast majority of people involved in poverty alleviation, including most relief and development organizations, ministries, churches, donors, staff, and volunteers. The reason for this difference is that a biblical perspective is radically different from our cultural default perspectives, which have been deeply shaped by the erroneous teachings of Western Naturalism and Evangelical Gnosticism.

We recognize that some of these concepts are a bit abstract and will take time for some to comprehend. At the same time, we believe these ideas are extremely practical, for they are consistent with what the Bible reveals about the nature of the cosmos after the fall.

So, whether Jane is the woman asking your church for help with her electric bill or the woman in the rural Ugandan village that lacks clean water, you should have all five of these causes of poverty in mind. In some cases, you may discover that broken systems can explain nearly all of Jane's poverty. In other cases, you may find that Jane's own brokenness is the primary cause. And in other cases—perhaps most cases—you may discover that all five factors are interacting in complex ways to contribute to Jane's poverty.

This was the case with Parvatamma. Ancient religious beliefs, a paralyzing story of change, enslaving systems, destructive practices, a deeply broken personhood, and demonic forces combined to lock Parvatamma into grinding poverty.

Moreover, these five factors have done far more than that. Remember, we all are becoming something; we all are being transformed into the image of whatever god we worship. These five factors have *transformed* Parvatamma into the image of Yellamma. Like Yellamma, Parvatamma is now participating in the temple prostitution of little girls. And as Parvatamma offers up her own daughter to Yellamma, she helps perpetuate her culture's worship of this horrendous goddess. And so the cycle of relational and material poverty continues for another generation.

Worship and Poverty Alleviation

Human beings are transformed into the image of whatever god they worship,

so at the core of effective poverty alleviation is worship of the one true God.

The fall of humanity does more than create a legal problem for guilty sinners before a righteous God—as important as that legal problem is. The fall deeply impacts every square inch of the cosmos, resulting in false gods and erroneous stories of change, broken individuals, destructive formative practices, broken systems, and the activity of demonic forces, all of which contribute to both relational and material poverty. The situation is more than overwhelming, requiring a miracle of cosmic proportions to overcome poverty. Fortunately, as we shall see in the next chapter, God is in the cosmic miracle business.



CHAPTER EIGHT

RECONSIDERING REDEMPTION: FULLY EMBODIED HOPE

The early church didn't say, "Look what the world is coming to!" They said, "Look what has come into the world!"¹

—CARL F. HENRY, THEOLOGIAN

Christianity revitalized life in Greco-Roman cities by providing new norms and new kinds of social relationships able to cope with many urgent urban problems. To cities filled with the homeless and the impoverished, Christianity offered charity as well as hope. To cities filled with newcomers and strangers, Christianity offered an immediate basis for attachments. To cities filled with orphans and widows, Christianity provided a new and expanded sense of family. To cities torn by violent ethnic strife, Christianity offered a new basis for social solidarity.²

—RODNEY STARK, SOCIOLOGIST, 1996

Lauren was living at Hope House, a home for teenage mothers, when she got hired by the Career Partner Program of Prime Trailer Leasing, a company near Denver, Colorado that rents out semi-trailers. Because of the program, Lauren eventually became an excellent employee. But that's not how things got started.

"My mom was a teen mom," Lauren says. "My dad joined the military, my mom was homeless, so we lacked stability." When she was sixteen, Lauren became pregnant herself. "I remember thinking, *Oh my gosh, even when I'm trying to do something, I'm not really getting anywhere.*" "The first six months at Prime were extremely rocky," Lauren says. "I struggled so much. I was like, *I don't want to let anybody in. People just leave, and they'll just abandon me, or if things get too tough, I'll just be out on the streets.* But this company is nothing like that."

Prime's willingness to welcome Laura and love her along the way allowed her to contribute to the company and her community. Through work, Lauren is able to be there for her daughter. "She's three and a half, and she's sassy, but she has stability I never really had even at that age," Lauren says. "This company has done so many things for me.... The reason I come into work every day and want to work my butt off for this place is that they provided me with an opportunity that I wouldn't have gotten anywhere else."³

A world away from Lauren, the atmosphere is electric at St. Luke's, an extremely poor church in rural Togo, West Africa, which several Chalmers Center staff and I are visiting. Singing, clapping, and laughter fill the air as about one hundred men, women, and children cram onto wooden benches as baby chicks scurry between their feet. This is the weekly meeting of the church's savings and credit association, a simple credit union that the members own and operate on their own.

Lacking access to banking services, poor people in the Majority World find it difficult to save or borrow the money they need to start microenterprises, to pay school fees for their kids, or to survive the never-ending medical crises. Loan sharks often thrive in such environments, lending money at exorbitant interest rates to some of the poorest and most vulnerable people on the planet. Savings and credit associations, therefore, can literally be life-savers, providing poor people with access to the banking services that they so desperately need.⁴

But the weekly assembly of St. Luke's savings and credit association involves far more than financial transactions, as important as those are. The meetings feel more like a church service, complete with biblical teaching, fellowship, songs of praise, dancing, encouragement, and testimonies to God's faithfulness. Joy fills the air, in stark contrast to the world just outside St. Luke's doors.

Togo ranks dead last out of 158 countries in terms of the self-reported happiness of its people.⁵ And there are solid reasons for such unhappiness. For the past 400 years, the Togolese have suffered brutal oppression from slave traders, colonizers, and dictators. With 73.4 percent of its rural population living below the international poverty line of \$1.90 per day, Togo is one of the poorest countries in the world.⁶

Back to the hope and joy filling St. Luke's:

The meeting begins with the members sharing testimonies about how the savings and credit association has helped them. Businesses have been started, kids have enrolled in school, and doctors' bills have been paid. And then Komi, a man in his thirties, stands up to speak, "It wasn't very long ago that I was sleeping with prostitutes every evening. But as a result of this savings and credit association, I have repented and moved back in with my wife. Things are now going very well in our marriage." Her face beaming, Komi's wife then stands up, points to her pregnant belly, and says, "And here is the result! We used to fight a lot, but now we are kissing all the time."

Why does Wes Gardner, the owner of Prime Trailer, hire Lauren, when there are more qualified people available? And how does a savings and credit association cause Komi to repent of his sins and restore his marriage? It turns out that Wes's and Komi's behaviors are due to the way they answer the two questions posed at the start of Part 3:

- 1) Why did Jesus come to earth?
- 2) What is the gospel?

THE MISSION OF JESUS CHRIST

While these questions sound very basic, there are nuanced differences in how Christians answer them, and those differences shape every aspect of our lives. Understanding Jesus' mission changes everything, so Jesus made sure His disciples got it right:

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man [Jesus] is?"

They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

"But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?"

Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my

church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.” (Matt. 16:13–18)

Peter refers to Jesus as the “Messiah,” the Hebrew term for the “anointed one,” the king who God had promised would restore the kingdom to Israel. Indeed, the entire New Testament emphasizes Jesus’ kingly mission, calling Him “Jesus [the] Christ” (Mark. 8:29; Acts 5:42; Rom. 5:6). Christ isn’t Jesus’ last name, like “Lincoln” in “Abraham Lincoln.” Rather, Christ is the Greek term for “the anointed one,” the Messiah whom the prophets said would usher in a kingdom that would bring unprecedented peace and prosperity.

Approximately seven hundred years earlier, the prophet Isaiah described this coming King and kingdom in glorious and comprehensive terms:

For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Of the greatness of his government and peace
there will be no end.
He will reign on David’s throne
and over his kingdom,
establishing and upholding it
with justice and righteousness
from that time on and forever.
The zeal of the LORD Almighty
will accomplish this. (Isa. 9:6–7)

Note that this kingdom would bring “peace” without end. The word for “peace” in Hebrew is *shalom*, which is more than just the absence of war. It means harmony, prosperity, comprehensive happiness, and wholeness. Amazingly, this King would increase this peace, this wholeness, *without end*, liberating the entire creation—not just human souls—from the ravages of sin and restoring it to all that it was designed to be. Of course, as the very height

of creation, human beings would necessarily be included in the King's comprehensive restoration. Throughout the book of Isaiah, the restoration of human beings is described in holistic fashion to include the salvation of both their bodies and souls, the reconciliation of their relationships, and the recovery of their high calling as priest-kings (Isa. 9:6–7; 35:1–10; 53:5, 55:12–13; 61–62). In other words, this King would achieve the goal of the biblical story of change for His people:

The Goal of God's Story of Change

People experience human flourishing when they serve as priest-kings, using their mind, affections, will, and body to enjoy loving relationships with God, self, others, and the rest of creation.

Now move forward approximately seven hundred years from the time of Isaiah. Jesus has just been tempted by the devil for forty days and nights, and He returns to Galilee to start His earthly ministry. On the Sabbath, Jesus attends the synagogue in Nazareth, the obscure town in which he had been raised. Week in and week out, Jews gathered in this synagogue to worship under the chafing yoke of the Roman Empire. Aware of Old Testament expectations, these worshipers were longing for God to send the promised Messiah, the one who would restore the kingdom to Israel. But centuries had gone by with no Messiah, and the Romans were running the show. Hope was probably in short supply.

Jesus stands up and is handed a scroll from Isaiah. Unrolling it, He turns to one of the Messianic passages, Isaiah 61:1–2, and reads,

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”
... The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him.
He began by saying to them, “*Today this scripture is fulfilled in*

your hearing.” (Luke 4:18–21; emphasis added)

Upon hearing this, one can imagine that a shiver may have gone down the spines of the worshipers that day. Could it be that Isaiah’s prophecies were really about to come true? Could it really be that a kingdom whose domain would increase without end was about to begin? Was it really possible that justice, peace, and righteousness were about to be established forever? Was Jesus really the King who would bring healing to the parched soil, the feeble hands, the shaky knees, the fearful hearts, the blind, the deaf, the lame, the mute, the brokenhearted, the captives, and the sinful souls, and proclaim the year of jubilee for the poor (Isa. 35:1–6; 53:5; 61:1–2)?

The scene ends with people disbelieving Jesus—and trying to put Him to death for blasphemy!—because how could someone so humble—Mary’s and Joseph’s son—be so important (Luke 4:22–30)?

But Jesus’ answer to all these questions was a resounding “Yes!” declaring, “*Today* this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” In essence, Jesus is saying, “The kingdom that Isaiah promised is at hand, and I am the promised King.” Indeed, just a few verses later, Jesus frames His entire ministry in terms of announcing the kingdom of God: “I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent” (Luke 4:43).

Jesus did not simply preach the kingdom, though. His actions demonstrated that the kingdom, *His* kingdom, had actually arrived. Jesus’ words and actions should never be separated, otherwise we won’t properly understand His identity and significance as the Messiah. The King had come, and His power was cosmic in scope: He clearly had authority over nature, over sickness, and over the demonic, and He had come to proclaim the good news to the poor (Matt. 11:4–5).⁷ Even death and sin were not too great for Him, for He would overcome even these ancient enemies. Jesus’ miracles were not cool magic tricks that might help convince people to follow Him. No, they signaled so much more: they displayed His identity as the unique Lord of heaven and earth, the one who was distinctively able to reconcile all things in Himself (Col. 1:19–20).

In Jesus we see the first stages of the kingdom bursting forth into this messy and broken world, but that is only the beginning. For, as Tim Keller explains, the kingdom of God is “the renewal of the whole world through the

entrance of supernatural forces. As things are brought back under Christ's rule and authority, they are restored to health, beauty, and freedom."⁸ Just as Isaiah prophesied, the kingdom expands without end, liberating God's people—both body and soul—along with the entire cosmos:

For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.

We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently. (Rom. 8:19–25)

Jesus is liberating our bodies, our souls, and the entire cosmos from the effects of the fall. It is “in this hope we were saved.” *This* is the gospel, the good news that Jesus is Lord of all the world and that He is bringing His people into the new kingdom that He is establishing through all the earth, a kingdom of *shalom* that will have no end. And *this* is the gospel that Jesus committed to His followers (Luke 9:1–6; 10:1–12). As theologian Herman Ridderbos notes, “It may be rightly said that the whole of the preaching of Jesus Christ and his apostles is concerned with the kingdom of God.”⁹

The Bible also describes other reasons Jesus came to earth, and each of these contribute to the overall story of the kingdom. Jesus came to fulfill the law and the prophets (Matt. 5:17), who wrote about this kingdom; to give His life as a ransom for many (Matt. 20:28) to bring them into the kingdom; to call sinners to repentance (Luke 5:32) that they might be fit for the kingdom; to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10) for the kingdom; to give life to the full (John 10:10), the *shalom* of the kingdom; to testify to the truth (John 18:37) that His followers would understand the kingdom; to enable the Gentiles to glorify God (Rom. 15:9) by becoming part of the kingdom; to redeem those

who were under the law (Gal. 4:5) to become citizens of the kingdom; and more.

Because the entire Bible is God's Word, all these verses are simultaneously true. We should not pit them against one another. Nor should we focus on just one verse and ignore others. Rather, each of these verses highlights different aspects of the whole. Because Christ's kingdom is so big and so complex, it simply can't be described in just one verse. For example, Jesus' parables often begin with the phrase "The kingdom of heaven is like ..." (Matt. 13; 18:21–35; 20:1–16; 22:1–14; 25:1–13). And then the parables go on to describe a feature of the kingdom. Each of these features is simultaneously true. They are just different facets of a very multifaceted kingdom. Hence, if we focus in on just one feature, we won't understand the kingdom as a whole, and we won't even really understand that one feature very well.

Imagine reading just one chapter from the middle of an extremely long book. Without understanding the story as a whole, you won't understand that one chapter very well. Further, by reading just that one chapter, you will miss the main point of the entire book. The same is true when we come to Scripture. We need to interpret each verse in light of the overall story of the Bible, which we may summarize as follows¹⁰:

God creates a beautiful world and calls humanity to serve as His image-bearers, a community of priest-kings who protect and develop His creation for His glory. Unfortunately, Adam and Eve sin against God, which results in human beings' loss of vocation as priest-kings, puts them under Satan's dominion, and distorts every square inch of the creation. But God does not abandon His handiwork. Through His life, death and resurrection, Jesus Christ becomes our substitute, overcoming sin, death, and the Devil, ascending to the right hand of the Father as our holy and loving Lord. From there He reigns—right now—over a kingdom that is bringing *shalom* by transforming the present cosmos into a new one. The community of people who have saving faith in Christ—the true church—are rescued from the kingdom of darkness, immediately become new creatures in Christ, are declared righteous by reason of our union with Him, and serve as a community of

restored priest-kings. When Christ returns, His kingdom will be completely consummated, and the true church will be restored to full human flourishing, continuing to serve as a community of fully-embodied, restored priest-kings in the new creation.

Unfortunately, most of us have focused on just one feature of the story—on one chapter, so to speak—giving us a very distorted picture of the whole. I have asked thousands of evangelical Christians in numerous contexts this most basic question, “Why did Jesus come to earth?” and fewer than 1 percent say anything even remotely close to the answer that Jesus Himself gives at the start of His earthly ministry: to preach the kingdom of God and bring it into being. Instead, the vast majority of people say something like this: “Jesus came to die on the cross to pay for my sins so that my soul can go to heaven when I die.” Praise God that those who trust in Jesus Christ can be secure in knowing that God has indeed forgiven them, that they have eternal life in Christ, and that the grave no longer has any hold on them (Rom. 8:1–4; John 3:16; Luke 23:43; 2 Cor. 5:18). To know that we need not fear death or divine punishment is life-changing news.

But while this answer is true, it is incomplete. As a result, it leads to some serious problems.

First, this partial answer reduces the work of Jesus Christ to saving our souls, when the kingdom of God and the promises associated with its consummation bring good news for every square inch of the universe (see Rom. 8:18–25; 1 John 3:2): for turtles, for stars, for cultures, and for every facet of our mind-affections-will-body-relational personhoods. The kingdom truly is good news for the poor, for *every* part of their being.

Second, while believers can be confident that when they die they will immediately be with the Lord (see Luke 23:43), such a disembodied vision is certainly not the ultimate Christian hope. Rather, the souls of deceased believers await the resurrection of their bodies and the reuniting of heaven and earth, a new creation in which God will dwell with His people (1 Cor. 15:35–58; Phil. 3:21; Rev. 21:1–5). As John Piper explains,

It seems to me that the hope of resurrection does not have the same place of power and centrality for us today that it had for the early Christians. And I think one of the reasons for that is that we have a

wrong view of the age to come. When we talk about the future and the eternal state, we tend to talk about heaven, and heaven tends to imply a place far away characterized by non-material, ethereal, disembodied spirits.

In other words, we tend to assume that the condition that the departed saints are in NOW without their bodies is the way it will always be. And we have encouraged ourselves so much with how good it is for them now that we tend to forget how it is an imperfect state and not the way it will always be, nor the way Paul wanted it to be for himself. Yes to die is gain, and yes, to be absent from the body is to be at home with the Lord, but NO this is not our ultimate hope. This is not the final state of our joy. This is not our final or main comfort when we have lost loved ones who believe.

That is our hope—to be with the risen Christ with a body like his glorious body. To know him in a form like his. Our final destiny and our eternal state is not an ethereal, disembodied state in a distant heaven. It is to reign with Christ here on the renewed earth. This hope was so vibrant for the early Christians that they comforted each other not mainly with the joys of the disembodied state after death, but with the hope of resurrection bodies (cf. Philippians 3:21).¹¹

The present heaven isn't our ultimate hope. Rather, the great hope is Eden restored: a fully embodied existence in a physical creation where the risen Christ will dwell with His people physically and spiritually. God once again dwells with His people and our vocations are once again unhindered by sin, so that we and our work are finally full of meaning, purpose, and joy.

Third, this partial answer acts as though there are no present benefits from the fact that King Jesus reigns right now. It is apparently all about the future. So, is there no hope for this life? This certainly is not a very compelling story for poor people who are abused, exploited, sick, hungry, and alone. Imagine saying to them, "We are sorry that your life is so miserable, but cheer up: your sins can be forgiven so that your soul can go to heaven when you die." This story simply isn't listening to the heart cries of the poor. We can almost hear them saying to themselves, "Huh? I thought you said you had *good* news." By so quickly providing a spiritualized answer, we risk not simply

sounding insensitive and offensive, but also undervaluing the fullness of the gospel!

Certainly, the kingdom is “not yet” in the sense that it will not be fully manifested until Christ returns. On the other hand, two thousand years ago, Jesus clearly stated that there is a “now” to the kingdom, saying “*Today* this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21; emphasis added). Jesus Christ has complete power over the entire universe, *right now*, and He demonstrated that power by healing the sick, casting out demons, raising the dead, and preaching good news to the poor (Luke 7:18–23). And it’s a power that He continues to demonstrate in Denver, Colorado, rural Togo, and your back yard. This isn’t just some abstract truth. Rather, the apostle Paul prays that we will actually live our lives in view of Christ’s reign in the present age:

I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably *great power for us who believe*. That power is the same as the mighty strength he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, *not only in the present age but also in the one to come*. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything *for the church*, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way. (Eph. 1:17–23; emphasis added)

We know God takes our current physical pain seriously, for the Son of God truly became man—a real, particular human being like us in every way except sin. The Son did not become a ghost! Jesus’ body was real: He wept, He bled, and He died. So when we proclaim the Christian hope, we need to make sure we don’t so “spiritualize” the good news that we make it appear that God doesn’t care about our embodied existence—for that would communicate that He doesn’t care about us, all of us in our entirety. Remember, we are not merely “spiritual” beings, we are human beings—

body and soul, one unified person. So Jesus, fully human, entered into our embodied existence in order that He might bring about a renewed creation, a renewed life. But the eternal life He secures for us is not an escape from our humanity; rather, it is the renewal of our humanity. Yes, we are new creatures in Christ, but being “born again” doesn’t undermine our humanness: it renews it. Thus, Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection are the ultimate hope for all of us, including people who are materially poor.¹² We long for the time when all things are finally and fully set right—but that hope is not anti-physical. Rather, it is the renewal of all the dimensions of God’s creation, including the physical. And that vision shapes our lives in the present.

Jesus Christ reigns over everything, right now, and He is using His power to help His people, His church, right now. While this does not mean that God will take away all our suffering in this life, there is hope—fully embodied hope—for the possibility of healing in this life even as we eagerly await the full healing in the next.

GOOD NEWS FOR THE POOR

In chapter 7, we saw that material poverty is one of the possible symptoms of relational poverty. An effective poverty alleviation strategy must therefore move beyond treating only material problems to addressing the underlying brokenness in people’s relationships with God, self, others, and the rest of creation. But, as we have seen, mending these four relationships presents a daunting challenge, for the causes of relational brokenness are overwhelming: (1) false gods and erroneous stories of change; (2) broken individuals; (3) destructive formative practices; (4) broken systems at the community and macro levels; and (5) the unleashing of demonic forces. Fortunately, addressing these issues is not a daunting challenge for King Jesus:

The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and

the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him *to reconcile to himself all things*, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. (Col. 1:15–20; emphasis added)

King Jesus is using His supreme power and authority *to reconcile all things*. To reconcile is to put things into right relationship again, restoring them to what they were created to be. Just as Isaiah prophesied, reconciliation—which brings about *shalom*—is at the very heart of the kingdom. Consistent with this heart, Jesus’ miracles did not just show off His power. Rather, as acts of reconciliation, they moved people closer to wholeness, enabling the blind to see, the deaf to hear, the lame to walk, and the dead to live. In other words, Jesus’ miracles moved people closer to achieving the goal of God’s story of change.

And this is good news for the poor. In response to material poverty, Jesus does not pursue the strategy of Evangelical Gnosticism: establishing a dependency-creating soup kitchen and giving out tracts to get people’s souls to heaven.¹³ Rather, He uses the power of His death and resurrection to overcome *all* the causes of broken relationships—the root causes of material poverty—so poor people can be restored to full human flourishing. And now we have the answer to the second question of the biblical story of change: “How can the goal be achieved?”

The Way to Achieve the Goal of God’s Story of Change

Through the gift of the Son and Spirit, the triune God accomplishes our reconciliation to God, self, others, and the rest of creation.

Poverty alleviation is fundamentally a miracle performed by the triune God. While this truth has many implications, we shall focus on two for our purposes.

First, because poverty alleviation is a miracle, it cannot be put into a formula, manufactured, bottled, and shipped all over the world. Yes, there are some methods, tools, and techniques that generally work better than others.

And yes, we should continue to conduct research in search of better approaches. But we must also recognize that many of the factors involved in poverty alleviation are simply outside of human control.

Second, there is simply no room for the “god-complexes” that so often characterize those who try to help materially poor people, including boards, leaders, staff, volunteers, and donors.¹⁴ Because Western civilization assumes that God is largely irrelevant to the daily functioning of the world, materially non-poor Westerners tend to believe that our wealth and technology are the answer to poverty. While the broken *relationship with self* often leads to a marred identity for materially poor people, it often leads to arrogance and overconfidence for the materially non-poor.

But we cannot completely alleviate poverty. Only Jesus can. Poverty alleviation, then, is not really about our reaching down to grab the hand of a poor person in order to pull them up to our level. Rather, it is more like walking hand-in-hand and side-by-side as Jesus Christ does His reconciling work on both of us. Both of us are suffering from relational poverty, and both of us need the healing that only Jesus can give.

The fact that Christ is ultimately the one who alleviates poverty—in all its forms—does not imply that we have no role to play. On the contrary! We have a far bigger role to play than most of us realize. Believers are “new creation[s]” commissioned with the “ministry of reconciliation,” sent forth as “Christ’s ambassadors” (2 Cor. 5:17–21). No, we are not the King, but we go forth with His supreme power and authority working in and through us.

Now, let’s return to Wes and Komi. Why does Wes Gardner, the owner of Prime Trailer, hire Lauren when more qualified people are available? And how does a savings and credit association lead Komi to repent of his sins and move back in with his wife? It turns out that Wes’ and Komi’s behaviors are due to the way they answer the two questions posed at the start of this chapter: (1) “Why did Jesus come to earth?” and (2) “What is the gospel?” Once we understand the gospel in kingdom terms, we discover a whole new world and a whole new way of living in that world.

THE KINGDOM OF GOD CONQUERS WESTERN NATURALISM AND EVANGELICAL Gnosticism

As a business person, Wes Gardner works each day in a kingdom that has largely pledged its allegiance to an illegitimate king: *homo economicus*, that self-interested, individualistic, materialistic, consuming robot we encountered in chapters 3 and 4. The good news is that the kingdom of God has come, and King Jesus will not allow *homo economicus* to usurp His throne. In a related publication of the Chalmers Center, *Practicing the King's Economy: Honoring Jesus in How We Work, Earn, Save, Spend, and Give* (Baker Books, 2018), authors Michael Rhodes and Robby Holt describe the conflict between the kingdom of *homo economicus* and the kingdom of God:

Remember Rahab? She was the prostitute living in the walls of Jericho when the Israelite spies showed up.... Rahab lived in a kingdom. Jericho had its own rulers and rules, its own economic policies and social arrangements, and of course, its own gods.... Then one day she looked out the window and saw another kingdom invading, a kingdom with another king, a different economic policy, other sorts of social arrangements, and even, if she could believe the stories, a God strong enough to overcome the most powerful empire on earth. This God, known in Israel by his name *Yahweh*, was on his way. Rahab had to answer the question, *Whose side am I on?* ...

Each one of us is a bit like Rahab. We live in one kingdom, a kingdom of this world. When we look out the window and see King Jesus and his kingdom headed our way, we're confronted with the same question Rahab faced: Whose side am I on? Nobody can swear ultimate allegiance to more than one king. "No one can serve two masters" (Matt. 6:24)...

Every earthly kingdom has its own way of doing things, its own customs and policies regarding food, sex, family, and religion. And *every* kingdom has an economic policy. But when Jesus welcomes us into his alternate kingdom, something strange happens. We discover a whole new world. As we encounter this strange new world, we discover that the Jesus kingdom looks very different from the kingdoms to which we've grown accustomed.

Perhaps you have grown used to thinking about this dynamic in terms of God's sexual ethics or emphasis on honesty and integrity.

Many of us sense that our United States kingdom, for instance, has an entirely different “marriage and family” policy than the one Jesus calls us to embrace. Many of us also sense that when our culture’s approach to family or sex conflicts with God’s approach, we must choose to “obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29 ESV).

But King Jesus also has his own unique economic policies, his own economic program.¹⁵

Rhodes and Holt go on to unpack the radical difference between the economy of King Jesus and the economy of King *homo economicus*. For example, rather than allowing the uninterrupted pursuit of one’s material self-interests, King Jesus’ economy allows the poor to glean from the edges of fields, lending to enemies without expecting to get repaid, and forming communities in which “no one claimed that any of their possessions was their own” (Lev. 23:22; Luke 6:35; Acts 4:32). Yes, each of these verses needs to be interpreted carefully within its context, but as Rhodes and Holt demonstrate, the Bible pictures a kingdom whose economy looks fundamentally different from the current global marketplace.

Wes Gardner understands this conflict. He knows that he is faced with a Rahab decision, a kingdom-allegiance decision, every moment of every day in his business. Wes hasn’t reduced the gospel to solving only his legal problems with a Holy God, as absolutely important as that is. Rather, Wes understands the gospel in comprehensive terms: King Jesus is ushering in a kingdom that is bringing *shalom* as far as the curse is found. This includes rescuing Wes from the kingdom of darkness, bringing him into the kingdom of light, and restoring him as a priest-king who is empowered to live out the reality of this new kingdom every moment of every day.

So, every day at Prime Trailer Leasing, Wes improvises the strange economy of the kingdom of God by allowing poor people to do something akin to gleaning. And this is the reason Wes hires Lauren, even though it will cut into his profits. No, profits are not evil. Indeed, Prime Trailer cannot survive without them. But serving King Jesus rather than *homo economicus* radically changes both the purposes and practices of Wes’s business. Prime does not view what it pays workers simply as a cost to be controlled. “I look at our payroll as profit,” says Wes. “I look at that line in my financial statements that shows how much we spend on wages and I think, *Look how*

much money we've made." Prime has given people an opportunity to work, which is dignifying and life-changing. Prime's model shows us how God's people can align their marketplace activities with the economy of King Jesus.¹⁶

When business owners view labor costs as "profits" because such costs reflect the opportunity for workers to fulfill their callings as priest-kings, then "the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 3:2 ESV).

* * *

But We Don't Know Any Poor People!

American churches are exhibiting a renewed interest in alleviating poverty, but they often run into a major obstacle: they simply don't know any poor people! It is important to recognize that this situation didn't just happen. Centuries of racial injustice combined with more recent economic trends have resulted in a country in which the materially poor and non-poor are living in distinct subcultures that are increasingly isolated from one another.¹⁷

Unfortunately, just living the "normal," middle-class Christian lifestyle exacerbates these problems. When seeking a place to live, most of us look for a safe neighborhood with good schools and a short commute to work. And then life takes over: working long hours, driving to soccer games, helping with homework, participating in church, and so on. Soon, every minute of the day is accounted for, and in nearly every one of those minutes we are interacting with people whose socioeconomic backgrounds are similar to ours. Doing the "normal" life pulls us along, like a powerful current, into institutions, communities, and social networks that are light-years away from people who are poor and marginalized.

But in the kingdom of God, this should not be. God gave Old Testament Israel, which was to be a paradigm of the kingdom of God,¹⁸ numerous commands regarding its economic life in general and its care for poor people in particular. Central to God's vision for Israel was that the materially poor and non-poor would be in deep relationship with one another, rubbing shoulders every day as full participants in the same community:

If your brother becomes poor and cannot maintain himself with you,

you shall support him as though he were a stranger and a sojourner, and *he shall live with you*. Take no interest from him or profit, but fear your God, *that your brother may live beside you* (Lev. 25:35–36 ESV; emphasis added).

As Robby Holt and Michael Rhodes note in *Practicing the King's Economy*, an economically integrated community wasn't an option; it was a command:

That's why Isaiah pronounced, "Woe to you who add house to house and join field to field till no space is left and you live alone in the land" (Isa. 5:8). Apparently, Isaiah was confronting rich Israelites who used their social and economic power to push the poor off the land, acquiring more and more farms and fields and ignoring all God's laws ensuring every Israelite had a place to stand within the community....

But Yahweh heard the cries of the oppressed and brought judgment on those wealthy Israelites. The Lord hit them where it hurt—at the very place where they'd tried to build up their little economic kingdoms. The beautiful mansions they'd acquired were devastated and left empty. Their big, shiny new vineyards produced no fruit (see Isa. 5:9–10).¹⁹

* * *

THE KINGDOM OF GOD CONQUERS TRADITIONAL RELIGION²⁰

How does a savings and credit association lead Komi to repent of his sins and return to his wife? Actually, there are even more dramatic things going on than this.

During the meeting of the savings and credit association, the pastor whispers to us visitors, "See the marks on their faces and bodies? These people used to be idol worshipers, and those marks are from their rituals." Togolese Christians use the term "idol worshipers" to refer to practitioners of voodoo, the traditional religion that dominates Togo and that the slave trade brought from West Africa to Haiti and Brazil. The pastor continues, "The idol

worshippers used to be terrified of coming near this church, but due to the savings and credit association they are no longer afraid. In fact, our church has grown from 40 members to over 140.”

How can banking services accomplish all that? On their own they can’t, but the curriculum used in the association meetings intentionally integrates the gospel, the good news of God’s kingdom, with technical training on financial matters. In addition to calling people to faith and repentance, the lessons communicate that King Jesus has power over everything, including the spirits of voodoo, and that He is using His power to reconcile all things, restoring believers to right relationship with God, self, others, and the rest of creation.²¹

We ask the group members, “Who is Jesus?” This is the same question that Jesus asked Peter nearly two thousand years ago, for everything—all of life—hinges on the answer. About a dozen hands go up.

One lady says, “We used to sacrifice one chicken after another to try to satisfy the gods. But Jesus is the final sacrifice for our sins to the one true God. So, we don’t need to sacrifice anymore.”

Another lady jumps up and says, “Yes, that is true, but there is more. Jesus is the King and Lord of this church and of our entire village. He has power over the spirits and over everything.”

Komi nods his head and adds, “Yes, and the training in this group has taught me that King Jesus is helping me to live in right relationships again. And part of living in right relationship with others is to love my wife. That’s the reason I moved back home with her.”

When people flee voodoo and adultery, seeking to live all of life as an act of worship to Jesus Christ, then “the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt. 3:2 ESV).

This is the gospel that Jesus came to declare and demonstrate. And *this* is the gospel that the Holy Spirit is using to transform the lives of Wes, Lauren, Komi, and the former idol worshipers in Togo. And *this* is the gospel that the Holy Spirit can use to transform every aspect of our mind-affections-will-body-relational beings into lives centered on worship of the risen King.

* * *

The False Promise of the Prosperity Gospel

The “prosperity gospel,” also called the “health and wealth gospel,” is very popular in both the United States and in many places in the Majority World. At its core, the prosperity gospel teaches that God promises to bless Christians with increasing wealth and physical health in this life. Moreover, it often teaches that if the believer has more faith, puts more money in the offering plate, or increases their holiness, God’s blessings will increase in his or her life.

There are elements of truth in the prosperity gospel. Salvation does include the removal of both material poverty and physical suffering (see Rev. 21:1–4). In addition, increases in sanctification will often have positive impacts on a person’s wealth. For example, a person who is saved from alcoholism will likely experience an improvement in their economic situation (see Prov. 23:20–21).

At the same time, the Third Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization determined that the prosperity gospel “can be soberly described as a false gospel.”²² For the purposes of this book, there are two errors of note.

First, the prosperity gospel fails to understand that the kingdom of God is both now and not yet. Yes, Christ reigns over everything right now, so He has power to overcome both poverty and sickness right now. But the Scriptures also teach that it is not until Christ returns that He will completely reverse all the effects of the fall (see Rev. 21:1–4). It is not until the second coming that we will be fully whole.

Second, yes, all else equal, increases in sanctification will often lead to increases in material prosperity, but not all else is equal. As we saw in chapter 7, individual brokenness is only one of the causes of material poverty. So even if a person is perfect, which is not possible this side of eternity, broken systems and demonic forces could still plunge them into poverty. In fact, many of the poorest people in the world are deeply committed Christians who trust in God for every morsel of food they eat.

Of course, we are still left with a perplexing question: If Jesus reigns over everything right now, why doesn’t He solve all our problems immediately? Only God knows the answer to this question. But the gospel of the kingdom gives hope—real hope—in the midst of suffering and unanswered questions. We must look to Christ’s resurrection for guidance here: it is uniquely the very foundation of Christian hope, which includes our own bodily resurrection (1 Cor. 15:1–58). We really do live in this tension of the now

and not yet, living within the dawn of the kingdom of God, yet knowing that all of the benefits of Christ's victory are not yet fully ours to experience. We still live with pain, tears, and suffering; but praise God, we also now live with courage, faith, and hope. All of this is possible because we are united to the living Christ, which means His death and resurrection are determinative for us, as if we were crucified and risen with Him already (see Rom. 6:8; Col. 2:12; 3:1–4). But this a reality that will only one day reach fulfillment in the final resurrection. In the present, when our body cries out in pain, when the tears stream down our faces, when the stench of death causes us great lament and threatens to overwhelm us—during these times the church's words of hope and promise ring out with strength and clarity: Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again.²³

* * *

The gospel is the good news of the kingdom of God, a kingdom that is liberating all of creation, including people who are both rich and poor, from the kingdoms of this world. The kingdom of God embodies a different understanding—the only true understanding—of the nature of God, of human beings, and of the world. And as we have seen, these understandings are not merely theoretical, for they dramatically shape every aspect of individuals, communities, and nations. Table 8.1 summarizes these differences.

Spend some time reading through this table. Note in particular the stark contrast between Evangelical Gnosticism, which has shaped so much of the Western church, and historic Christianity. They exhibit completely different understandings of human flourishing, of how to achieve such flourishing, and of how to live in the here and now. Evangelical Gnosticism is simply the wrong story, deforming its adherents into something less than human beings are designed to be. This story doesn't work for us, and it doesn't work for the materially poor people we want to help. We all need to live out a better story, God's story.

And this presents us with a problem, for at the core of God's story is a miracle—the reconciliation of the four key relationships—and none of us has the ability to achieve that. Fortunately, as we shall see more in the next chapter, King Jesus is in the miracle business every day, using His power and authority to move people—both the materially poor and non-poor—toward

achieving the goal of God's story of change.

The lid on the SkyDome is fully open, and the kingdom of God really is at hand.

TABLE 8.1
Summary of Stories of Change

		TRADITIONAL RELIGION	WESTERN NATURALISM	EVANGELICAL GNOSTICISM	HISTORIC CHRISTIANITY
THE NATURE OF:	God	Good and evil personal spiritual beings and impersonal spiritual forces control the physical world	Does not exist	Distant and largely disconnected from affairs of this world	Sovereign, loving, personal, and relational Being who is the Creator, Sustainer, and Reconciler of all things
	Human Beings	Similar to rest of natural world; deep spiritual connection to family, tribe, and nature	Autonomous, purely material, highly intelligent animal	Autonomous individual with separable body and soul	Highly integrated mind-affections-will-body-relational being
STORY OF CHANGE:	What is the Goal?	Harmony and prosperity for one's family or tribe	Material consumption	Get the soul to heaven for eternity and enjoy material consumption in this life	Serve as priest-kings whose entire being lives in right relationship with God, self, others, and rest of creation
	How is the Goal Achieved?	Manipulate the spirits to gain power	Handouts or economic growth	Evangelism to save the soul plus handouts or economic growth for the body	Through the gift of the Son and Spirit, the triune God accomplishes our reconciliation to God, self, others, and the rest of creation
THE INDIVIDUAL'S RELATIONSHIP TO:	God	Spirits are to be feared, appeased, and manipulated	God does not exist	Primarily legal	Intimate, loving community and worship
	Self	At the mercy of spiritual beings and forces, so has little power to affect change in world; no different from trees or animals	Center of the universe with the capacity to control the world to increase one's consumption	Soul is so valuable that Christ was willing to die to save it from eternal punishment	A priest-king uniquely created to extend the reign and worship of God
	Others	A potential threat to the harmony and prosperity of one's family or tribe	Competitors for control of material world	Other individuals who are loved at arms-length	Intimate, loving community that is served sacrificially
	Rest of Creation	Live in harmony with it rather than try to develop it	Closed machine that can be used to increase personal consumption	Closed machine that can be used to increase personal consumption	Open to actions of both humans and spiritual beings; humans should protect and develop it for God's glory

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CHAPTER NINE

THE NEW CREATION DAWNS

Nothing is more central or basic than union and communion with Christ.... Union with Christ is really the central truth of the whole doctrine of salvation.¹

—JOHN MURRAY, THEOLOGIAN, 1955

If you want to judge how well a person understands Christianity, find out how much he makes of the thought of being God's child, and having God as his Father. If this is not the thought that prompts and controls his worship and prayers and his whole outlook on life, it means that he does not understand Christianity very well at all.²

—J.I. PACKER, THEOLOGIAN, 1973

Mimi walks out of the hospital, her head spinning from the doctor's devastating news. In desperation, her heart cries out, "Lord Jesus, I need help."³

That took some nerve. Mimi had washed her hands of Jesus long ago, so why would He listen to her now?

Suddenly, a clear and piercing thought emerges through the fog in her brain: "Fear not, I am Jehovah-Rapha your healer."

And life hasn't been the same ever since, which is a very good thing, because life hadn't been too great up to this point.

Mimi was raised in Birmingham, Alabama. At the age of three, she walked into her bedroom during a cocktail party and found her mother lying on the floor, unconscious from an overdose. While the party continued, Mimi's father and aunt carried Mom out a back door so the guests wouldn't see and placed her in a drug rehabilitation facility. Soon thereafter, Mimi's Dad and Mom divorced.

As Mimi grew older, her situation did not improve. From the time she was nine, Mimi was repeatedly sexually abused by a fourteen-year-old boy. The boy shared nude pictures of Mimi with his friends, and soon Mimi became the sexual toy for many of the boys in school. Feeling guilty and ashamed but

with nowhere to turn, Mimi became an alcoholic by age ten.

When Mimi turned twelve, she ran away with an eighteen-year-old boy to Atlanta. It wasn't long before he grew tired of her and sold her to several men. They kept Mimi high on LSD, passing her around to be sexually abused by one person after another. "In those days, I would take any drug people would hand me just to take the pain away," she recalls. "I was completely detached emotionally." After three days, Mimi's father rescued her with the help of a private investigator. But by then, she was well on the pathway to destruction.

She was severely traumatized, and the next three decades of her life included drug and alcohol addiction, sexual abuse and promiscuity, an abortion, mental illness, multiple incarcerations, and homosexuality. And now at age forty-three, she finds herself walking out of the hospital, having just been told that the female lover with whom she has been living for the past seven years has tested positive for colon cancer.

"Lord Jesus, I need help."

"Fear not, I am Jehovah-Rapha your healer."

Mimi gets in her car and drives to the hospital exit door to pick up her partner. As though she's suddenly been transformed into an Old Testament prophetess, Mimi declares, "God says, 'Fear not, I am Jehovah-Rapha your healer.'"

And then the hand of God reaches into the car and grabs hold of both women, dragging them from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light, as both women miraculously submit their lives to King Jesus. And life hasn't been the same ever since.

No, Mimi still isn't completely whole. Life has inflicted deep wounds on every aspect of her being, and her old nature isn't going down without a fight. Indeed, from the time of her conversion in 2001 to the present, Mimi has had spiritual ups and downs and continues to pursue healing from the trauma in her life. Yes, believers are new creatures in Christ, but transformation is a lifelong process that is incomplete until we receive new bodies at the resurrection (1 Cor. 15:35–54). The kingdom is "now," but it is also "not yet."

Nevertheless, the transformation is real. Mimi married a godly man seven years ago, and the two of them are active members of their church. In addition, Mimi is the founder and director of Love's Arm

(www.lovesarmoutreach.org), a ministry that engages in Christ-centered relationships with people in addiction-related prostitution and the sex industry, empowering them to move beyond shame and into a community of grace. Mimi estimates that over 95 percent of the people they are trying to help are victims of sexual abuse, which often leads to post-traumatic stress syndrome, alcohol and drug abuse, and the desperate need for money to support their addictions.

Love's Arm mobilizes fifty-seven volunteers, one-third of whom have been rescued from the sex industry themselves, to initiate and nurture relationships with people working in prostitution and strip clubs. To those willing to exit their former lifestyles, Love's Arm offers prayer, community, encouragement, and a biblically based life recovery program. So far, Love's Arm has helped seventy people experience recovery, healing, and reconciliation. But the ministry isn't stopping there. The next step is to buy a house to start Rahab's Rest, a twenty-four-month, holistic recovery home that will provide nurture and employment for women coming out of the sex industry. Mimi explains, "Rahab's Rest is the last piece we need to put into place, as it will really give us the ability to pour into people with deep relationship. Home is a safe place. Home is a place where love is. You don't have to be in fear when you are home. Once people know they are home, it is transformative."

Mimi is a restored priest-king who is seeking to restore others. No, she is not yet completely whole, because the kingdom is not yet fully consummated. But there is clearly also a "now" to the kingdom, for something powerful has been unleashed in Mimi that has launched her on a trajectory toward becoming whole.

ENTERING THE NEW CREATION

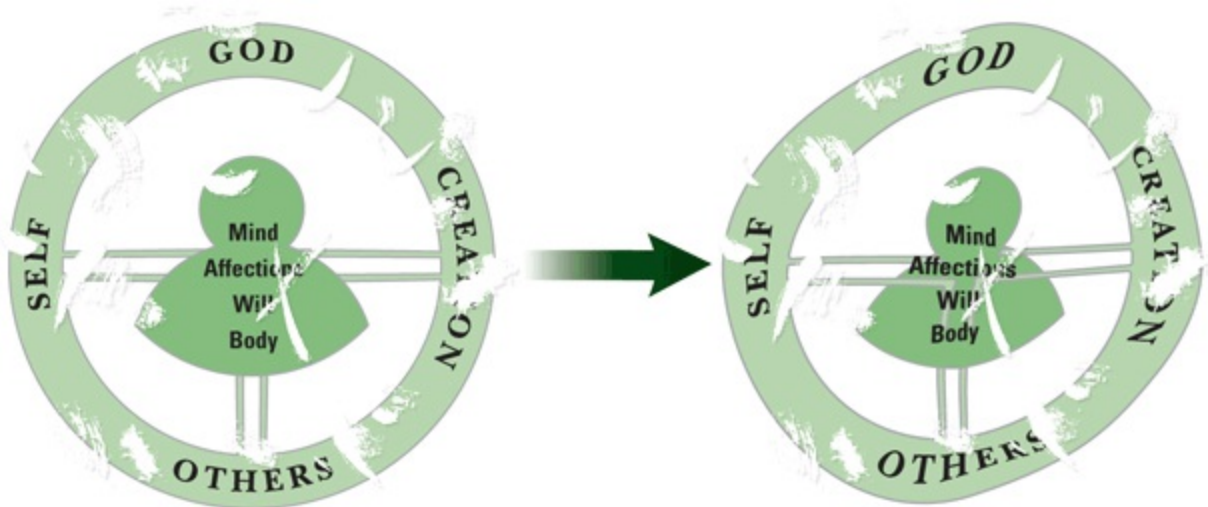
Mimi is right: transformation starts with going home. Whether or not we realize it, each one of us is longing for Eden, longing to return to the dwelling place of God. Our entire being longs to worship, work, eat, play, sing, dance, and rest in the comfort and security of our heavenly Father's home. It is for this that we are created, and it is for this that we are wired.

Unfortunately, we all have been banished from our home, and our

connection to God has been severed. Hence, we roll through life like a wheel without a spoke, which distorts our entire beings—our minds, affections, wills, bodies, and relationships (see [Figure 9.1](#)). Post-Eden, every human being is a deeply malformed creature.

FIGURE 9.1

The Impacts of the Fall on the Human Being



Adapted from Brian Fikkert and Russell Mask, *From Dependence to Dignity: How to Alleviate Poverty through Church-Centered Microfinance* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 91.

For some people, this malformation results in feelings and behaviors that sometimes lead to material poverty: alcohol and drug abuse, lack of self-control, loss of purpose, out-of-wedlock births, shame and inferiority, laziness—the list goes on. For other people, the malformation bubbles up in different ways: god-complexes, perfectionism, fear of failure, anxiety, pride, materialism, loneliness, workaholism—the list also goes on. Regardless, the foundation for being restored to wholeness—both for the materially poor and non-poor—is to be returned to the presence of God Almighty, for “to be human is to be in communion with God.”⁴

David expresses this foundation for human flourishing so beautifully:

One thing I ask from the LORD,
 this only do I seek:
 that I may *dwell in the house of the LORD*

all the days of my life,
to gaze on the beauty of the LORD
and to seek him in his temple.
For in the day of trouble
he will keep me safe in his *dwelling*;
he will hide me in the shelter of his sacred tent
and set me high upon a rock.
(Ps. 27:4–5; emphasis added)

David is not the only biblical writer to depict returning home to the dwelling place of God as the key to human flourishing.⁵ “Homelessness” in our day can come in various forms, from economic difficulties to social displacement, from spiritual restlessness to always wanting more. Everyone has a longing for *shalom*, for home.

Biblically, in its fullest expression, *being home* is understood as unhindered communion with God, neighbor, and even with the land.⁶ As we saw in chapter 6, the premier feature of the new heaven and earth, the ultimate fulfillment of all human longing, is that God will once again dwell among His people (Rev. 21:3). He will be with them, and they will then fully enjoy renewed harmony with one another, healing of the land, and the recovery of their true identities. And the foundation for all of this—and the very foundation of poverty alleviation—is restoration to deep communion with God Almighty.

Stop and consider the implications of the last sentence for the design of our poverty alleviation ministries. Yes, poor people need malaria nets, clean water, and decent jobs to become whole, and we should work with all our might to increase the availability of such blessings. But as important as they are, none of them is as foundational to sustainable poverty alleviation, and foundational to becoming fully whole, as being restored to the very dwelling place of God. From the communion with God in this dwelling place flows further healing, from mending torn relationships to returning to a more wholesome treatment of God’s good creation. We have seen this very movement in Mimi’s life.

But this presents quite a challenge! How can squatters in the slums of Manila, villagers in rural Uganda, public housing residents in Chicago—or any one of us, for that matter—be returned to the dwelling place of God? The

obstacles to such a return seem insurmountable.

Scripture says we are God's "enemies" (Rom. 5:10), and what we need is to be reconciled to Him. Elsewhere, the Bible uses the language of our being "dead" in our sin (Eph. 2:1). Somehow, we think we can live without God and His guidance. In the end, such rebellion and deadness of heart do not leave us feeling triumphant and safe, but vulnerable and anxious. It is as if we embraced the apparent "freedom" of being "homeless" only to discover that homelessness brings not freedom, but exposure and terror. And so we find ourselves asking where and to whom do we belong?

And even if we wanted to return to God, where on earth is His dwelling place anyway? Yes, there was a garden-temple in the original creation, and yes, there will be a city-temple in the new creation, but neither of those seem like much use to us right now. It appears that we just can't get home in this life. Indeed, it feels like we are destined to be untethered astronauts, tumbling helplessly through space for the rest of our lives, becoming increasingly malformed in the process. This is a terrifying existence. We are trapped in the darkness, dominated by hostile forces that are bigger than we are, and we have no sure footing.

Brought Back into the Temple

Fortunately, God overcomes all these obstacles. We can't get back to the temple, so God sends the temple to find us. One of Jesus' names is "Immanuel," which means "God with us" (Matt. 1:23). Jesus Christ is Himself *the* temple—the place where all the fullness of God *dwells* in bodily form (John 1:14; 2:18–22; Col. 2:9).

And Jesus brings us home, to Himself. He rescues us from the kingdom of darkness—from our own inner darkness and from the darkness around us—in ways that are so mind-bogglingly incredible that it will take a lifetime to understand—and then some. Consider the famous scene in the garden of Gethsemane. In anguish, Jesus kneels alone, with sweat pouring off His body like great drops of blood. Aware that He is about to be executed, Jesus cries out to His Father, praying for His disciples and even praying for future believers—for us!

My prayer is not for them (the disciples) alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may

be one, *Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us* so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—*I in them and you in me*—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.

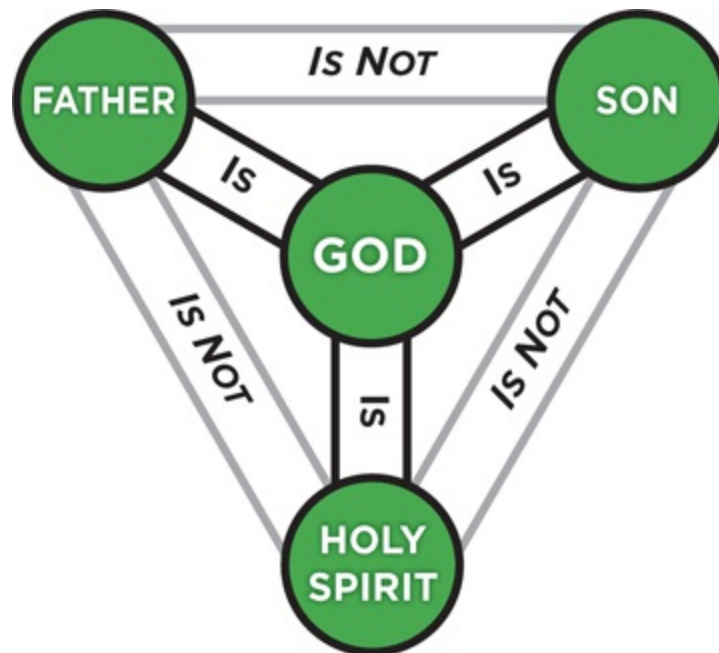
Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in *them and that I myself may be in them*. (John 17:20–26; emphasis added)

The ancient church spent great time and effort in contemplating John 17 in their attempts to faithfully worship God. The passage played a pivotal role in the development of the historic church creeds, which show that:

- the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Spirit is God;
- the Father is *not* the Son or Spirit, and the Son is *not* the Father or the Spirit, and the Spirit is *not* the Father or the Son;
- yet each person indwells the others (an activity called “*perichoresis*”).

FIGURE 9.2

The “Shield of the Trinity”



Note: The “Shield of the Trinity” dates from the twelfth century.

In this passage, Jesus prays that He will be *in us* and that we will be *in Him*, in some way that is analogous to how He and the Father are *in* each other. And He prays that we will be *with Him* where He is. This being “in” is more than merely a legal or social or devotional arrangement. The term for this relationship is “union with Christ,” and looking at it opens a rich vision of the new way of being we have in Christ.⁷ Indeed, throughout the New Testament, believers are described as being “in Christ” and Christ is described as being “in believers.”⁸

What does all this mean? It’s mysterious and impossible to fully understand, but it is also so marvelous.

Christ has bound us to Himself in an organic union, like a branch attached to a grape vine. We are not merely like Him. Rather, we are attached to Him and derive our being and nature from Him. Like a head attached to a body, Jesus is connected to us.

This is not like a union of people into an organization, or the connection of a governed area with its ruler. Those relations are external to the people involved, so they do not derive their beings, lives, or natures from those unions. Those connections may have a legal or financial or social nature, but they are all optional, and they all can change or be undone.

What method would you use to define who a person is? How would you go

about discovering and defining the essence of someone's being? Very likely, you would draw a border around the person and say that what's inside the border is part of the definition and what's outside isn't. This is our normal way of thinking.

The Bible makes some astonishing claims about who believers are that revolutionize our concept of identity. For example, your life is not bounded by the border that you just drew. Rather, your life is "hidden with Christ in God" (Col. 3:3). You derive your nature from outside yourself because you are a branch on the vine that is Christ (John 15:1–6). You are so tightly and fundamentally "in Him" (Eph. 1:3–14; Col. 2:6–15) that you have actually died and been done away with, but you have also been given a new being and life in Him (Col. 2:13; Eph. 2:5–6). Nothing about you has escaped that death and new life. Nothing about you is disconnected from the risen Jesus.

This doesn't mean you are no longer *you*, but rather that *in Christ* you are restored to the person you were created to be. Christ loves *you*, and your death and resurrection in Christ is His way of freeing you from the sin that entangles and distorts the real you. Everything about the real you has its origins in Him. And this reality blossoms in a "personal," "intimate," and "vital" relationship with Him.⁹

And because Jesus Christ Himself is *the* temple, and because we are *in Christ*, we are *in the temple of God*! In Christ, believers are more in the temple than we could ever imagine, for we are organically connected to it—to Him! "For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God" (Col. 3:3 ESV).

Now, imagine this: Jesus currently sits at the right hand of the Father in heaven, and because we are united to Him, we are there too:

But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus. (Eph. 2:4–6)

Because we are seated with Christ in the heavenly realms right now, Jesus' prayer in the garden of Gethsemane has been answered. Remember how Jesus prayed: "Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I

am.” We are there with Him, *right now*. And remember how Jesus prayed: “Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us.” This is happening, *right now*.

Being in Christ allows us to participate in the very inner life and love of the Trinity. This doesn’t mean we become little “gods,” but it does mean that He moves in us to drive away all our shame, fear, and sin that make us want to run away from God. We are never more ourselves and never more at home than when we rest in the presence and love of the triune God. We can enter into God’s presence with confidence, knowing that we are always welcome there (Heb. 4:15–16). We dwell in our Father’s house as His beloved children, having the very same status that Jesus has. Jesus is the Son of God by His divine nature, but we are adopted as sons and daughters of God, so we are now in the family too. This intimacy with God is the fundamental need of our hearts. We are no longer tumbling disconnected through space. We now belong to God, to His family: “See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are” (1 John 3:1). This is our secure standing as believers, our new reality in Christ.

God’s house is the safest place in all the universe. Because we are in Christ, we share in all His person, life, and work. His victories are now our victories. And because He has conquered sin, death, and the devil, all the forces and threats and fears that were arrayed against us—both internal and external—no longer have real power over us. Even the law, with its hostile demands, has been “nail[ed] to the cross” (Col. 2:14). Since He has died for us and we have died in Him (Col. 3:3; 2 Cor. 5:14–19), the law has no more hold on us. We are holy, blameless, beyond reproach (Col. 1:22), a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17). And, because He has put our enemies down, they are DOWN! All the rulers and authorities of the spiritual realms are powerless against us (Col. 2:15). In other words, Christ has defeated all five causes of poverty, so in Him, we have victory over all five causes as well.

Of course, we still struggle sometimes to remember that we really do belong to God, that we are secure in His love and grace, and that we need not fear the world, death, or the devil. We live in the tension between the now and the not yet, learning more and more about it, but yet still living inconsistently in our lives. The apostle John captured this well when he added, “Beloved we are God’s children *now*, and what we will be has *not yet* appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because

we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2 ESV).

Whether we realize it, we are safely home, dwelling in God’s presence—in His temple. This is true both right now and forevermore. He is our home, and we are in Him.

Transformed into New Creatures

As Mimi notes, going home is transformational. Given that human beings are wired to dwell with God, being returned to His home provides the foundation for a person to become whole. In terms of our wheel analogy, the restoration of the spoke with God realigns every aspect of the mind-affections-will-body-relational creature, making people capable of becoming whole again (see [Figure 9.3](#)).

FIGURE 9.3

The Restoration of the Human Being



Adapted from Brian Fikkert and Russell Mask, *From Dependence to Dignity: How to Alleviate Poverty through Church-Centered Microfinance* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 91.

Returning to God’s presence is so transformative that the Bible describes believers this way:

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. (2 Cor. 5:17 ESV)

United to Christ and filled with the Holy Spirit, we have become a different kind of creature than what we were before. This change is so much more than just a change in our legal status. It is a change in the very nature of our being. Theologian Todd Billings describes the transformative process of going home beautifully:

Since we were not created to be autonomous, self-made people but were created to be in communion with God, when the Spirit leads us back into communion with God in Christ, we do not lose our true selves. We regain them.

Our new self in Christ, which comes forth from the future, is our true self.¹⁰

Billings emphasizes the key to our metamorphosis is that we are *in Christ*, so that what happens to Him, happens to us. And look what has happened to Christ:

Christ's resurrection ... placed him into the beginning of the new creation. The resurrected Christ is not merely spiritually the inauguration of the new cosmos, but he is literally its beginning, since he was resurrected with a physical, newly created body. Recall that when Matthew 27:50 narrates Jesus' death, Matthew immediately adds in verses 51–53, “the earth shook; and the rocks split, and the tombs were opened; and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they entered the holy city and appeared to many.” These strange phenomena are recorded by Matthew to signal his readers that Christ's death was the beginning of the end of the old creation and the inauguration of a new creation.¹¹

Jesus is the firstfruits of the new creation (1 Cor. 15:20). And because we are in Christ, we have been spiritually resurrected with Him, making us firstfruits of the new creation as well (Rom. 8:23; James 1:18). Believers are part of the new heavens and earth—right now!

No, the kingdom is not yet fully consummated. Our world and our lives are still very messy and complicated. We wait for the final destruction of the

indwelling sin with which we still wrestle, for Satan to be completely bound, for the resurrection of our bodies, and for the rest of the creation to be liberated. But those caveats notwithstanding, from the moment we become a Christian, we are “a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” And unlike the malformed, old creature, this new creature is actually capable of living rightly in the four key relationships (2 Peter 1:3–11).

Given that individual brokenness is one of the causes of poverty, it is impossible to overstate the significance of the last sentence for our poverty alleviation ministries. People struggling with low self-esteem, chemical addictions, dysfunctional families, or poor work habits need to be liberated from bondage and restored to all that it means to be human, restored to what they were created to be. And that is exactly what salvation does for us. As Billings states, “Our new self in Christ, which comes forth from the future, is our true self.”¹² This new self is not some stranger. It is *you* restored! It is who you really are. It is you, *whole*.

Of course, this new creature is not yet experiencing complete wholeness. Our sinful habits and tendencies do not disappear immediately, and we still await our resurrection bodies. Additionally, individual brokenness is only one of the possible causes of both relational and material poverty. To be sure, there are many very godly Christians all over the world, new creatures in Christ, who lack sufficient food because of factors that are completely external to them, including corrupt governments, dysfunctional economies, and natural disasters. Not until God’s kingdom comes in its fullness will the new creature in Christ be unshackled from everything currently holding it down: an old nature that is full of sin, a decaying body, broken systems, and demonic forces.

That incompleteness notwithstanding, the new creature in Christ has a new—but also imperfect—capacity to properly love God, self, others, and the rest of creation. This is a capacity that human beings’ old natures simply do not have. Union with Christ is therefore essential for real poverty alleviation—for helping others to become truly whole. The Christian life is about walking in the power of the Spirit to cultivate this new capacity, thereby growing into our new creatureliness, growing into who we really are, growing toward becoming whole:

His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life

through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.

For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But whoever does not have them is nearsighted and blind, forgetting that they have been cleansed from their past sins. (2 Peter 1:3–9)

Achieving the goal of God's story of change—enjoying loving relationships with God, self, others, and the rest of creation—requires each party in these relationships to relate properly toward the other. We need to act rightly toward God, self, others, and the rest of creation, and they need to act rightly toward us. The amazing thing is that, according to 2 Peter 1:3–9, believers have “everything we need” to act properly in each of these relationships, because our new natures have the capacity to truly love (Eph. 1:3). As Peter reminds us, we are not virtuous in order to receive God's promises; rather, having received God's promises, we seek to grow in the godly virtue that God has given us. Of course, this side of glory we often fail to act according to our new natures; and even when we do love properly, that love isn't always reciprocated. And so we groan, along with the rest of creation, longing for all the remaining obstacles to flourishing to be fully removed (Rom. 8:22–25).

Let us briefly examine how becoming a new creature in Christ provides the foundation for all of us to live rightly in each of the four key relationships, paying particular attention to how this provides materially poor believers with a capacity they would not have otherwise.

Relationship with God

Many poor people suffer from a profound sense of guilt, shame, and failure.

They often feel unloved by other people, making it difficult for them to believe they are loved by a holy God. It can be hard for them to imagine being welcomed into God's presence when they don't feel welcome at the grocery store.

Unfortunately, religious teachings often exacerbate these feelings of alienation. For example, traditional religion asserts that the ultimate divine being is distant and unapproachable, thereby abandoning poor people to the mercy of selfish and volatile spirits. And works-based religions like Hinduism aren't any better, teaching poor people that the gods have cursed them. Clearly, Western Naturalism provides no comfort, for it doubts the existence of God altogether. And even Evangelical Gnosticism is problematic, as it confines God to the spiritual realm, leaving people to fend for themselves Monday through Saturday.

Given that human beings are designed for a relationship with God, is it any wonder that people, including materially poor people, sometimes turn to alcohol, drugs, and sex to deaden the pain of such alienation?

Into this dynamic enters the good news that believers, by virtue of being united to Christ, are living in the stability and security of their Father's house—dwelling inside the temple—all the time and no matter what. Moreover, because we are God's beloved children, He actually delights to have us there. In fact, the place just isn't the same without us. This message of unconditional acceptance provides tremendous comfort for people who often feel unloved and inadequate.

To understand our union with Christ, we need to know that it is something secure and stable, rather than constantly in flux. We can be tempted to imagine that our individual actions are what hold together our relationship with God. On days when we pray for extended times or read our Bible, do we tend to think God is more pleased with us? What about after we have clearly sinned? During times of sin or prayerlessness, we might begin to imagine He no longer wants to identify us as His children—we imagine Him as ashamed of us. And subtly, we make *our* actions rather than *His* grace the basis of our relationship with Him. But union with Christ does not ebb and flow; it does not increase and decrease. We are secure in God's love; by the fellowship of the Spirit we are united to the grace of the Son as we rest in the Father's love (2 Cor. 13:14). This is fundamental to rightly understanding God's grace.¹³

Our *experience* of communion with God may fluctuate, but the security of

our union with Christ is fixed through the good and bad days, the highs and lows.¹⁴ Put differently, the promise of our union always reminds us that grace—not our obedience—is the foundation of our acceptance by God.

Let us remember that we are God's children, those who have been adopted into His family. What would we think of a dad who adopts a needy child, but after the child acts disobediently, He disowns the kid and returns him to the orphanage? We would likely think ill of such an adoptive parent abandoning his child. So why would we think less of God? Do we really imagine the Father adopts us and then just waits for us to be disobedient, and once we cross the line He sends us back to the orphanage? No, we are no longer orphans (John 14:18). United to Christ, we are secure in the love and life of God. And rightly understood, this security breeds activity, not passivity. We actively want to be in the Father's presence, for God is our safe haven. We actively seek to love others as we have been loved, for in this way we joyfully participate in the movement of God's good gifts. But our actions are always a response to divine grace, never the basis for it.

As Mimi explains, the membership that believers have in God's household—no matter what!—is a powerful force for helping women to be rescued from the sex industry:

Yes, our sin separated us from God, but when the veil in the temple was torn, Jesus brought us back in relationship with God. So many people think that their sin separates them from God and that God can no longer love them. But that's not the gospel. There is nothing you could do that would make God love you any more or any less than He does right now. This is the gospel. Our behavior does not determine God's love for us. People just can't believe this.

It wasn't about my holding onto Him. He was holding onto me. He keeps us for Himself. It wasn't just a matter of being forgiven; it was a matter of needing to be healed. Only God could have brought me through all of this. As I went through the healing process, all my emotions were screaming out in uncontrollable ways. I just had so much emotion from the trauma. All I could do was cling to His promise, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." This was the only solace that I had. This is what got me through all of that.

Of course, dwelling in God's house is not the same as communing with Him.¹⁵ Just as it is possible for teenagers to live at home without communicating with their parents, so too it is possible for believers to dwell in God's presence without cultivating vibrant fellowship with Him. God desires to relate intimately with us, so He has promised to encounter us—including the materially poor members of His family—deeply and personally as we pray, read the Word, and participate in the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. As we engage in these practices, we mysteriously—but really—enjoy intimacy with God Almighty and are increasingly empowered to live into our new natures, to become whole:

And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory,
are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory,
which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit. (2 Cor. 3:18)

Mimi is right. Going home is transformational, especially when the one seated across the dinner table is the Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer of the entire cosmos.

Relationship with Others

As we saw in chapter 6, God saw that Adam, even in a sinless world, needed other people to be fully whole, saying, "It is not good for the man to be alone" (Gen. 2:18). Unfortunately, many poor people experience social isolation and loneliness. In addition to being painful in their own right, these negative feelings directly contribute to material poverty. As depicted by the image of the wheel, because human beings are mind-affections-will-body-relational creatures, our relationship with others impacts our entire personhood. In fact, researchers are finding that having positive relationships with others dramatically improves physical and mental health, both of which are crucial for being able to earn a living.¹⁶ The good news is that being united to Christ provides a basis for deep communion with others in truly miraculous ways.

When Jesus prays in Gethsemane, He has a community, not just a bunch of individuals, on His mind: "That *all of them may be one*, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May *they* also be in us (John 17:21)." Jesus is praying that believers will be connected to one another and to God Himself,

not just socially, but in a vital connection at the root of their beings. Miraculously, the church, the “body of Christ,” is a community in which each member is connected to all others just as different organs in the body are connected to and serve one another (1 Cor. 12:12–31). Further, this connection extends to all Christians everywhere, past and present (Heb. 12:1–2), and to Jesus Christ Himself (1 Cor. 12:12–31). This implies that in some mysterious way, the church of all ages is currently seated with Christ in the heavenly realms, together enjoying intimate fellowship with the triune God. This reality implies that believers have the capacity to enjoy a deeper relationship both with God and with others than we could ever imagine, right now (1 John 1:3).

But things don’t always feel this way. Just as biological siblings often fail to get along, brothers and sisters in Christ don’t always experience life-giving relationships with one another.¹⁷ In a fallen world, deep community requires hard work, commitment, and dedication, and the church often falls short on all counts. But there is hope, real hope. Because believers are organically united to Christ and to one another, and because the Spirit dwells within us, there are powerful, supernatural forces at work that provide a more solid foundation for deep community—for giving and receiving love—than the world has ever seen.

As Mimi explains, loving community with both God and others provides the foundation for ongoing transformation:

My vision for Love’s Arm is that we be a conduit for the redemptive power of grace. It’s all about carrying the gospel and discipleship in a life-giving way. We don’t pontificate or proselytize to bring people into the kingdom. Rather, we try to live out the gospel in such a way that people are drawn to the unconditional love of Christ. And then we speak the reality of who they are in Christ to them. When people come to the reality that they are loved, this becomes the key to transformation. It’s transforming grace that people need to encounter.

Relationship with Self

Materially poor people often struggle with a marred identity, a deep sense of inferiority that could stem from any number of sources: racial, ethnic, or

gender discrimination; physical, sexual, or emotional abuse; one's personal psychological make-up; false religious teachings; lack of education; personal failure; or even from poverty itself. Regardless, the message that countless poor people have absorbed is that they are less than human and that they are incapable of making positive changes in their lives. In addition to any external forces that are hindering them, this diminished sense of ability can be paralyzing, preventing them from trying to move ahead. Hence, there is arguably nothing more powerful than for materially poor people to discover that as a new creature in Christ, they are a restored image bearer of God Almighty, endowed with inherent dignity, worth, and significance.

A Ugandan trainer and I were teaching biblical principles of small business management to very poor women in a crowded slum in Kampala, Uganda. These women had fled the conflict in northern Uganda and were now living in squalor. The first lesson we taught included the message that all human beings are created in the image of God, so we have the ability to plan, which is essential to starting a business. The lesson asked the women to use the week to start planning the type of business they would like to begin.

When we came back the second week, we asked the women what they had done as a result of the first lesson. One woman's hand immediately shot up, and she stated, "I went home and cleaned my house." *Oh my*, I thought. *She was supposed to start planning her business. I guess she didn't understand anything from the first lesson.* When we asked her why she cleaned her house, she replied, "In last week's lesson, I learned that I am an image bearer of God. I figured that my husband and kids must be image bearers too. And as image bearers, we shouldn't live in filth. So I went home and cleaned our house."

Imagine what could happen to the whole slum if all the residents grasped this message!

Interlude: The Church as the Restored Temple

Before moving on to discussing what becoming a new creation in Christ means for our *relationship with the rest of creation*, we need to unpack another amazing truth first. Because Christ is the new temple, the church, His body, becomes the new temple as well:

Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that

God's Spirit dwells in your midst? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person; for God's temple is sacred, and you *together* are that temple. (1 Cor. 3:16–17; emphasis added)

Peter also picks up this theme:

As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him—you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. (1 Peter 2:4–5)

As the temple, the church is the distinctive dwelling place of God for which we all have been longing since being cast out of Eden. This temple—which will have a radical fulfillment in future glory—is the place where God dwells with His people in a special way, transported back from the future into the here and now. Our corporate existence of love, forgiveness, grace and laughter is an anticipation, a real taste of the future, breaking into the present. We are definitely not in Flatland anymore!

Stop and think about that last paragraph for a moment. Is that how you feel about going to church every week?

Probably not. Many of us attend church the same way we go out to eat. We casually saunter in with our friends, plop ourselves down, and expect the staff to serve us. If it's a good experience, we leave a generous tip—also known as putting money in the offering plate. But sometimes we are disappointed, so we try out other restaurants. And when we get tired of them, we start to wonder if we should just cook at home.

Many of us often feel like we get more out of reading the Bible on our own or by praying while, say, hiking through the forest. Why is it so important for us to gather as the church to do these things? To understand the importance, think about this:

Why do so many of us Americans travel long distances to be with our relatives on Thanksgiving Day? Surely, we could just eat turkey and stuffing on our own. And we would still be part of the family even if we didn't get together, wouldn't we? So why do millions of us endure delayed plane flights, sit in traffic jams on highways, and spend large amounts of money to

eat with our relatives? Clearly, there is something uniquely special about actually gathering together around the table as a family. As we eat the food, as we recall our shared history, and as we discuss our present lives, something happens that wouldn't happen otherwise. Surrounded by love, we experience the joy of being who we really are, both individually and collectively. And somehow this affirmation of our identity empowers us to go back to our daily routines, more confident and more determined to live our lives with meaning, purpose, and significance. Being together prepares us for the time when we are not together.

* * *

The Millennial Generation and the Church

The millennial generation is leaving the American church in droves. Surprisingly, when asked about their view of the church, only 8 percent of millennials say the problem is that the church is “out of date.”¹⁸ Rather, many millennials say they are tired of churches that are all-too-up-to-date by being too much like the surrounding culture—using slick marketing, large-scale programs, wealth, and power to advance what are often political rather than Christ-centered agendas.¹⁹ Russell Moore, President of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, captures the sentiments of many millennials:

The Bible Belt is collapsing. The world of nominal, cultural Christianity that took the American dream and added Jesus to it in order to say, “you can have everything you ever wanted and Heaven too” is soon to be gone. Good riddance.²⁰

In the place of a Christianity that is captive to the surrounding culture, Moore believes millennials are longing for a deeper and more comprehensive version of the Christian life:

Most of the Millennial-age gospel Christians I know are far more theologically rooted than their parents' generation. Most of them are far more committed to reaching outside of Christian subcultures

to share the gospel with people not like them...

I find the Millennial generation's grasp of gospel Christianity far better than what we've seen in a long time. They tend to be better at articulating a Christian vision of life, because they've had to do so all their lives, never able to count on a pseudo-Christian culture to do pre-evangelism for them.²¹

Similarly, David Kinnaman, who has spent much of his life studying millennials in his role as president of Barna Group, argues that the decline of cultural Christianity in America is forging a new generation that is learning to be distinctly counter-cultural in all aspects of their lives:

[Millennials] who are staying connected in the churches and connected into their faith are taking matters of faith even more seriously than do previous generations of Christians.... [They have] a more holistic understanding that theology matters, that Scripture matters, that worship should be taken seriously, that being a Christian is a whole-life commitment, rather than something you just do on Sundays.²²

Millennials don't have it all right, but they've rightly discerned that Evangelical Gnosticism is a fraud: we can't worship God on Sunday morning and then pursue the American Dream the rest of the week. So, millennials are looking for authentic community that fosters an intimate encounter with Jesus Christ, that prepares them to live out God's story throughout the week, and that demonstrates genuine concern for the poor and marginalized.²³ Millennials are seeking nothing other than *real church*.

* * *

Theologian John Jefferson Davis expresses similar ideas in more sophisticated terms:

The significance and weight of a human activity depends greatly on the context in which the activity takes place. A higher and weightier view of worship flows from a higher and weightier view of the church.... A support staff entering data on laptop computers

in the local high school and a support staff working on laptops on Air Force One with the president of the United States on board are engaged in similar activities, but the latter staff has greater weight and authority. The White House is not just a building on Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, D.C, but that place where the president is personally present—a center of command and control and authority. The “real church” is not just a collection of people on Sunday morning—but an assembly where the risen Christ is present.

Three of the fundamental images of the church in the New Testament—the family of God the Father, the body of Christ the Son, and the temple of the Holy Spirit—call attention to the presence of the living, Triune God as its defining and characteristic and mark....

The personal presence of God in the ecclesia (church), by virtue of his covenant promises, his Word, sacraments, and Spirit, invests the ecclesia with ... weight that does not obtain with merely human organizations and assemblies.²⁴

Why should we go to church? Because when the church assembles under its God-ordained authority for the preaching of the Word, for prayer, and for the administration of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, God has promised to be personally present by His Spirit.²⁵ Although these activities have no magical power in and of themselves, God has ordained these activities as “the ordinary means of grace”—the normal means that He uses to call people into saving faith and to nurture them in that faith, thereby enabling them to serve Him more faithfully throughout the week.²⁶

Worship and Poverty Alleviation

Human beings are transformed into the image of whatever god they worship, so at the core of effective poverty alleviation is worship of the one true God.

With eyes to see and ears to hear, we can, by the Spirit, recognize how the fullness of the kingdom of God is breaking in from the future, experienced in the here and now in villages in Nigeria, in slums in Rio de Janeiro, in the hills

of Appalachia, in inner-city Chicago, and in your neighborhood. And this truth provides the foundation for being restored to a proper *relationship with creation*.

* * *

I Love Jesus but Not the Church

A growing number of Americans say they have made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is important in their life, but they do not attend church. Surprisingly, the “I love Jesus but not the church” crowd—80 percent of whom are between the ages of thirty-three and seventy—largely holds to orthodox Christian beliefs. But they have lost faith in the institutional church, believe they can find God elsewhere, or that the church is not personally relevant to them.²⁷

To be sure, the church is far from perfect. But simply giving up on the church is never a valid response. A believer can choose whether to join the local soccer league, the Rotary club, or the parent-teacher association, but the believer doesn’t get to choose whether to be in the church (see Heb. 10:25). One simply cannot say to Jesus, “I love you, but I hate your body, your bride, and your fullness” (see Eph. 1:18–23; 4:7–13; 5:32). There is simply no decision to make here.

But then how do we deal with the imperfections of it all? What do we do when the sermon is regularly less than stellar, when the church seems detached, and when we can see hypocrisy in the person next to us in the pew? We remind ourselves that the effectiveness of the whole enterprise doesn’t depend on human skill or effort. And we put our faith, not in our personal judgment, but in the One who has promised to be present in her midst, even when it doesn’t feel like it:

The experience of being transformed may or may not involve at a particular time a sensible awareness of the divine presence or transformation. But just as a patient receiving radiation therapy may not feel, see or taste anything during the radiation treatment, yet later experience a cure from cancer, so it is that the Spirit, influencing our spirit through the biblical text, can do a real work in

the soul beyond our conscious awareness.²⁸

God dwells in the local church, and being in His presence is transformative, even when it doesn't always feel like it.

* * *

Relationship with the Rest of Creation

Recall from chapter 6 that before the triune God created the world, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit existed in loving communion. God is love: the Father, Son, and Spirit dwell in eternal love. Out of His loving communion, the triune God then creates.

And this is the same order that God establishes for human beings as His image bearers. God's life and love are meant to be experienced and responded to, rather than something we must work hard to secure. Hence, Adam and Eve enjoyed intimate communion with God, self, and each other in the garden-temple before God gave them the command to be fruitful, to multiply, and to subdue the earth (Gen. 1:28). Communal worship in the garden-temple was to prepare Adam and Eve to be priest-kings who would extend the reign and worship of God to the ends of the earth. This dynamic is consistent with what we saw in chapter 2: human beings take on the image of whatever we are worshiping. Thus, to effectively fulfill our task as image bearers of the triune God, it is important that our work be rooted in the worship of Him. As Beale and Kim explain,

Eden is a place of God's presence, and the place of God's presence is a place of worship. The expansion of Eden, therefore, is an expansion of worship. Worship fuels mission in Eden—bearers of the image of God reflect his presence in worship and are propelled forward in their mission to fill the earth with reflections of God's glory (Gen. 1:28). Worship is in fact the goal of mission in Eden, filling the earth by multiplying image bearers in the temple of God's presence who would worship and reflect God's glory to the ends of the earth. John Piper rightly reminds us that “worship is the fuel and the goal of missions.”²⁹

And now it all gets really wild. Recall from chapter 6 that when the temple is restored in the New Jerusalem, those who are in Christ will be restored as priest-kings as well:

You have made them to be a *kingdom and priests* to serve our God, and they will *reign* on the earth.
(Rev. 5:10; emphasis added)

We might expect from this that, since the church is our experience of the restored city-temple brought forth from the future into the present, new creatures in Christ might be restored as priest-kings in the present as well. And this is indeed the case:

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. (1 Peter 2:9)

As restored priest-kings, believers are called and re-created to live out the reality of the new creation by extending the reign and worship of God throughout the earth, *right now*. And communal worship in the church, the dwelling place of God, is to prepare God's family for this task. Sunday morning isn't the only day in which we worship; it's the beginning of an entire week of worship.³⁰

All of this informs our poverty alleviation initiatives. There is no better strategy for alleviating material poverty than empowering people to engage in sustaining work. While numerous factors can undermine such work—including broken economic systems and demonic forces—individual brokenness is often an issue, as some people are unwilling or unable to work effectively. The good news is that by being united to Christ and filled with His Spirit, materially poor believers are restored priest-kings who are re-created to engage in work that is remarkably dignifying, meaningful, and purposeful. And preparing for such work begins in communal worship in the church, the dwelling place of God.

The Goal of God's Story of Change

People experience human flourishing when they serve as priest-kings, using their mind, affections, will, and body to enjoy loving relationships with God, self, others, and the rest of creation.

It's tough to imagine a more difficult past than Mimi's. Yet by the power of Christ's death and resurrection, she is a restored priest-king through whom the new creation is bursting forth into the lives of women working at strip clubs in Chattanooga, Tennessee. And as it does, more women are being rescued from the sex trade and are serving as restored priest-kings, too. Indeed, that is what excites Mimi the most:

I'm most encouraged when I see one of the volunteers get it, and they are like, "Man, there is nothing better than this on earth. I've found myself in this." When they see the power of the gospel transform people they say, "This is the most awesome thing on earth."

Yes, the dawning of the new creation is the most awesome thing on earth. And in it we do find ourselves. In it—whether materially rich or poor—we do become whole.



CHAPTER TEN

LIVING INTO THE STORY

Let us eat, drink, and be merry, for yesterday we were dead.¹

—RUSSELL MOORE, THEOLOGIAN, 2011

Christians are Easter people living from and toward that Easter experience of a new creation.²

—HANS SCHWARZ, THEOLOGIAN, 2013

Fifty gaunt-looking people cram into a small church building located in a slum in Western Kenya. This is the weekly meeting of Crossroad Church's integrated health and microfinance ministry. Like the savings and credit association in Togo described in chapter 8, the group members come together each week to save and borrow money to start microenterprises, to pay school fees for their kids, and to cover the costs of medical care. Recognizing the multifaceted nature of both poverty and the kingdom of God, Crossroads also provides a range of health services to the members of the savings and credit association.

One of the group members stands and says, "Hello, my name is Eunice. Jesus is my Savior. When I get my loan I buy beads and make jewelry. I use the profits to feed my five children and to pay my rent." After proudly displaying the necklaces she makes, Eunice sits down and then another lady stands up to speak.

"Hello, my name is Margaret. I use my loan money to crochet purses out of plastic bags." With a twinkle in her eye, Margaret then proceeds to demonstrate how she cuts plastic grocery bags into narrow strips that she uses like yarn for crocheting. Her nimble fingers quickly work the plastic and the needles, as she transforms bags she gleaned from a garbage dump into attractive purses to sell. Her face beaming with pride, Margaret then takes her seat as Ephraim stands up to speak.

"When I got my loan it was 140 Kenyan Shillings (about \$2). I am an artist, and I use the fibers of the banana trees to make art. With my loan I

bought glue, and I made pictures which I sold for 3,000 Kenyan Shillings (about \$43). I have two children, but my wife passed away. My profits help me to pay for my children's school expenses. I believe we should encourage one another in this program to share our talents so that our talents don't die with us."

Ephraim's concern about his death is well-founded, for each of these fifty group members has HIV/AIDS, and ten other members have already died. Despised by their relatives and ostracized by society as a whole, these modern-day lepers have migrated to this slum from various parts of the country and from different, often hostile, tribes. Hope is in short supply. As a community health worker explains, "HIV/AIDS carriers in Kenya typically struggle with depression and feelings of worthlessness. They often feel like God hates them because other people were engaged in the same behaviors they were, but the others did not get HIV/AIDS. They tend not to be productive people, sitting around and moping a lot."³

Thus, the fact that these HIV/AIDS sufferers are operating businesses and are so full of joy is amazing to behold. But their productivity does not stop there, as each of them reports having started one to two additional savings and credit associations on their own, thereby spreading life-saving financial services, biblical teaching, fellowship, songs of praise, and prayer to roughly 1,000 other people!⁴

Did you catch that? These fifty, modern-day lepers are ministering holistically to approximately 1,000 other people.⁵

The Goal of God's Story of Change

People experience human flourishing when they serve as priest-kings, using their mind, affections, will, and body to enjoy loving relationships with God, self, others, and the rest of creation.

God is working out His reconciling story in the here and now of this broken world. And He has chosen "the foolish things, the despised things, and the things that are not"—like fifty HIV/AIDS sufferers in a slum in Kenya—to "nullify the things that are" (1 Cor. 1:26–29). The kingdom of God is upside down, so at the very bottom—which is mysteriously at the very top—are restored priest-kings, new creatures in Christ who are spreading the

reign and worship of God in the most unlikely of places.

God doesn't need us, but He has given us the incredible privilege of playing a role in His grand drama. The Bible doesn't provide us with a detailed script that reveals every line in this story, but it does outline the overall direction of God's unfolding plan. And this prompt is sufficient to enable fifty modern-day lepers to improvise His story in the here and now in very powerful ways.

Of course, successfully improvising God's story requires us to know what scenes we are supposed to be acting out, what scenes have happened before, and what scenes we need to anticipate. Unfortunately, many of us haven't followed the plotline of God's story all that well, so we are fumbling about on stage, having no confidence and little sense of direction. This misunderstanding affects our lives and our approaches to poverty alleviation in profound ways.

WHAT TIME IS IT?

The top portion of [Figure 10.1](#) illustrates the timeline of Evangelical Gnosticism, which many of us have internalized, either consciously or unconsciously. This timeline puts events, the "scenes" of the play, into a sequence that looks something like this:

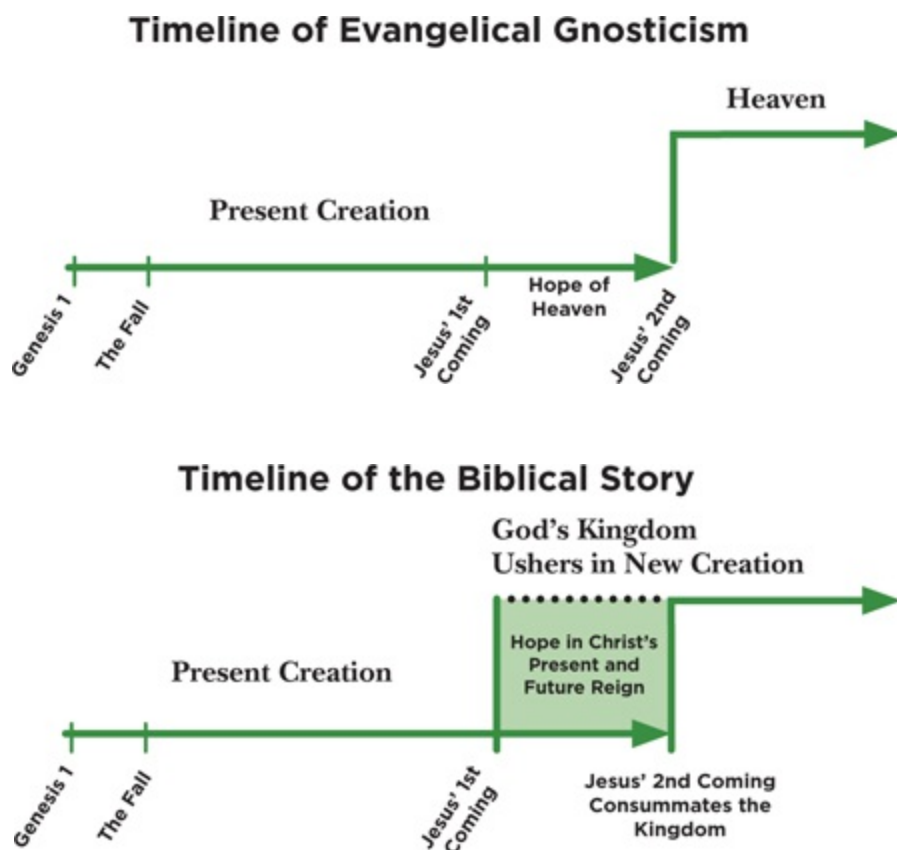
1. God creates a perfect world.
2. Human beings sin.
3. Christ dies on the cross to save people from their sins.
4. We accept Christ as our savior so that our souls can go to heaven when we die.
5. We enjoy our lives right now, pursuing the American Dream within the bounds of the nation's laws and personal piety (avoiding extra-marital sex, drunkenness, etc.).
6. We die and our souls go to heaven.
7. Christ comes again, bringing an end to this world.
8. We live with God in heaven forever.

In this script, we seem to be in period 5 right now. Our future in heaven is secure, but there isn't any clear connection between this world and the next,

so we just enjoy the present life the best we can. Many of us get married, have children, pursue jobs that pay well, and attend church. These are all good things, of course, and we do enjoy them, but they don't seem to have any eternal significance. In fact, in many ways it feels like our entire lives are spent in the waiting room at the doctor's office. We enjoy reading *People* magazine while we sit there, but we know that it's just a fun thing to do while we wait for what really matters to begin.

FIGURE 10.1

Different Understandings of the Timeline of God's Story



Although we still live on the old earth below the old heavens, God has started a new creation in the risen Christ, and that new creation is us! As depicted in the bottom half of [Figure 10.1](#), the real timeline of God's story looks like this:

1. God creates a good world.
2. Human beings sin.

3. Christ dies on the cross to establish His kingdom, liberating the entire cosmos from the effects of sin.
4. In Christ's resurrection, we are a new creation. The kingdom has come, but it is not yet fully realized.
5. Those who trust in Christ are new creatures: a forgiven people who are adopted into God's family—the church—to serve as the royal priesthood and holy nation.
6. God's family lives as restored priest-kings, seeking to extend the reign and worship of God in the present even as we long for His second coming, the moment at which His kingdom will be fully realized.
7. We die and enter into God's presence, but without our bodies.
8. Christ comes again, fully consummating the new creation. God's family receives resurrection bodies and becomes fully whole.
9. God's family lives with God in the new creation forever, continuing to serve as priest-kings who extend the reign and worship of God.

Christ is the center of history because His life, death, and resurrection change *everything*. His story becomes our story. He came, not simply that our sins might be forgiven, but to liberate us into His own life (remember union with Christ!) to live and love well *now*! Christ the King has come, and we celebrate the inauguration of His kingdom by living as though He is King in the present age, because He really is.

Yet we recognize that while He is the King and His kingdom has come, we are still in a war-torn world, a conflict zone. Because Christ's own life flows through us, the world responds to us the way it responded to Him. In the face of opposition, His victory over the world and death gives us strength to follow Him even to death, knowing that it has no hold on us. So we follow Him and participate in His kingdom now, not by shouting angry words, not by trying to take over governments, and not by becoming the most influential figures in culture. No, this kingdom looks like its King, the one who welcomed the child, healed the leper, and proclaimed good news to the poor. This kingdom looks like a King who was willing to suffer and die for others, even those who were His enemies.

This requires patience from us. We would like to see the kingdom in full effect here and now, but our King works patiently, slowly, and graciously. Although we live in His kingdom *now*, things don't look like what they will

someday when all things have been set right.

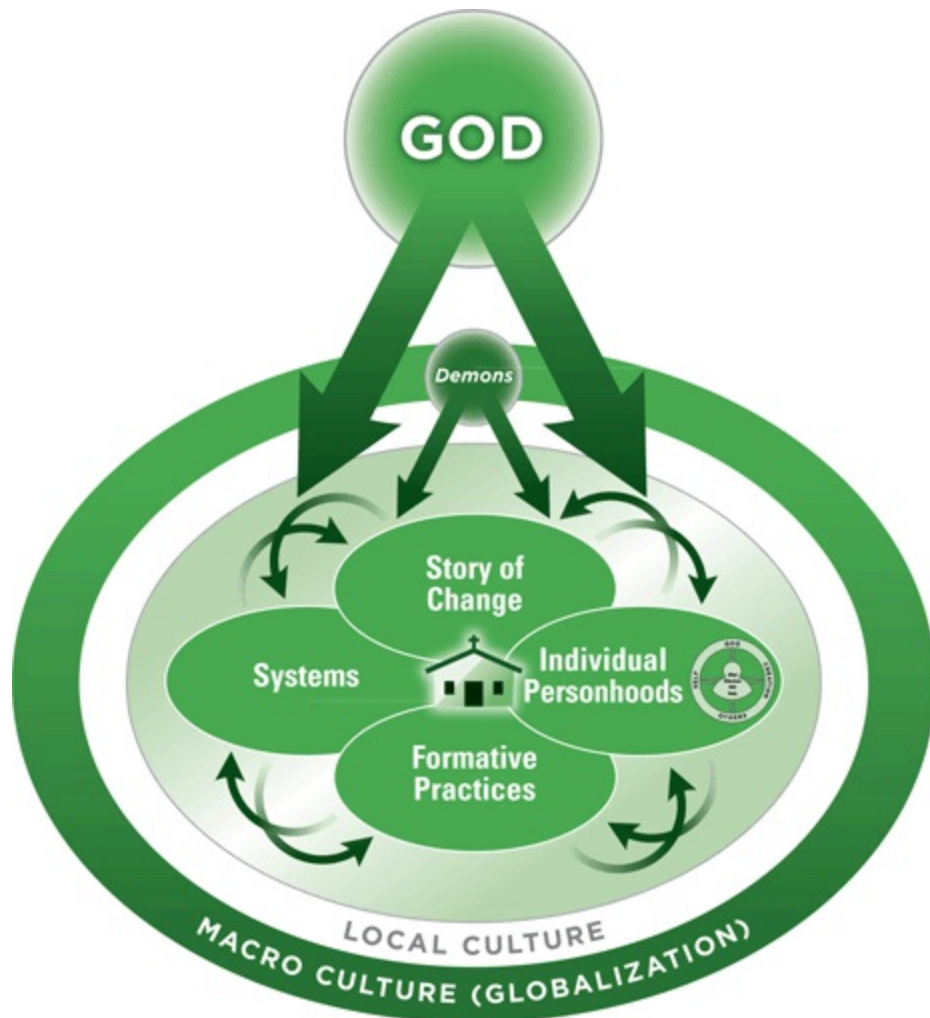
In this story, believers are in period 6. We have been restored as priest-kings, new creatures in Christ who are secure in His love and who are called to declare and demonstrate His kingdom to a world that still tries to reject Him (see Matt. 6:33; Luke 9:1–2; 10:1–9; John 20:21). This gives us a much bigger reason to get out of bed on Monday morning than the erroneous story of Evangelical Gnosticism, and it gives us much more power for doing so. We are no longer in the waiting room, biding our time until Christ returns. Like the fifty HIV/AIDS sufferers in the Kenyan slum, we are new creations, right now, and we are called to proclaim the present kingdom of God, right now.

THE COMMUNITY OF THE KINGDOM

Figure 10.2 pictures what living into the present chapter of God's story looks like in terms of the process of individual and cultural formation.⁶

FIGURE 10.2

A Community that Embodies God's Kingdom



Adapted from Brian Fikkert and Michael Rhodes, “*Homo Economicus Versus Homo Imago Dei*,” *Journal of Markets and Morality* 20, no.1 (Spring 2017), 106

The outer two ovals represent any existing local and macro cultures, which have their own god(s), stories of change, formative practices, systems, and individual members, all of which can be influenced by both the “spiritual forces of evil” (Eph. 6:12) and by the one true God. We should expect these cultures to have some elements that are consistent with the kingdom of God, and some that are inconsistent. On the positive side, God is actively engaged with His world, so His sustaining and redeeming hand is present even in pagan cultures (see Matt. 5:45; Acts 14:16, 17:24–28; Col. 1:15–19). Furthermore, despite the destructive effects of the fall, unbelievers continue to have some form of the good qualities with which they were created, so their cultures also have some features that are consistent with God’s kingdom. For example, most unbelievers love their children, so they create

systems to help their children flourish, systems that include schools, pediatricians, sports leagues, youth choirs, and more. On the other hand, because human beings create culture in the image of whatever god(s) they worship, any culture that is worshipping a false god will have practices, systems, and people that are incompatible with God's kingdom. Every culture is a mixed bag.

The inner oval represents the infusion of the kingdom of God, the emergence of the new creation, within the existing culture. At the center of this infusion is the local church, where God dwells with His people in a particularly intimate way. Each week, the royal priesthood, the holy nation, gathers to worship its King, to bask in His love, and to prepare for another week of making His presence known as far as the curse is found. Remember, Sunday morning isn't the end of worship; it's the beginning of an entire week of worship.

Because Christ is King of the entire cosmos, Christians should be extending the knowledge of His presence into every square inch of His domain. As shown in [Figure 10.3](#), Christians do this in three arenas.

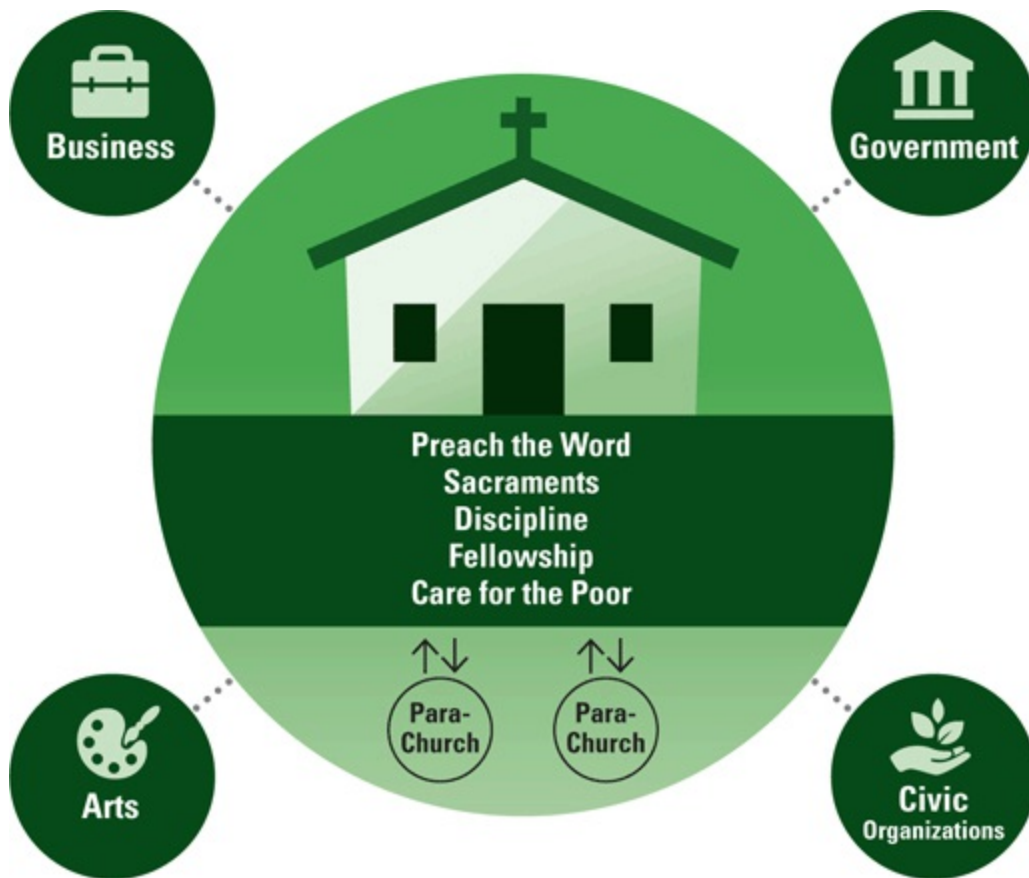
First, there are some activities the Bible indicates the church should do *directly*: preach the word, administer the sacraments, exercise discipline, engage in fellowship, and care for the poor, especially poor believers (see Gal. 2:10).⁷ When the church engages in these activities, it *directly* ministers holistically to the people in its midst.

Second, some believers are called to be involved in parachurch ministries, which explicitly seek to help the church fulfill its mission by undertaking tasks that are beyond the capacity of the local church. Many poverty alleviation ministries fall into this category. Some parachurch ministries may be national or even international in scope (some Christian relief and development agencies, for example) while others will be much more local.

Third, some believers are called to serve as priest-kings in institutions that are not parachurch ministries in that they are not engaged in explicitly Christian ministry (government, business, the arts, and civic organizations, for example). While these institutions are not rooted in the local church, Christ is the Creator, Sustainer, and Reconciler of all things, including these institutions, so Christians must work in them as well, faithfully seeking to use words and deeds that bear witness to the present and future reign of Christ as much as possible (Matt. 5:16; Col. 1:15–20).

FIGURE 10.3

The Church, Parachurch, and Community



Adapted from Fig. 6.5 in Bryant L. Myers, *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011), 199.

As we seek to advance Christ’s kingdom, we must not try to do so through power or might, but through humility, sacrificial service, and love. Our King comes “gentle and riding on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey” (Matt. 21:5). The expansion of the kingdom does not mean wholesale destruction of all elements of the surrounding culture, for many of those elements are good.⁸ Rather, the expansion should act more like salt that preserves and enhances the good, and like yeast that permeates and brings life (Matt. 5:13, 13:33). The spread of the kingdom is more about transforming than completely discarding, for the new creation is birthed out of the old (Rom. 8:18–25; Phil. 3:21; Col. 1:15–20; Rev. 21:24).⁹

Don’t be fooled by the apparent weakness of the weapons of the kingdom

community. Yes, in the face of the world's military might, technological mastery, and economic power, the holy nation goes into battle with meekness, humility, kindness, forgiveness, purity, generosity, material abandon, peacemaking, honesty, turning the other cheek, and prayer (Matt. 5–7; 1 Cor. 13:13). While these weapons seem weak, they are actually the most powerful in the world (Ps. 20:7), for King Jesus reigns over His entire cosmos right now, including every culture of this world. Because of that, the rules of His kingdom—its story of change, practices, and systems—are the ones that are governing the universe, both now and forever. And *love* is the currency of His realm (see 1 Cor. 13:13). *Love* really does make *His* world go 'round.

How can sacrificial love defeat the weapons of the world: nuclear warheads, unbridled technology, and global consumerism? They can do so because Jesus' rule over the world isn't merely a title or a legal right or a moral imperative. He is here, He is powerful, and He is Lord. These strange weapons work because He makes them work, using them to reach the minds and hearts of the world. When we love well, the world looks in wonder, and God uses that to draw people to surrender to Him, the one and only King.

Thus, the holy nation, as small and pathetic as it often seems, is actually on the cutting edge of the universe. Indeed, when this community functions according to the story of change, practices, and systems that King Jesus has established for His cosmos, it goes “with the grain of the universe”—it lives according to the “laws of nature” of His kingdom, which is both now and not yet.¹⁰ In this sense, the kingdom community acts like something of a habitat within the larger culture, an environment in which human beings can blossom and grow into the type of creatures they were created to be.¹¹ This is how we improvise in the present. Like Crossroads Church in a Kenyan slum, we can live in ways that genuinely anticipate and give a foretaste of the coming kingdom. And as we do so, we invent ways that are more conducive to human flourishing than the kingdoms of this world.

Unfortunately, too often the community of faith is co-opted by the culture at large. Too often it mixes the story of change, systems, and formative practices of this world with those of the kingdom of God. Too often we sound angry and afraid, rather than loving and generous. Too often the church resembles an exclusive political party rather than a welcoming hospital or home. As a result, our unfaithfulness hinders the flourishing of the church's

members and undermines its ability to shine light into the darkness of the world. The community of faith needs to become more whole—for both its own good and the good of the world.

And the community of faith needs to live out the biblical story of change where Jesus did it—among the poor and the lowly, among the modern-day lepers in a Kenyan slum (see Luke 7:18–23; 1 Cor. 1:26–31). For the kingdom of God is upside down.

* * *

The Church, the Parachurch, and Poverty Alleviation

The Bible calls the local church to care for the poor, but such care should not distract the elders, who govern the church, from their primary task of preaching and teaching the Word (Acts 6:1–7; 1 Tim. 3:1–5; Titus 1:5–9). To protect the elders’ time, the Bible appoints deacons, who serve under the authority of the elders, to care for the poor on behalf of the church (Acts 6:1–7; 1 Tim. 3:8–13). However, when a poverty alleviation initiative is large or complex, it may be beyond the deacons’ capacity, so the ministry will eventually become a distraction to the elders. In such situations, there is some wisdom in creating parachurch organizations to oversee such ministries.

Of course, not all churches use the form of church government just described. Nevertheless, the principle remains the same: When a poverty alleviation initiative becomes large or complex, it may distract the leaders who are tasked with preaching and teaching the Word. In such cases, it may be advisable to form parachurch organizations to operate such ministries. This is actually the common practice, as most poverty alleviation ministries are run by parachurch organizations. Unfortunately, there are often tensions in the relationship between churches and parachurch ministries.

Churches sometimes express frustration that parachurch organizations ask for financial support, but they often do not collaborate with churches in the communities in which they are both ministering. Although this dynamic is present in most settings, it is particularly challenging in the Majority World, where enormous global relief and development agencies work in communities that contain churches consisting of, say, twenty extremely poor people with very little education. As Rick Warren, pastor of Saddleback

Church, explains,

In the first century, mission strategy was always congregationally based.... There were no mission societies, mission boards, or parachurch organizations.... Today, most local churches are sidelined and uninvolved when it comes to missions. The message from most mission and parachurch organizations to the local church is essentially “Pray, pay, and get out of the way.” ... I believe the proper role for all the great parachurch and relief organizations is to serve local churches in a supportive way, offering their expertise and knowledge, but allowing local churches around the world to be the central focus and the distribution centers. ¹²

On the other hand, development expert Bryant Myers describes the frustrations that many parachurch ministries have with churches, frustrations that he laments:

Too often Christian development professionals see the church as a distraction, or worse, an impediment to transformation. “The church has separated itself from the rest of the community.” “Churches don’t believe development is something they should be doing.” “The church is not professional enough; it doesn’t know what it is doing.” “Churches have been validating the current political and economic system; they are part of the problem.” We know the litany well.¹³

Parachurch organizations often have good reasons to be frustrated. Churches frequently lack a kingdom vision that includes ministering to low-income individuals and communities, and even when they capture such a vision, their approaches often do more harm than good.

But parachurch ministries have their own problems. Under the heavy influence of Evangelical Gnosticism, which separates the spiritual and the physical realms, many parachurch ministries tend to undervalue what the local church brings to the table. They often fail to understand that—because human beings are mind-affections-will-body-relational creatures who are longing for the dwelling place of God—the local church is absolutely

essential to poverty alleviation. As theologian Lesslie Newbigin states, parachurch ministries “have power to accomplish their purpose only as they are rooted in and lead back to a believing community,” the community of the local church.¹⁴

Like all of us, poor people need the healing power of Jesus. And He is present—mysteriously yet really—when the church administers the ordinary means of grace: the preaching of the Word, the administration of the sacraments, and prayer. This is the inner-most sanctuary of the temple, the very dwelling place of God. We are home there. And as Mimi, whom we met in chapter 9, says, home is where we become whole.

* * *

DESIGN PRINCIPLES FOR POVERTY ALLEVIATION MINISTRIES

Indeed, from the very start of His earthly ministry, King Jesus showed a special concern for the materially poor, wanting them to enjoy the benefits of His kingdom (Luke 4:18–21; 7:18–23). Hence, as we seek to expand God’s kingdom, we must do so by creating a community that is bent toward materially poor people and that enables them to flourish. Stated differently, *poverty alleviation is about creating a community whose story of change, formative practices, systems, and members reflect the kingdom of God, applying the power of Christ’s death and resurrection to address the five causes of material poverty:*

- 1. False gods and erroneous stories of change*
- 2. Destructive formative practices*
- 3. Broken systems at both the community and macro levels*
- 4. Broken people*
- 5. Demonic forces*

What does this look like in very practical terms? There is no detailed script, but the contours of God’s story outlined in this book serve as a prompt that can help us to more faithfully improvise the present chapter in His grand drama. As the previous paragraph illustrates, this prompt points us in a very

different direction from many of our existing poverty alleviation efforts. To be sure, handing out food, distributing malaria nets, and digging wells—typical elements of poverty alleviation strategies—all have a role to play. But applying God’s story of change involves so much more than these common features. Surprisingly, poverty alleviation includes confronting false gods, correcting erroneous stories of change, fostering positive formative practices, reforming systems, healing broken mind-affections-will-body-relational creatures, and resisting demonic forces. This all sounds very different from the standard approaches, and it is! In fact, it is so different that you might be feeling a little uncomfortable at this point, not quite knowing where to begin. That’s okay! Again, there is no detailed script, so we have to rely on the Holy Spirit to guide our steps. In addition, if you are willing to join us in this improvisation, we provide additional practical guidelines in the companion book, *A Field Guide to Becoming Whole: Principles for Poverty Alleviation Ministries*.

REVISITING THE OPENING EXERCISE

At the start of this book, you were asked to allocate \$100 across funding proposals from three Christian organizations that are seeking to alleviate material poverty. Please take a few moments to reconsider your allocation of funds.

Complete the following:

1. How would you allocate the \$100 now? Fill in the blanks below with your donations.

The dollar amount you would give to MicOrg is:

The dollar amount you would give to HealthOrg is:

The dollar amount you would give to JobsOrg is:

Total: = \$100

2. Does your original allocation of funds differ from your current allocation? Why or why not?

3. What are the implications of your answer to question 2 for your own poverty alleviation efforts? List any specific changes that you commit to making.

4. What are the implications of your answer to question 2 for your life in general? List any specific changes that you commit to making.

Debriefing the Exercise

The world is very complicated and messy, and there are often pros and cons to many decisions we make. We authors do *not* believe there is a simple formula for designing or running poverty alleviation ministries or for deciding which ones to fund. Furthermore, we don't want to play "gotcha," tripping you up with a short grant proposal that you may not have fully understood. So relax, we are all just learning and growing together. But here is the way we would likely allocate our \$100 and our reasoning:

Authors' Allocation to MicOrg: \$0. While MicOrg's proposal has the benefit of cutting costs and increasing scale, it is very much rooted in Western civilization's tendency to view human beings as highly

individualistic “brains on sticks,” so that increased knowledge is the key to poverty alleviation. Conversely, a biblical perspective sees human beings as mind-affections-will-body-relational creatures, so that living in a supportive, gospel-centered community is absolutely essential to human flourishing. Moreover, as we saw in chapters 6 and 9, being in community both precedes and provides the foundation for work. See also [Table 8.1](#). We would prefer not to fund this proposal and would encourage MicOrg to look for ways to use technology that does not undermine the power of community.

Authors’ Allocation to HealthOrg: \$100. As discussed in chapter 7, demonic forces are real, and the Bible commands us to resist them by being united to Christ and using the weapons of the Word, prayer, and godly community. These “weapons” should not be an afterthought, but should help guide and govern this good work. HealthOrg’s funding proposal is consistent with biblical truth and is worthy of funding.

Authors’ Allocation to JobsOrg: \$0. While JobsOrg’s proposal has the benefit of reaching more people, it accomplishes this increase in scale by shifting away from narrating God’s story of change across all aspects of life to embracing the Evangelical Gnostic approach that limits Christ’s work to saving souls. See the section entitled “When Evangelical Gnosticism Addresses Poverty in the Majority World” on [pages 110–13](#) and Deuteronomy 6:4–13.

While we have not conducted this exercise on a large scale, it has been our experience that *before* being exposed to the content of this book, American Christians allocate their money roughly as follows:

The dollar amount you would give to MicOrg is: \$50

The dollar amount you would give to HealthOrg is: \$0

The dollar amount you would give to JobsOrg is: \$50

Total: = \$100

What does this suggest about the default story of change of American

Christians?

A FINAL WORD

There is an old saying that a fish doesn't know it's in water because it has never experienced anything else. Similarly, most of us have been swimming in the seas of Western Naturalism and Evangelical Gnosticism for so long that we don't even realize it. This is the only world we know. So, we just keep on swimming, and through our approaches to poverty alleviation, we invite poor people to swim along with us.

But there is a better world available, a world in which lepers do not beg in the streets, in which young boys do not pick through garbage dumps, and in which little girls are not victims of sexual abuse. Because in this other world, God dwells again among His people, and He is making everything new (Rev. 21:1–5).

No, this better world is not yet fully here, but it is already bursting forth into the present, creating real hope and real possibilities in the here and now. And as new creatures in Christ, we are called and empowered to join with fifty Kenyan HIV/AIDS sufferers in living into this new world—preaching the Word *and* digging wells, starting schools *and* administering the sacraments, offering prayers *and* dispensing penicillin, fellowshiping with Christ's body *and* financing microenterprises.¹⁵ Because the goal isn't to live the American Dream now and get our souls to heaven later. The goal is to become whole.

Reflection Questions

1. Reflect on your answers to [Questions 1](#) and [2](#) in the Initial Thoughts at the start of Part 3.
 - a. Are there any ways in which you have understood Christ's work and the gospel too narrowly?

- b. How might a broader understanding impact your life when the alarm clock goes off on Monday morning?

2. Reflect on your answer to [Question 3](#) in the Initial Thoughts at the start of Part 3.

- a. What difference does it make right now to understand our eternal destiny as a fully embodied new heaven and earth?

- b. If the key to flourishing in the new creation is that God dwells with His people, what does that say about how we can experience greater flourishing right now?

3. Reflect on your answer to [Question 4](#) in the Initial Thoughts at the start of Part 3.

- a. How would you answer that question now?

- b. What are the implications of your revised answer for your own life?

- c. How might your revised answer inform the design of your poverty alleviation efforts?

4. Reflect on your answer to [Question 5](#) in the Initial Thoughts at the start of Part 3.

a. How would you answer that question now?

b. What are the implications of your revised answer for your own life?

c. How might your revised answer inform the design of your poverty alleviation efforts?

5. Practically speaking, what does it mean that you are to live as a restored priest-king in the new creation right now? Be specific about how you will respond to this incredible truth.

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~ Brian

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~ Kelly

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NOTES

Opening Exercise

1. These organizations and funding proposals are completely fictional. Any similarity with any actual organizations or proposals is completely coincidental.

Introduction: We Need a New Story

1. Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?” *The National Interest*, no. 16 (Summer 1989): 4.
2. Lesslie Newbigin, “Can the West Be Converted?” *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 6, no. 1 (1985): 25.
3. The “American Dream” is a phrase that can mean different things to different people. What we take issue with is a way of life characterized by self-defined happiness and the pursuit of ever-increasing wealth, power, and freedom. At the same time, we fully agree that the opportunity to build a stable life through hard work has been a force for good for literally millions of Americans over the centuries, including ourselves.
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5. See Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000); idem., *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2015); Brian Fikkert, “Improving the Quality and Quantity of America’s Volunteerism,” *2016 Index of Culture and Opportunity*, eds. Jennifer A. Marshall and Rachel Sheffield (Washington, DC: The Heritage Foundation, 2016), 36–37.
6. Putnam, *Bowling Alone*.
7. For a similar view, see David Brooks, “The Retreat to Tribalism,” *New York Times*, January 1, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/01/opinion/the-retreat-to-tribalism.html>.
8. “Americans Divided on the Importance of Church,” *Barna*, March 24, 2014, https://www.barna.com/research/americans-divided-on-the-importance-of-church/#.UzOeP_ldVqG.
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11. See Bruno S. Frey, *Happiness: A Revolution in Economics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010).
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15. Twenge et al., “Birth Cohort Increases in Psychopathology,” 151.
16. Commission on Children at Risk, *Hardwired to Connect: The New Scientific Case for Authoritative Communities* (New York: Broadway Publications, 2003), 68.
17. Sabrina Tavernise, “U.S. Suicide Rate Surges to a 30-Year High,” *The New York Times*, April 22, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/22/health/us-suicide-rate-surges-to-a-30-year-high.html>.
18. See Corrie Cutrer, “Why Are Our Children So Anxious?,” *Christianity Today*, January 6, 2017, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/women/2017/january/parenting-in-age-of-anxiety-children-teens.html>; David P. Murray, *Christians Get Depressed Too: Hope and Help for Depressed People* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2010).
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Chapter 1: Love Really Does Make the World Go 'Round

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2. For example, see the classic article by Carol Hirschon Weiss, “Nothing as Practical as Good Theory: Exploring Theory-Based Evaluation for Comprehensive Community Initiatives for Children and Families,” in *New Approaches to Evaluating Community Initiatives*, James P. Connell, Anne C. Kubisc, Lisbeth B. Schorr, and Carol H. Weiss, eds. (Washington, DC: Aspen Institute, 1995), 65–92. Part of the reason that the field

uses the term “theory of change” is to emphasize the desire to test the theory using statistical methods. We have chosen to replace the word *theory* with *story* for three reasons. First, the term *story* is more accessible to the primary audience of this book. Second, because much of God’s story involves things that cannot be seen, including God Himself, it cannot be tested by statistical methods in the same way that theories of observable processes can be tested. Third, neither the truthfulness of God’s story nor its believability depend upon scientific verification. God’s story is true because He says so in His Word, and we believe God’s Word because the Holy Spirit testifies to its truth in our hearts.

3. As Kelly has stated elsewhere, “All of His being is of love. To speak of God apart from his love is to speak of someone other than God.” Kelly M. Kapic with Justin Borger, *The God Who Gives: How the Trinity Shapes the Christian Story* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 21.
4. Technically speaking, relationships have more “ontic weight” than matter. See John Jefferson Davis, *Worship and the Reality of God: An Evangelical Theology of Real Presence* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 48–66.
5. See Michael Reeves, *Delighting in the Trinity: An Introduction to the Christian Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012); Kapic, *The God Who Gives*.
6. See Kelly M. Kapic, “Anthropology,” chapter 8 in *Christian Dogmatics: Reformed Theology for the Catholic Church*, Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain, eds. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 165–93; Richard Lints, *Identity and Idolatry: The Image of God and Its Inversion* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015); Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1986), 68–73.
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9. Without getting too technical, this just reminds us that words like *soul* are meant to convey something essential to a person, who they are, but this is not to pit the soul against their physical bodies. For more background on the diversity of language and meaning here, see the classic study by Hans Walter Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Munich: Fortress Press, 1973). For *nephesh* see

- especially 10–25. See also Robert A. Di Vito, “Old Testament Anthropology and the Construction of Personal Identity,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 61, no. 2 (Washington, DC: The Catholic Biblical Association of America, April 1999): 217–38.
10. “בבל,” *Brown-Driver-Briggs* (Abridged), paragraph 11225.
 11. The fancy phrase used to capture this biblical holism is *pyscho-somatic unity*.
 12. It is not that we are against more contemporary psychological language and more technical discussions of the human person, but we think that ancient and biblically saturated ways of speaking provide sufficient guidance as we wrestle with what it means to be human and how we should treat one another.
 13. For a detailed study of this variety of expression, see “בבל,” *Brown-Driver-Briggs* (Abridged), paragraph 11225.
 14. See James K. A. Smith *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*, Cultural Liturgies, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 51–52.
 15. *Ibid.*, 75.
 16. Robert Chambers, *Rural Development: Putting the Last First* (London, UK: Longman Group, 1983), 103–39.
 17. The relational dynamic as central to human persons is widely recognized beyond merely drawing from Scripture. See, for example, how David Brooks explores this idea in terms of psychology, relationality, etc., in *The Social Animal: The Hidden Sources of Love, Character, and Achievement* (New York: Random House, 2011).
 18. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 51.
 19. Mary Murphy Corcoran, “Effects of Solitary Confinement on the Well Being of Prison Inmates,” *Applied Psychology Opus*, Department of Applied Psychology at New York University, <https://steinhardt.nyu.edu/appsycho/opus/issues/2015/spring/corcoran>; Bruce A. Arrigo and Heather Y. Bersot, “Revisiting the Mental Health Effects of Solitary Confinement on Prisoners in Supermax Units: A Psychological Jurisprudence Perspective,” chapter 10 in *The Marion Experiment: Long-Term Solitary Confinement and the Supermax Movement*, Stephen C. Richards ed., (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2015); George Dvorsky, “Why Solitary Confinement is the Worst Kind of Psychological Torture,” July 1, 2014, <https://io9.gizmodo.com/why-solitary-confinement-is-the-worst-kind-of-psycholog-1598543595>.
 20. Sharon Shalev and Monica Lloyd, “Though this be Method, yet there is Madness in’t: Commentary on One Year Longitudinal Study of the Psychological Effects of Administrative Segregation,” *Corrections and Mental Health* (Washington, DC: National Institute of Corrections, 2011), 5.
 21. Terry Kupers as quoted in Dvorsky, “Why Solitary Confinement is the Worst Kind of

Psychological Torture.”

22. Ibid.
23. For example, see Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*, 75–111.
24. See Brian Fikkert and Michael Rhodes, “*Homo Economicus Versus Homo Imago Dei*,” *Journal of Markets and Morality* 20, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 101–26. See also Mark Gornik's discussion, drawing on Pierre Bourdieu and William Julius Wilson, of how work, or the lack thereof, dramatically shapes people's identity, daily life, and relationship to both their families and broader culture in Mark Gornik, *To Live in Peace: Biblical Faith and the Changing Inner City* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2002), 44–47.
25. Lints, *Identity and Idolatry*, 18–19.
26. See Malcolm Jeeves, *Minds, Brains, Souls and Gods: A Conversation on Faith, Psychology and Neuroscience* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013); Timothy R. Jennings, *The God-Shaped Brain: How Changing Your View of God Transforms Your Life* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013); James E. Zull, *From Brain to Mind: Using Neuroscience to Guide Change in Education* (Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, 2011); James E. Zull, *The Art of Changing the Brain: Enriching the Practice of Teaching by Exploring the Biology of Learning* (Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, 2002); Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*; Dennis P. Hollinger, *Head, Heart and Hands: Bringing Together Christian Thought, Passion and Action* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005).
27. See Susan A. David, Ilona Boniwell, and Amanda Conley Ayers, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Happiness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Jonathan Haidt, *The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom* (New York: Basic Books, 2006); Commission on Children at Risk, *Hardwired to Connect: The New Scientific Case for Authoritative Communities* (New York: Broadway Publications, 2003).
28. David Shimer, “Yale's Most Popular Course Ever: Happiness,” *New York Times*, January 26, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/26/nyregion/at-yale-class-on-happiness-draws-huge-crowd-laurie-santos.html>.
29. David et al., *The Oxford Handbook of Happiness*.
30. Haidt, *The Happiness Hypothesis*, 239.

Chapter 2: How Do Human Beings and Cultures Change?

1. James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016), 8.

2. Andy Crouch, *Playing God: Redeeming the Gift of Power* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 67.
3. See Lints, *Identity and Idolatry*; see also J. Richard Middleton, “The Liberating Image? Interpreting the Imago Dei in Context,” *Christian Scholars Review* 24, no. 1 (1994): 8–25.
4. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 52.
5. See Lints, *Identity and Idolatry*; Crouch, *Playing God*; Greg K. Beale, *We Become What We Worship: A Biblical Theology of Idolatry* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2008); Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Nottingham: InterVarsity Press, 2006).
6. See Suzanne McDonald, “Beholding the Glory of God in the Face of Jesus Christ: John Owen and the ‘Reforming’ of the Beatific Vision,” chapter 8 in *The Ashgate Research Companion to John Owen’s Theology*, Kelly M. Kapic and Mark Jones, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2016), 141–58.
7. See Bob Goudzwaard, *Aid for the Overdeveloped West* (Toronto, ON: Wedge Publishing Foundation, 1975), 14–15.
8. As quoted in Bryant L. Myers, *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development*, revised and expanded ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 313.
9. Ibid.
10. See Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, 350 BC.
11. For a very accessible introduction to these ideas written by a Christian philosopher, see Smith, *You Are What You Love*. For an example of recent empirical support for this model, see Jonathan Haidt and Craig Joseph, “Intuitive Ethics: How Innately Prepared Intuitions Generate Culturally Variable Virtues,” *Daedalus* (Fall 2004): 55–67.
12. This section is adapted from Fikkert and Rhodes, “*Homo Economicus* Versus *Homo Imago Dei*,” 105–6. I am extremely grateful to Michael Rhodes for increasing my understanding of this process.
13. In reality, Mary is shaped by multiple communities, some of which are very small, like her family, friends, and neighbors, and some of which are much larger, like the country in which she lives.
14. Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).
15. Fikkert and Rhodes, “*Homo Economicus* Versus *Homo Imago Dei*,” 104.
16. Smith, *You Are What You Love*, 14–19.
17. Private conversation with Brian.

18. Private conversation with Brian.
19. Gailyn Van Rheenen, “Animism, Secularism and Theism: Developing a Tripartite Model for Understanding World Cultures,” *International Journal of Frontier Missions*, 10:4 (October 1993): 169–71. See also Darrow L. Miller with Stan Guthrie, *Discipling Nations: The Power of Truth to Transform Cultures* (Seattle: YWAM Publishers, 1998).
20. Darrow Miller used the term “Evangelical Gnosticism” over three decades ago in Miller, *Discipling Nations*, 46–47. In addition, others have been using this term in recent publications. See Thabiti Anyabwile, “Evangelical Gnosticism,” The Gospel Coalition, April 11, 2018, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/thabiti-anyabwile/evangelical-gnosticism/>; Abigail Rine Favale, “Evangelical Gnosticism,” *First Things*, May 2018, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2018/05/evangelical-gnosticism>.
21. Tim Keller, “How to Find Your Rival Gods,” *Christianity Today*, October 20, 2009, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2009/octoberweb-only/142-21.0.html>.
22. Available at <https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/sdg/Chalmers,%20Thomas%20-%20The%20Expulsive%20Power%20of%20a%20New%20Af.pdf> among other places.

Chapter 3: You Can Become a Consuming Robot

1. Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power and the Only Hope that Matters* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009), xxiii.
2. Interview of Eugene Peterson by Bob Abernethy, *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly*, May 13, 2011, <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/2011/08/12/may-13-2011-eugene-peterson/8806/>.
3. See, for example, Myers, *Walking with the Poor*, 23–45; Paul N. Wilson, “The Human Soul: A Missing Link in Economic Development Education,” *Faith and Economics* 57 (Spring 2011): 25–46; Denis Goulet, “Development Experts: The One-Eyed Giants,” *World Development* 8, nos. 7–8 (July–August 1980): 481–89.
4. For example, see the thinking of Charles Taylor and related discussions: Collin Hansen ed., *Our Secular Age: Ten Years of Reading and Applying Charles Taylor* (Deerfield, IL: The Gospel Coalition, 2017); James K. A. Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2014); Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007). Taylor notes the West’s long-run trend toward naturalism: “Why was it virtually impossible not to

believe in God in, say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy, but even inescapable?” (25). At the same time, consistent with what we are saying in this chapter, Taylor notes that the West has not fully embraced naturalism, for it is still “haunted” by notions of and even longings for God to be real and present (see the helpful summary in Smith, *How (Not) to be Secular*, 3–17).

5. Brianna Barker Caza and Amy Wrzesniewski, “How Work Shapes Well-Being,” chapter 52 in David et al., *The Oxford Handbook of Happiness*, 693–710; Bruno S. Frey and Alois Stutzer, “What Can Economists Learn from Happiness Research?,” *Journal of Economic Literature* 40, no. 2 (June 2002): 402–35.
6. Clifford L. Broman, V Lee Hamilton, and William S. Hoffman, “The Impact of Unemployment on Families,” *Michigan Family Review* 2, no. 2 (Winter 1996): 83–91.
7. Carlos Nordt, Ingeborg Warnke, Erich Seifritz, Wolfram Kawohl, “Modelling Suicide and Unemployment: A Longitudinal Analysis Covering 63 Countries, 2000–11,” *The Lancet Psychiatry* 2, no. 3 (March 2015): 239–45; Julia Friederike Sowislo and Ulrich Orth, “Does Low Self-Esteem Predict Depression and Anxiety? A Meta-Analysis of Longitudinal Studies,” *Psychological Bulletin* 139, no. 1 (Jan. 2013): 213–40; Richard H. Price, Jin Nam Choi, and Amiram D. Vinokur, “Links in the Chain of Adversity Following Job Loss: How Financial Strain and Loss of Personal Control Lead to Depression, Impaired Functioning, and Poor Health,” *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology* 7, no. 4 (Oct. 2002): 302–12.
8. See Bruce Wydick, “Blessed are the Handouts,” *Christian Daily Journal*, December 1, 2017, <https://christiandailyjournal.com/2017/12/01/blessed-are-the-handouts>.
9. This section summarizes much of the content in Fikkert and Rhodes, “*Homo Economicus Versus Homo Imago Dei*.”
10. A growing number of Christian and secular observers are raising similar concerns to the ones raised here. For example, see the articles in the theme issue on “Exploring Mutuality,” *The Brewery Journal* 1 (2014), https://1stdirectory.co.uk/_assets/files_comp/1d963cea-25b9-4e01-9d23-c6126222b1cc.pdf; Cohen, *Homo Economicus*; Michaels, *Monoculture*; *The Gospel and Globalization: Exploring the Religious Roots of a Globalized World*, Michael W. Goheen and Erin G. Glanville, eds. (Vancouver, BC: Regent College Publishing, 2009); Bob Goudzwaard, Mark Vander Vennen, and David Van Heemst, *Hope in Troubled Times: A New Vision for Confronting Global Crises* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007).
11. Fikkert and Rhodes, “*Homo Economicus Versus Homo Imago Dei*,” 112–13.
12. For additional discussion of this point, see Michael W. Goheen, “Probing the Historical

- and Religious Roots of Economic Globalization,” in *The Gospel and Globalization*, Goheen and Glanville, eds., 69–90; Bob Goudzwaard, “Globalization, Economics, and the Modern Worldview,” in *The Gospel and Globalization*, Goheen and Glanville, eds., 111–24; Bob Goudzwaard, *Globalization and the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2001).
13. Laurence R. Iannaccone, “Introduction to the Economics of Religion,” *Journal of Economic Literature*, 36:3 (1998): 1465–95; Gary S. Becker, *A Treatise on the Family* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981).
 14. Michaels, *Monoculture*, 9.
 15. This section summarizes Fikkert and Rhodes, “*Homo Economicus Versus Homo Imago Dei*,” 111–12.
 16. For a helpful review of the conflict between this self-interested culture and the more relational qualities that are conducive to human flourishing, see Tim Kasser, Steve Cohn, Allen D. Kanner, and Richard M. Ryan, “Some Costs of American Corporate Capitalism: A Psychological Exploration of Value and Goal Conflicts,” *Psychological Inquiry* 17, no. 1 (2007): 1–22.
 17. See Helen I. Duh, “Antecedents and Consequences of Materialism: An Integrated Theoretical Framework,” *Journal of Economics and Behavioral Studies* 7, no. 1 (Feb. 2015): 20–35; William T. Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2008), 46; Mark D. Harmon, “Affluenza: Television Use and Cultivation of Materialism,” *Mass Communication and Society* 4, no. 1 (2001): 405–18.
 18. Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 98–100.
 19. See Mark D. Promislo et al., “Valuing Money More than People: The Effects of Materialism on Work-Family Conflict,” *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology* 83 (2010): 935–53; Tim Kasser, *The High Price of Materialism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002).
 20. Yujie Wei, Naveen Donthu, and Kenneth L. Bernhardt, “Volunteerism of Older Adults in the United States,” *International Review on Public and Nonprofit Marketing* 9 (2012): 1–18; Ellen Briggs, Tim Landry, and Charles Wood, “Beyond Just Being There: An Examination of the Impact of Attitudes, Materialism, and Self-Esteem on the Quality of Helping Behavior in Youth Volunteers,” *Journal of Nonprofit and Public Sector Marketing* 18, no. 2 (2007): 27–45; Putnam, *Bowling Alone*.
 21. Jean M. Twenge, “Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?” *The Atlantic*, September 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/09/has-the-smartphone-destroyed-a-generation/534198>. See also Andy Crouch, *The Tech-Wise*

Family: Every Day Steps for Putting Technology in its Proper Place (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2017).

22. The value of output, GNP, is necessarily paid to the suppliers of all the inputs that were used to produce that output (natural resources, labor, capital, and entrepreneurship). So, the value of production is equal to the value of income earned by the owners of those inputs. It is for this reason that GNP is equivalent to Gross National Income (GNI), the total income earned by the nation's citizens, including the income earned by the nation's inputs that are located in foreign countries. For example, the wages earned by an American who is living in Germany are part of U.S. GNP. Very closely related to GNP is the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), which is the value of output produced within a nation's borders. For simplicity, the text focuses on a single measure, GNP, even though GDP is the key metric used in some contexts.
23. Elizabeth Dickinson, "GDP: A Brief History," *Foreign Policy*, January 3, 2011, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/01/03/gdp-a-brief-history/>.
24. Sabina Alkire, *Bhutan's Gross National Happiness Index: Methodology and Results*, OPHI Research in Progress Series (Oxford: Oxford Poverty & Human Development Initiative, 2008).
25. *World Happiness Report 2018*, John F. Helliwell, Richard Layard, and Jeffrey D. Sachs, eds. (New York: Sustainable Development Solutions Network, 2018), 20, 26.
26. Commission on Children at Risk, *Hardwired to Connect: The New Scientific Case for Authoritative Communities* (New York: Broadway Publications, 2003), 6; see Susan A. David, Ilona Boniwell, and Amanda Conley Ayers, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Happiness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Jonathan Haidt, *The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom* (New York: Basic Books, 2006).
27. Jean M. Twenge as quoted in Courtney Hutchison, "Today's Teens More Anxious, Depressed, and Paranoid Than Ever," ABC News, December 10, 2009. See also Twenge et al., "Birth Cohort Increases in Psychopathology," 145–54.
28. Fikkert and Rhodes, "*Homo Economicus* Versus *Homo Imago Dei*," 114–15.
29. For example, see Twenge, *Generation Me*.
30. The survey asks respondents: "If you were in trouble, do you have relatives or friends you can count on to help you whenever you need them, or not?"
31. The survey asks respondents: "Have you donated money to a charity in the past month?"
32. Helliwell et al., *World Happiness Report 2017*, 180.
33. For example, see Richard Bluhm, Denis de Crombrughe, and Adam Szirmai, *Poor*

- Trends: The Pace of Poverty Reduction after the Millenium Development Agenda*, UNU-MERIT working paper series, IPD WP19, February 2014; Aart Kraay, “When is Growth Pro-Poor? Evidence from a Panel of Countries,” *Journal of Development Economics* 80, no. 1 (June 2006): 198–227.
34. See United Nations, *The Millennium Development Goals Report 2015* (New York: United Nations, 2015), 4.
 35. Bluhm et al., *Poor Trends*.
 36. See Sustainable Development Goals, United Nations, <http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/poverty/>.
 37. Carol Graham, Shaojie Zhou, and Junyi Zhang, “Happiness and Health in China: The Paradox of Progress,” *Global Economy and Development*, Brookings Institution, Washington, DC, working paper 89, June 2015; Zhilin Tang, “They Are Richer but Are They Happier? Subjective Well-Being of Chinese Citizens Across the Reform Era,” *Social Indicators Research* 117, no. 1 (2014): 145–64; Carol Graham, *Happiness around the World: The Paradox of Happy Peasants and Miserable Millionaires* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).
 38. Richard A. Easterlin, Fei Wang, and Shun Wang, “Growth and Happiness in China, 1990–2015,” in *World Happiness Report 2017*, ed. Helliwell et al.
 39. Graham, *Happiness around the World*.
 40. Lan Chaplin, Ronald Paul Hill, and Deborah John, “Poverty and Materialism: A Look at Impoverished Versus Affluent Children,” *Journal of Public Policy and Marketing* 33, no. 1 (2014): 78–92.

Chapter 4: You Can Be a Harp-Playing Ghost Forever

1. N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 26–27.
2. Lesslie Newbigin, *Truth to Tell: The Gospel as Public Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1991), 79.
3. Miller, *Disciplining Nations*, 46–47.
4. Gailyn Van Rheenen, *Communicating Christ in Animistic Contexts* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1996), 197–274.
5. For a helpful discussion of the difficulties of translating and interpreting 2 Peter 3:10, see Al Wolters, “Worldview and Textual Criticism in 2 Peter 3:10,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 49 (1987): 405–13.
6. Some of the details of this story have been modified slightly to protect the identity of this organization.

7. Private conversation with Brian.
8. Abraham Kuyper, Inaugural Lecture at Free University of Amsterdam, 1880. Found in James D. Bratt, ed., *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1998), 488.
9. Davis, *Worship and the Reality of God*; Marva J. Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for this Urgent Time* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1995).
10. Ronald J. Sider, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience: Why Are Christians Living Just Like the Rest of the World?* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005), 27–28. We should keep in mind that not all news is bad as is sometimes imagined. For example, see Brad Wilcox, “Evangelicals and Domestic Violence: Are Christian Men More Abusive?,” *Christianity Today*, December 2017, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2017/december-web-only/evangelicals-domestic-violence-christian-men-domestic-abuse.html>.
11. Barna, “Americans Divided on the Importance of Church,” March 24, 2014, https://www.barna.com/research/americans-divided-on-the-importance-of-church/#.UzOeP_ldVqG.
12. See Twenge et al., “Birth Cohort Increases in Psychopathology”; Twenge, *Generation Me*.
13. Christian Smith with Melissa Lundquist Denton, *Soul-Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 171.
14. Ibid., 165.
15. Paul G. Hiebert, “The Flaw of the Excluded Middle,” *Missiology* 10, no. 1 (January 1, 1982): 35–47.
16. Gailyn Van Rhee, “MR #32: Modernity Sweeps Africa,” *Missiology*, November 15, 2004, <http://www.missiology.com/mr-32-modernity-sweeps-africa/>; Gailyn Van Rhee, *Communicating Christ*.
17. Van Rhee, *Communicating Christ*, 127–42. Van Rhee argues that the theology of the kingdom of God is particularly helpful for combating the lies in traditional religion.
18. George G. Hunter III, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism: How Christianity Can Reach the West ... Again*, tenth anniversary revised and expanded ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010), 5.
19. Ibid., 14–18.
20. Ibid., 20.

21. Ibid., 21.
22. Alexander Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica: Hymns and Incantations* (Edinburgh: Floris Books, 1992), 93.
23. Ibid., 299.
24. Razib Khan, “The Scots-Irish as Indigenous People,” *Discover*, July 22, 2012, <http://blogs.discovermagazine.com/gnxp/2012/07/the-scots-irish-as-indigenouspeople/#.WblhltN94dV>; Thomas Sowell, *Black Rednecks and White Liberals* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2005); David Hackett Fischer, *Albion’s Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); Grady McWhiney, *Cracker Culture: Celtic Ways in the Old South* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1988).
25. J. D. Vance, *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis* (New York: HarperCollins, 2016), 93.
26. Ibid., 98.
27. Ibid.
28. As quoted in interview by Kelsey Dallas, *Washington Post*, September 9, 2016, at https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/social-issues/author-jd-vance-faith-made-me-believe-in-a-hopeful-future/2016/09/09/3cd46d6a-7604-11e6-be4f-3f42f2e5a49e_story.html?utm_term=.ad2e72bd8a20.
29. Vance, 189.
30. Ibid., 2.
31. Ibid., 85–86.

Chapter 5: Escaping Flatland

1. Tim Morris and Don Petcher, *Science and Grace: God’s Reign in the Natural Sciences* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2006), 137.
2. Paul Borthwick, *Western Christians in Global Mission: What’s the Role of the North American Church?* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 45.
3. This segment based on private correspondence with Brian, October 17, 2017.
4. Carl F. Ellis Jr., *Free at Last? The Gospel in the African American Experience*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), Figure 2.1.
5. Edwin A. Abbot, *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions* (London: Seeley and Co., 1884).
6. Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 26–46.
7. Renamed Rogers Centre in 2005.
8. Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 51.

9. Alister E. McGrath, *The Re-Enchantment of Nature: Science, Religion and the Human Sense of Wonder* (London: Hodder and Stoughton Religious, 2003).
10. Bryant L. Myers, “Progressive Pentecostalism, Development, and Christian Development NGOs: A Challenge and an Opportunity,” *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 39. no. 3 (July 2015): 115–20. See also Donald E. Miller and Tetsunao Yamamori, *Global Pentecostalism: The New Face of Christian Social Engagement* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007).
11. Myers, “Progressive Pentecostalism,” 116, 118.
12. Dena Freeman, ed., *Pentecostalism and Development: Churches, NGOs, and Social Change in Africa* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 13.
13. Ibid, 25.
14. Myers, “Progressive Pentecostalism,” 119.
15. Myers also provides some important cautions about the approach of Progressive Pentecostal churches: some are teaching the erroneous prosperity gospel; the singular focus on personal transformation misses the fact that broken systems are often contributors to poverty; and while demons are active in the world, there are often natural causes for diseases that can best be addressed by modern medicine (ibid., 117).
16. C. S. Lewis, “Miracles,” in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1970), 26.

Chapter 6: Reconsidering Creation—The Key to Understanding Human Flourishing

1. J. H. Bavinck, “Religious Consciousness and Christian Faith,” in *The J. H. Bavinck Reader*, John Bolt, James D. Bratt, and Paul J. Visser, eds. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2013), 202.
2. Alvin Mbola, “Bad Relief Undermines Worship in Kibera,” *Mandate*, Chalmers Center for Economic Development, 2007, no. 3.
3. Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, Word Biblical Commentaries (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 61–62, 86; G. J. Wenham, “Sanctuary Symbolism in the Garden of Eden Story,” *Proceedings of the World Congress of Jewish Studies* 9 (1986), 19–25. G. K. Beale has been one of the leaders in highlighting this theme. For more from him, see *The Temple and the Church’s Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: Apollos IVP, 2004), 66–80; idem., *New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 617–22. Ancient Jewish literature sometimes struggled with this idea of the garden on earth, since this is where God abides, and therefore sometimes imagined it might actually be in heaven. See James L.

- Kugel, *The Bible as it Was* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 80–82.
4. T. Desmond Alexander, *From Eden to New Jerusalem* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2016); idem., *From Paradise to the Promised Land* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012); G. K. Beale and Mitchell Kim, *God Dwells Among Us: Expanding Eden to the Ends of the Earth* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014); J. Richard Middleton, *A New Heaven and a New Earth: Reclaiming Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014); N. T. Wright, *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters* (New York: HarperOne, 2012); Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission*.
 5. For more on the how Genesis 1:26–28 can be understood in terms of the first “great commission,” see Kopic, *The God Who Gives*, 58–60.
 6. Beale and Kim, *God Dwells Among Us*, 34.
 7. The Westminster Shorter Catechism Q & A 37 helpfully explains: Q: “What benefits do believers receive from Christ at death?” A: “The souls of believers are at their death made perfect in holiness, and do immediately pass into glory; and their bodies, being still united to Christ, do rest in their graves, till the resurrection.” The point is we have immediate hope after we die, as we shall be in glory/‘heaven’, but we still await the resurrection. The resurrection is at the heart of the Christian hope, as we will be raised to be with God and His people, enjoying His renewed creation as we bask in the triune God’s presence, love, and beauty.
 8. Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 168–69.
 9. For a helpful unpacking of this central truth, see Michael Allen, *Grounded in Heaven: Recentering Christian Hope and Life on God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2018). One of Allen’s legitimate concerns about some recent literature on the “new creation” emphasis is that in the enthusiasm to be more “earthly” in their heavenly vision, surprisingly, the most central truth—that this promised new creation is ultimately about being in unhindered communion with God—can be lost or undervalued. Let us make sure we never lose this central truth!
 10. The Lord Almighty and the Lamb are the eschatological temple. See Revelation 21:22.
 11. Beale and Kim, *God Dwells Among Us*, 21.
 12. Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 105–6.
 13. Brian Fikkert and Russell Mask, *From Dependence to Dignity: How to Alleviate Poverty Through Church-Centered Microfinance* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 82–83.
 14. J. Todd Billings, *Union with Christ: Reframing Theology and Ministry for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 48.

15. Francis A. Schaeffer, “True Spirituality,” in *A Christian Worldview: The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer*, vol. 3 (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1985), 264.
16. David et al., *The Oxford Handbook of Happiness*.
17. Jonathan Gruber, “Religious Market Structure, Religious Participation, and Outcomes: Is Religion Good for You?” (Washington, DC: National Bureau of Economic Research, 2005), working paper no. 11377. It is extremely difficult to prove causal relationships between variables in the social sciences, so most studies are able to demonstrate only correlation between variables. While Gruber would admit that he can’t “prove” causation through the use of advanced statistical techniques (e.g. instrumental variable estimation), he provides strong reason to believe that church attendance actually causes an increase in income.
18. For more on a Christian view of work and vocation, see Douglas J. Schuurman, *Vocation: Discerning Our Callings in Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2003); Amy L. Sherman and Steven Garber, *Kingdom Calling: Vocational Stewardship for the Common Good* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011).
19. Transcription from video entitled, “Bridge of Love,” January 30, 2017, <https://www.reconciledworld.org/bridge-of-love/>.
20. Private conversation with Brian, May 1, 2016.
21. Snell, “The Rise of Living Alone and Loneliness in History”; Tom Rath and James Harter, *Wellbeing: The Five Essential Elements* (Princeton, NJ: Gallup Press, 2010); Debra Umberson and Jennifer Karas Montez, “Social Relationships and Health: A Flashpoint for Health Policy,” *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 51:S (2010): S54–S66; Pedro Montoya, Wolfgang Larbig, Christoph Braun, Hubert Preissl, and Niels Birbaumer, “Influence of Social Support and Emotional Context on Pain Processing and Magnetic Brain Responses in Fibromyalgia,” *Arthritis and Rheumatism* 50:12 (December 2004): 4035–44.
22. Anthony Biglan, *The Nurture Effect: How the Science of Human Behavior Can Improve Our Lives and Our World* (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2015); Putnam, *Our Kids*, 110–11.
23. For more on this theme of the cross-shaped life as shaped by better understanding who this God has shown Himself to be in Christ, see Kapic, *The God Who Gives*, 189–210.
24. Ibid., 189–90.
25. Helliwell et al., *World Happiness Report 2017*; Yadollah Abolfathi Momtaz, Rahimah Ibrahim, and Tengku A. Hamid, “The Impact of Giving Support to Others on Older Adults’ Perceived Health Status,” *Psychogeriatrics* 14, no. 1 (2014): 31–37; Netta Weinstein and Richard M. Ryan, “When Helping Helps: Autonomous Motivation for

- Prosocial Behavior and Its Influence on Well-Being for the Helper and Recipient,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 98:2 (2010): 222–44; P. A. Thomas, “Is It Better to Give or to Receive? Social Support and the Well-Being of Older Adults,” *The Journals of Gerontology Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*, 65B:3 (2009): 351–57; Stephanie L. Brown, Randolph M. Nesse, Amiram D. Vinokur, and Dylan M. Smith, “Providing Social Support May Be More Beneficial than Receiving It: Results from a Prospective Study of Mortality,” *Psychological Science* 14, no. 4 (2003): 320–27.
26. Helliwell et al., *World Happiness Report 2017*, 146. See also A. E. Clark, “Work, Jobs and Well-Being Across the Millennium” in *International Differences in Well-Being*, Ed Diener, John Helliwell, and Daniel Kahneman, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).
27. For more on this, see the helpful book by Andy Crouch, *Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013).
28. John 1:1–10; Gen. 1:1–2; Rom. 8:18–27; Col. 1:15–20; Heb. 1:1–3.

Chapter 7: Reconsidering the Fall: More Than Just a Legal Problem

1. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace: The Kuyper Lectures for 1981 Delivered at the Free University of Amsterdam* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1983), 89.
2. Miller, *Disciplining Nations*, 67.
3. Raymond S. Nickerson, “Confirmation Bias; A Ubiquitous Phenomenon in Many Guises,” *Review of General Psychology* 2, no. 2 (1998): 175–220.
4. Nash Colundalur, “Devadasis are a Cursed Community,” *The Guardian*, January 21, 2011, www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2011/jan/21/devadasi-india-sex-work-religion.
5. 1 Timothy 5:8 teaches that those who have sufficient material resources to help their family members but fail to do so are worse than unbelievers. This passage is *not* teaching that those who lack sufficient resources to support their families—the materially poor—are worse than unbelievers.
6. A Jewish commentator of this passage observes: “What the serpent is saying is that the woman and the man will have the capacity to make judgments as to their own welfare independently of God. The insidious nature of its discourse lies in the implication that defiance of God’s law constitutes the indispensable precondition for human freedom,” Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis*, Accordance electronic ed. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 25. From early on, humans

misunderstand freedom and flourishing—and we still live with this problem, thinking we flourish apart from God and His commands, when in fact, we discover we are most free and able to flourish when we live in harmony with the Creator and His commandments.

7. For a fuller understanding of Hindu beliefs and practices, see Charles E. Farhadian, *Introducing World Religions: A Christian Engagement* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 82–83; Willard G. Oxtoby ed., *World Religions: Eastern Traditions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 30; and Huston Smith, *The Illustrated World's Religions: A Guide to Our Wisdom Traditions* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1986), 22f.
8. Farhadian, *Introducing World Religions*, 68–69.
9. Fikkert and Mask, *From Dependence to Dignity*, 90–91; Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty without Hurting the Poor ... and Yourself*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2012), 58.
10. *Gravity*, film directed by Alfonso Cuarón (Burbank, CA: Warner Brothers), 2013.
11. See also Gen. 6:5; Jer. 17:9; Rom. 5:6–21; Eph. 2:1–3.
12. Maggie Black, *Women in Ritual Slavery: Devadasi, Jogini, and Mathamma in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, Southern India*, Anti-Slavery International, 2007.
13. Marianne Bertrand and Sendhil Mullainathan, “Are Emily and Greg More Employable than Lakisha and Jamal? A Field Experiment on Labor Market Discrimination,” *American Economic Review* 94:4 (Sept. 2004): 991–1013.
14. See chapter 3, [endnotes 5–7](#).
15. Raj Chetty, Nathaniel Hendren, Maggie R. Jones, and Sonya R. Porter, “Race and Economic Opportunity in the United States: An Intergenerational Perspective,” *NBER Working Paper No. 2444*, March 2018.
16. Fikkert and Mask, *From Dependence to Dignity*, 91–93; Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 81–82.
17. E. J. R. David, *Brown Skin, White Minds: Filipino–American Postcolonial Psychology* (Charlotte: Information Age Publishing, 2013), 67–68, 116–17. See also E. J. R. David, ed., *Internalized Oppression: The Psychology of Marginalized Groups* (New York: Springer Publishing Company, 2013).
18. David, *Brown Skin, White Minds*, 79–105.
19. *Ibid.*, 137–54.
20. Wright, *The Mission of God*, 431–32.
21. Ankur Shingal, “The Devadasi System: Temple Prostitution in India,” *UCLA Women's Law Journal* 22:1 (January 1, 2015): 107–23; Nicholas B. Dirks, *Castes of Mind*:

Colonialism and the Making of Modern India (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

22. Shingal, "The Devadasi System."
23. Some scholars believe that in order to garner worship for themselves, demons hide behind false teachers and idols so that people are often tricked into worshipping Satan and his legions. For helpful discussions of this topic, see Kevin Strange, *Their Rock Is Not Like Our Rock* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014); Wright, *The Mission of God*; Vern S. Poythress, "Territorial Spirits: Some Biblical Perspectives," *Urban Mission* 13, no. 2 (Dec. 1995): 37–49.
24. See Wright, *The Mission of God*, 147–63.
25. Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, *Christian Witness to People of African Traditional Religions*, Lausanne Occasional Papers, Mini-Consultation on Reaching Traditional Religionists, Pattaya, Thailand, June 16–27, 1980.
26. Philip Jenkins, "Believing in the Global South," *First Things*, December 20, 2006, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2006/12/believing-in-the-global-south>.
27. Kevin M. Coulter, "The Demons of African Pentecostalism," *First Things*, January 9, 2014, <https://www.firstthings.com/blogs/firstthoughts/2014/01/pentecostals-and-the-demonic>; Jill Filipovic and Ty McCormick, "Angels and Demons," *Foreign Policy*, December 20, 2009, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/12/20/angels-and-demons/#sthash.p1WcuqLK.dpbs>.
28. See discussion in Fikkert and Mask, *From Dependence to Dignity*, 93–94. See also Joel Mokyr, *The Enlightened Economy: An Economic History of Britain 1700–1850* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012); Deirdre N. McCloskey, *Bourgeois Dignity: Why Economics Can't Explain the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); Robert E. Lucas Jr., *Lectures on Economic Growth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).
29. C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, C. S. Lewis Signature Classics Edition (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2001), 31.
30. Chaplin et al., "Poverty and Materialism."
31. Ibid.
32. Orlando Patterson, "The Social and Cultural Matrix of Black Youth," chapter 1 in *The Cultural Matrix: Understanding Black Youth*, Orlando Patterson with Ethan Fosse, eds. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 88–89.
33. See the helpful discussion in Poythress, "Territorial Spirits."
34. Black, *Women in Ritual Slavery*, 20–21.
35. Joshua Project, "Devadasi in India," joshuaproject.net/people_groups/16683/IN.

36. *Testimony of Nadiyah Shereff: Young Woman Formerly Detained in the Juvenile Justice System*, Subcommittee Hearing on Girls in the Juvenile Justice System: Strategies to Help Girls Achieve their Full Potential, U.S. House of Representatives Judiciary Committee Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism, and Homeland Security, October 20, 2009.
37. Putnam, *Our Kids*, 110–11.
38. K. Collins, K. Connors, S. Davis, A. Donohue, S. Gardner, E. Goldblatt, A. Hayward, L. Kiser, F. Strieder, E. Thompson, *Understanding the Impact of Trauma and Urban Poverty on Family Systems: Risks, Resilience, and Interventions* (Baltimore: Family Informed Trauma Treatment Center, 2010), 12.
39. Malika Saada Saar, Rebecca Epstein, Lindsay Rosenthal, and Yasmin Vafa, *The Sexual Abuse to Prison Pipeline: The Girls' Story* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Law Center, 2015), 7.
40. Orlando Patterson, “The Real Problem with America’s Inner Cities,” *New York Times*, May 9, 2015, www.nytimes.com/2015/05/10/opinion/sunday/the-real-problem-with-americas-inner-cities.html.
41. Patterson, “The Social and Cultural Matrix,” 88–89.
42. *Ibid.*, 78–92.
43. Jody Miller, “Culture, Inequality, and Gender Relations among Urban Black Youth,” chapter 11 in *The Cultural Matrix*, 376.

Chapter 8: Reconsidering Redemption: Fully Embodied Hope

1. Though widely quoted and always attributed to Henry, we are unable to find a verified source for this quote.
2. Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 161.
3. Michael Rhodes and Robby Holt with Brian Fikkert, *Practicing the King’s Economy: Honoring Jesus in How We Work, Earn, Spend, Save, and Give* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 130.
4. See Fikkert and Mask, *From Dependence to Dignity*.
5. *World Happiness Report 2015*, John Helliwell, Richard Layard, and Jeffrey Sachs, eds. (New York: Sustainable Development Solutions Network, 2017), 28. Togo’s ranking improved to 139 in *World Happiness Report 2018*, but the events reported in this story took place in 2015, so we are using the data from that time period.
6. Data is for 2011. Muriel E. S. Ametoglo and Pr. Guo Ping, “Inequality, Poverty and Inclusive Growth in TOGO: An Assessment of the Survey Data,” *Journal of Poverty*,

Investment and Development 29 (2016): 44.

7. For more on Christ's authority over nature, sickness, and the demonic, and His proclamation to the poor, see Kopic, *The God Who Gives*, 75–88.
8. Timothy J. Keller, *Ministries of Mercy: The Call of the Jericho Road*, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1997), 52–53.
9. Herman Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1962), xi.
10. For a helpful treatment of this complex topic, see Jeremy R. Treat, *The Crucified King: Atonement and Kingdom in Biblical and Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014). Treat explains, "The basic point is that penal substitution and *Christus Victor* are doing different things in the explanation of the cross. Penal substitution explains the means of victory—or how Christ's suffering disarms Satan—and is usually depicted in cultic and/or forensic terms. *Christus Victor* explains the effect of Christ's accomplishment on Satan and his dominion over sinners. These two aspects of the atonement need not compete, for they are explanations of different (yet inseparable) aspects of Christ's work" (208). In addition, Treat explains that while "*Christus Victor* and penal substitution" is more biblically sound than "*Christus Victor* versus penal substitution," it is more accurate to say "*Christus Victor* through penal substitution," since Christ's kingdom is established *through* Christ's atonement for our sins on the cross, 193–226.
11. John Piper, "What Happens When You Die? The Dead Will Be Raised Imperishable" (sermon, Minneapolis, July 25, 1993), Desiring God, at www.desiringgod.org/messages/what-happens-when-you-die-the-dead-will-be-raised-imperishable.
12. For a fuller treatment of how a better appreciation of the incarnation can transform our view of God, ourselves, and the experience of suffering, including physical pain, see Kelly M. Kopic, *Embodied Hope: A Theological Meditation on Pain and Suffering* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017).
13. See "Evangelical Gnosticism's Poverty Alleviation Strategy 1: Handouts of Material Resources Plus Evangelism" in [chapter 4](#).
14. Myers, *Walking with the Poor*, 228, 234.
15. Rhodes and Holt, *Practicing the King's Economy*, 33–34, 38–40.
16. *Ibid.*, 131.
17. Charles Murray, *Coming Apart: The State of White America 1960-2010* (New York: Crown Forum, 2013).
18. As Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers

Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 469, states, “So the reality of this people, rendered to us in the Old Testament scriptures, generates an ethic of paradigm and analogy, in which we assume the moral consistency of God and ask, ‘If this is what God required of them, what, in our different context, does God require of us?’”

19. Rhodes and Holt, *Practicing the King’s Economy*, 91–92.
20. This section based on Brian’s personal experience.
21. For a further description of this curriculum, see Fikkert and Mask, *From Dependence to Dignity*, 250–75.
22. The Lausanne Movement, *The Capetown Commitment*, Part 2, Section IIE.5. See also David W. Jones and Russell S. Woodbridge, *Health, Wealth, & Happiness: Has the Prosperity Gospel Overshadowed the Gospel of Jesus Christ?* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2011); Lausanne Theology Working Group, *A Statement on the Prosperity Gospel*, web-based resource:
www.lausanne.org/en/documents/all/twg/1099-a-statement-on-the-prosperity-gospel.html.
23. For more along these lines, see Kopic, *Embodied Hope*, 116–17.

Chapter 9: The New Creation Dawns

1. John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1955), 16.
2. J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (London, UK: Hodder and Stoughton, 1973), 224.
3. This story and all of the quotes from Mimi Nikkel in this chapter are from an interview with Brian conducted on April 26, 2018.
4. Billings, *Union with Christ*, 48.
5. For example, Ex. 15:13; Lev. 26:11; 2 Chron. 29:6; Ps. 27:5, 31:20, 84:1, 90:1; John 1:14; 1 Cor. 5:2; Eph. 2:22; Rev. 21:3.
6. Steven Bouma-Prediger and Brian J. Walsh, *Beyond Homelessness: Christian Faith in a Culture of Displacement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2008), 297.
7. For more on union with Christ, see Grant Macaskill, *Union with Christ in the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Marcus Peter Johnson, *One with Christ: An Evangelical Theology of Salvation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013); Constantine R. Campbell, *Paul and Union with Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012); Robert Letham, *Union with Christ: In Scripture, History and Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 2011); Billings, *Union with Christ*.
8. For those new to this topic, see the very helpful article by Justin Taylor, *Union with*

Christ: A Crash Course, The Gospel Coalition website, February 9, 2011, thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justintaylor/2011/02/09/union-with-christ-a-crash-course.

Taylor rightly points to the following passages as formative in shaping this doctrine: John 6:56, 15:4–7; Rom. 8:10; 1 Cor. 15:22; 2 Cor. 12:2; 13:5; Gal. 2:20; 3:28; Eph. 1:4; 2:10; 3:17; Phil. 3:9; Col. 1:27; 1 Thess. 4:16; 1 John 4:13.

9. Johnson, *One with Christ*, 40–57.

10. Billings, *Union with Christ*, 33.

11. Benjamin L. Gladd and Matthew S. Harmon, *Making All Things New: Inaugurated Eschatology for the Life of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 10.

12. Billings, *Union with Christ*, 33.

13. For a fuller unpacking of the distinction between ‘union’ and ‘communion’ and how this dynamic shapes the Christian life, see Kelly M. Kapic, “The Law-Gospel Distinction in Reformed Theology and Ministry,” chapter 6 in *God’s Two Words: Law and Gospel in Lutheran and Reformed Traditions*, ed. by Jonathan Linebaugh (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2018), 146.

14. For more on this distinction between “union” and “communion,” see also Kelly M. Kapic, “Worshiping the Triune God: The Shape of John Owen’s Trinitarian Spirituality,” introductory essay in *Communion with the Triune God*, by John Owen, Kelly M. Kapic and Justin Taylor, eds. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 17–46, esp. 20–23.

15. Ibid. Technically speaking, union with Christ provides the foundation for communion with Christ.

16. Snell, “The Rise of Living Alone and Loneliness in History.”

17. For a recent call for male and female believers to more faithfully relate as siblings in God’s household, rather than seeing one another as the world encourages us to treat one another, see Aimee Byrd, *Why Can’t We Be Friends? Avoidance is Not Purity* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 2018).

18. Barna Group, “What Millennials Want When They Visit Church,” March 4, 2015, <https://www.barna.com/research/what-millennials-want-when-they-visit-church>.

19. Jeff Brumley, “Millennial’s Message to Churches: Please Stop Trying to Attract Millennials,” *Baptist News Global*, April 16, 2018, https://baptistnews.com/article/millennials-messge-to-churches-please-stop-trying-to-attract-millennials/#.W8k6sBNKg_U; “The Real Reason Why Millennials Aren’t Going to Church, and It’s Not Because They Hate Jesus,” *CBN News*, April 17, 2017, <https://www1.cbn.com/cbnnews/us/2017/april/the-real-reason-why-millennials-arent-going-to-church-and-its-not-because-they-hate-jesus>; Rachel Held Evans, “Why

- Millennials Are Leaving the Church,” *belief blog at CNN*, July 27, 2013, religion.blogs.cnn.com/2013/07/27/why-millennials-are-leaving-the-church; Barna Group, “5 Reasons Millennials Stay Connected to Church,” September 17, 2013, 2018 at <https://www.barna.com/research/5-reasons-millennials-stay-connected-to-church>.
20. Russell D. Moore, “A Prophetic Minority; Kingdom, Culture, and Mission in a New Era,” The Inaugural Address of Russell D. Moore as President of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, Capitol Hill Baptist Church, Washington, DC, September 10, 2013, at www.russellmoore.com/2013/09/19/a-prophetic-minority-kingdom-culture-and-mission-in-a-new-era.
 21. Russell D. Moore, “Are Millennials Selfish and Entitled?” blog post of March 17, 2016, www.russellmoore.com/2016/03/17/are-millennials-selfish-and-entitled.
 22. Aaron Cline Hanbury, “Do Millennials Have the Strongest Faith of Any Generation?” *Relevant*, September 22, 2016, <https://relevantmagazine.com/god/god-our-generation/do-millennial-christians-have-strongest-faith-any-generation>.
 23. Barna Group, “What Millennials Want”; idem. “5 Reasons Millennials Stay.”
 24. Davis, *Worship and the Reality of God*, 62–63.
 25. Different ecclesiastical traditions have slightly different items on this list. Some would not include prayer, while others, including the Wesleyans, include care for the poor.
 26. For classic brief statements on the “outward” (sometimes called “ordinary” or “normal”) means of grace, see Westminster Larger Catechism (Q. 154f.) and Westminster Shorter Catechism (Q. 88f.). For an accessible and helpful introduction to this topic, see Luke Stamps, “Especially Preaching: The Ordinary Means of Grace and Christian Spirituality,” Gospel Coalition website, February 10, 2011, <http://thegospelcoalition.org/article/especially-preaching-the-ordinary-means-of-grace-and-christian-spirituality>. For a more extensive treatment, see Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims On the Way* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 751–87.
 27. Barna, “Meet Those Who ‘Love Jesus but Not the Church,’” March 30, 2017, accessed online on September 11, 2018 at www.barna.com/research/meet-love-jesus-not-church.
 28. John Jefferson Davis, *Meditation and Communion with God: Contemplating Scripture in an Age of Distraction* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 121.
 29. Beale and Kim, 29; John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 15.
 30. Thanks to Matthew Kaemingk for this insight in a conversation with Brian on March

27, 2018.

Chapter 10: Living Into the Story

1. Russell Moore, *Tempted and Tried: Temptation and the Triumph of Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2011), 75.
2. Hans Schwarz, *The Human Being: A Theological Anthropology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2013), 385.
3. Interviews with Brian, fall of 2006.
4. Adapted from Brian Fikkert, “God Has Chosen the Foolish and the Despised Things,” *Mandate*, newsletter of the Chalmers Center for Economic Development at Covenant College, <https://www.chalmers.org/news/entry/god-has-chosen-the-foolish-and-the-despised-things>.
5. To learn more about church-centered savings and credit associations, see Fikkert and Mask, *From Dependence to Dignity*, 250–75.
6. Fikkert and Rhodes, *Practicing the King’s Economy*, 105–6.
7. Note that while the Bible calls the local church to care for the poor, it does *not* indicate that only the local church should do so. Even in simple societies, the Bible calls on individuals (Matt. 25:31–46), families (1 Tim. 5:8), businesses (Lev. 19:9–10), and governments (Ps. 72; Dan. 4:27) to play a role. Hence, it takes wisdom to discern the proper role of each institution in any given setting. For a further discussion of this topic, see Timothy J. Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 322–28; Corbett and Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts*, 44–45.
8. Some English translations of 2 Peter 3:10 seem to indicate that the present world will be completely destroyed. For example, the King James Version says “the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up.” Other translations suggest something more akin to being tested or purified. For example, the ESV says “the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed.” As Al M. Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2005), 47–48, argues, the latter translation seems to have more merit and is more consistent with the overall teachings of scripture, which suggest both continuity and discontinuity between this world and the next (Rom. 8:18–25; Phil. 3:21; Col. 1:15–20; Rev. 21:24).
9. As Wright notes in *Surprised by Hope*, 55, we can see evidence of both continuity and discontinuity between the old and the new creation in Jesus’ resurrection body. The fact that Jesus’ followers recognize Him demonstrates the continuity, while the fact

that His resurrection body can go through locked doors shows the discontinuity.

10. Stanley Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church's Witness and Natural Theology* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2001), 214.
11. Ibid.
12. Rick Warren as quoted in Ed Stetzer and David Putman, *Breaking the Missional Code: Your Church Can Become a Missionary in Your Community* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2006), 173–74.
13. Myers, *Walking with the Poor*, 191.
14. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1989), 227.
15. Brian Fikkert, “How Do We Flourish? The Image of God and *Homo Economicus*,” in *Made in the Image of God: The Importance of the Imago Dei for Issues in International Development*, Krish Kandiah, Hannah J. Swithinbank, and David Westlake, eds. (Teddington, UK: Tearfund, 2017), 64.



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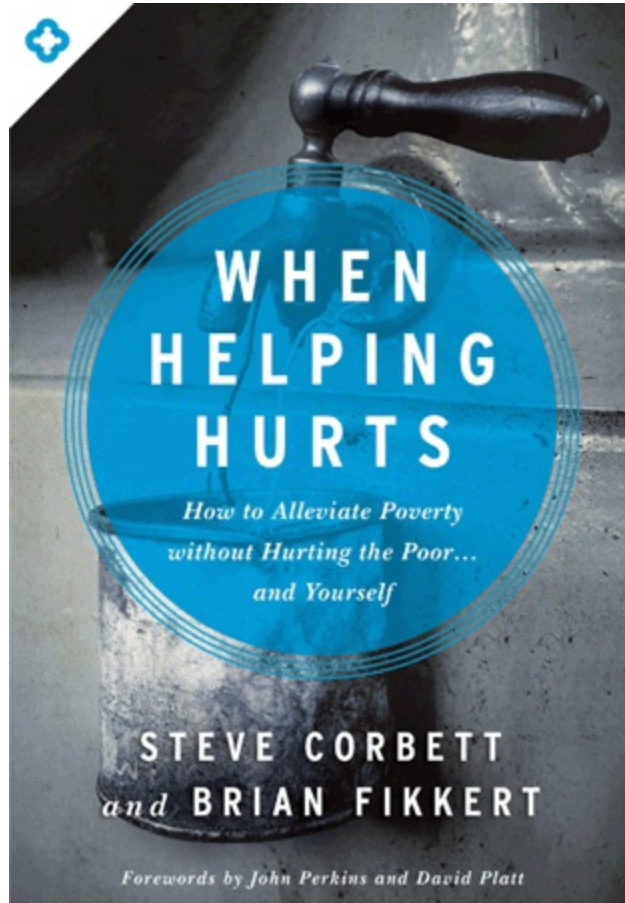
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WHY DID JESUS COME TO EARTH?

Why did Jesus come to earth?¹ Most Christians have a ready answer to this question. However, there are actually nuanced differences in how Christians think about this most basic issue, and those small differences can have dramatic consequences for all endeavors, including how the church responds to the plight of the poor. Let's examine how Jesus Himself understood His mission.

Jesus' earthly ministry began one Sabbath day in a synagogue in Nazareth. Week in and week out, Jews gathered in this synagogue to worship under the chafing yoke of the Roman Empire. Aware of Old Testament prophecy, these worshipers were longing for God to send the promised Messiah who would restore the kingdom to Israel, reigning on David's throne forever. But centuries had gone by with no Messiah, and the Romans were running the show. Hope was probably in short supply. It is in this context that the son of a carpenter from that very town stood up and was handed a scroll from the prophet Isaiah.

Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." ...

The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, and he began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." (*Luke 4:17-21*)

A shiver must have gone down the spine of the worshipers that day. Isaiah had prophesied that a King was coming who would usher in a kingdom unlike anything the world had ever seen. Could it be that Isaiah's prophecies were really about to come true? Could it really be that a kingdom whose domain would increase without end was about to begin (Isa. 9:7)? Was it really possible that justice, peace, and righteousness were about to be established forever? Would this King really bring healing to the parched soil, the feeble hands, the shaky knees, the fearful hearts, the blind, the deaf, the lame, the mute, the brokenhearted, the captives, and the sinful souls, and

would proclaim the year of jubilee for the poor (Isa. 35:1–6; 53:5; 61:1–2)? Jesus’ answer to all these questions was a resounding “yes,” declaring, “*Today* this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”

In the same chapter, Jesus summarized His ministry as follows: “I must preach the good news of the *kingdom of God* to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent” (Luke 4:43, italics added). The mission of Jesus was and is to preach the good news of the kingdom of God, to say to one and all, “I am the King of kings and Lord of lords, and I am using My power to fix everything that sin has ruined.” As pastor and theologian Tim Keller states, “The kingdom is the renewal of the whole world through the entrance of supernatural forces. As things are brought back under Christ’s rule and authority, they are restored to health, beauty, and freedom.”²

Of course there is both a “now” and a “not yet” to the kingdom. The full manifestation of the kingdom will not occur until there is a new heaven and a new earth. Only then will every tear be wiped from our eyes (Rev. 21:4). But two thousand years ago, Jesus clearly stated that there is a “now” to the kingdom, saying, “*Today* this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21).

A FULLER ANSWER TO THE QUESTION

We have asked thousands of evangelical Christians in numerous contexts this most basic question—why did Jesus come to earth?—and the vast majority of people say something like, “Jesus came to die on the cross to save us from our sins so that we can go to heaven.” While this answer is true, Jesus’ message is an even more grand and sweeping epic than that: “The kingdom of heaven is at hand. I am the King who is bringing healing to the entire cosmos. If—and only if—you repent and believe in me, you will someday enjoy all of the many benefits that my kingdom brings.”

Contrast the response of most evangelicals with the following passage concerning the nature and work of Jesus Christ:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the

firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. (Col. 1:15–20)

In this passage Jesus Christ is described as the Creator, Sustainer, and Reconciler of *everything*. Yes, Jesus died for our souls, but He also died to reconcile—that is, to put into right relationship—all that He created. This is what we sing every year in the Christmas carol, “He comes to make His blessings known far as the curse is found.” The curse is cosmic in scope, bringing decay, brokenness, and death to every speck of the universe. But as King of kings and Lord of lords, Jesus is making all things new! This is the good news of the gospel.

When she was three years old, my daughter Anna bowed her head one night and prayed, “Dear Jesus, please come back soon, because we have lots of owies, and they hurt.” I got all choked up listening to her, for she had captured the essence of the comprehensive healing of the kingdom and was longing for this healing to happen to her. She was praying—in three-year-old language—“Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10 KJV). Yes, come quickly Lord Jesus, for we do have lots of owies, and they really hurt.

Is Jesus Really the Messiah?

Jesus claimed to be the promised King, but how do we know His claims were true? This question has perplexed everyone from the lepers of Jesus’ day to the greatest minds of the twenty-first century. But it is a bit surprising that at the end of his life, John the Baptist himself was still uncertain about the authenticity of Jesus. John had spent his entire career eating locusts and wild honey, wearing strange clothes, hanging out in the desert, and preaching to one and all that Jesus was the promised Messiah, the King who would reign on David’s throne. But now John found himself in Herod’s prison about to have his head chopped off. He was likely thinking to himself, *If Jesus is really the Messiah, surely He would start the coup against King Herod before I, his secretary of state, get executed!* But there was no coup attempt, and John understandably developed some doubt.

So John sent two of his disciples to ask Jesus, “Are you the one who was to

come, or should we expect someone else?” (Luke 7:19). There are so many ways that Jesus could have answered this question. He could have pointed out that His birth in Bethlehem from the line of David was consistent with prophecies about the Messiah. Or Jesus could have referred to His remarkable knowledge of the Scriptures and to His unparalleled teaching abilities. Or Jesus could have reminded John that they had both witnessed the Holy Spirit descend upon Jesus in the form of a dove and had heard God the Father say, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased” (Matt. 3:17). If this latter event couldn’t convince John, it would seem that nothing could! But Jesus chose not to point to any of these signs. John was already aware of these and apparently needed something else to comfort him. So Jesus said:

Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me. (*Luke 7:22–23*)

In essence, Jesus was saying to John, “John, you have not run the race in vain. I am the promised Messiah. And you can be sure because of what your disciples are *both hearing Me say and seeing Me do*. I am preaching the good news of the kingdom, *and* I am showing the good news of the kingdom, just as Isaiah said I would.”

How useless it would have been if Jesus had only used words and not deeds to declare the kingdom. Imagine reading the story in Luke 18:35–43 about the blind beggar who was sitting along the roadside. Learning that Jesus was walking by, he called out, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” What if Jesus had said, “I am the fulfillment of all prophecy. I am the King of kings and Lord of lords. I have all the power in heaven and earth. I could heal you today of your blindness, but I only care about your soul. Believe in Me”? Who would have believed that Jesus was the promised King if He had not given any evidence to prove it? As Peter stated at Pentecost, “Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know” (Acts 2:22). Jesus’ deeds were essential to proving that He truly was the promised Messiah. Jesus preached the good

news of the kingdom, and He showed the good news of the kingdom.

What Would Jesus Do?

In his book *The Last Days: A Son's Story of Sin and Segregation at the Dawn of the New South*, Charles Marsh describes growing up in Laurel, Mississippi, during the 1960s. Racial tensions were high as the federal government sought to end segregation. Civil rights workers, many of whom came from the North, poured into the region, seeking to end centuries of discrimination against African Americans. Charles's father was the well-known pastor of First Baptist Church in Laurel and was a pillar of the community. Beloved for his outstanding preaching and godly living, Reverend Marsh was to his parishioners the model Christian.

Also living in Laurel, Mississippi, was Sam Bowers, the Imperial Wizard of the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan of Mississippi, who terrorized African Americans throughout the region. Bowers was suspected of plotting at least nine murders of African Americans and civil rights workers, seventy-five bombings of African-American churches, and numerous beatings and physical assaults.

How did Reverend Marsh, the model Christian, respond to this situation? Charles explains:

There is no doubt my father loathed the Klan when he thought about them at all. In his heart of hearts, he considered slavery a sin, racisms like Germany's or South Africa's an offense to the faith, and he taught me as much in occasional pronouncements on Southern history over homework assignments. "There is no justification for what we did to the Negro. It was an evil thing and we were wrong." Nevertheless, the work of the Lord lay elsewhere. "Be faithful in church attendance, for your presence can, if nothing else, show that you are on God's side when the doors of the Church are opened," he advised in the church bulletin. Of course, packing the pews is one of any minister's fantasies—there's always the wish to grow, grow, grow. But the daily installments of Mississippi burning, the crushing poverty of the town's Negro inhabitants, the rituals of white supremacy, the smell of terror pervading the streets like Masonite's stench, did not figure into his sermons or in our dinner-table conversations or in the talk of the church. These were, to a good Baptist preacher like him, finally matters of politics, having little or nothing to do with the spiritual geography of a pilgrim's journey to paradise. Unwanted annoyances? Yes. Sad evidences of our human failings? Certainly. But all of these would be rectified in some eschatological future—"when we all get to Heaven, what a day of rejoicing that

will be.”³

Like many Christians then and now, Reverend Marsh’s Christianity rightly emphasized personal piety but failed to embrace the social concern that should emanate from a kingdom perspective. He believed Christianity largely consisted in keeping one’s soul pure by avoiding alcohol, drugs, and sexual impurity, and by helping others to keep their souls pure too. There was little “now” of the kingdom for Reverend Marsh, apart from the saving of souls.

Indeed, for many Christians James 1:27 says, “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: ... to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.” Somehow, we often overlook the phrase that pure and faultless religion includes “look[ing] after orphans and widows in their distress.”

While Reverend Marsh preached personal piety and the hope of heaven, African Americans were being lynched in Mississippi through the plotting of Sam Bowers. Less dramatic but even more pervasive was the entire social, political, and economic system designed to keep African Americans in their place. What would King Jesus do in this situation? Would He simply evangelize the African Americans, saying, “I have heard your cries for help, but your earthly plight is of no concern to Me. Believe in Me, and I will transport your soul to heaven someday. In the meantime, abstain from alcohol, drugs, and sexual impurity”? Is this how Jesus responded to the blind beggar who pleaded for mercy?

Reverend Marsh was under enormous pressure. If he spoke out against the Ku Klux Klan, he rightly feared that he would lose his job and that his family would be in danger of physical harm. Moreover, his theological lenses were more attuned to issues of personal piety than to “seeking justice and encouraging the oppressed” (Isa. 1:17). For all of these reasons, Reverend Marsh focused his attention and energies, not on fighting the Ku Klux Klan, but on the lack of personal piety and unbelief of some of the civil rights workers. This culminated in his writing a famous sermon, “The Sorrow of Selma,” in which he lambasted the civil rights workers, calling them “unbathed beatniks,” “immoral kooks,” and “sign-carrying degenerates” who were hypocrites for not believing in God.⁴

In one sense, Reverend Marsh was right. Many of the civil rights protestors longed for the peace, justice, and righteousness of the kingdom, but they did

not want to bend the knee to the King Himself, which is a prerequisite for enjoying the full benefits of the kingdom. In contrast, Reverend Marsh embraced King Jesus, but he did not understand the fullness of Christ's kingdom and its implications for the injustices in his community. Both Reverend Marsh and the civil rights workers were wrong, but in different ways. Reverend Marsh sought the King without the kingdom. The civil rights workers sought the kingdom without the King. The church needs a Christ-centered, fully orbed, kingdom perspective to correctly answer the question: "What would Jesus do?"

What Is the Task of the Church?

The task of God's people is rooted in Christ's mission. Simply stated, Jesus preached the good news of the kingdom in word and in deed, so the church must do the same. And as we have seen, Jesus particularly delighted in spreading the good news among the hurting, the weak, and the poor. Hence, it is not surprising that throughout history God's people have been commanded to follow their King's footsteps into places of brokenness.

In the Old Testament, God's chosen people, the nation of Israel, were to point forward to the coming King by foreshadowing what He would be like (Matt. 5:17; John 5:37–39, 45–46; Col. 2:16–17). Israel was to be a sneak preview of the coming attraction: King Jesus. Like any sneak preview, Israel was to give viewers an idea of what the main event would be like and to make viewers want to see the main event. When people looked at Israel, they were supposed to say to themselves, "Wow! These people are really different. I can't wait to meet their King. He must really be something special." Hence, since King Jesus would bring good news for the poor, it is not surprising that God wanted Israel to care for the poor as well.

In fact, God gave Moses numerous commands instructing Israel to care for the poor. The Sabbath guaranteed a day of rest for the slave and alien (Ex. 23:10–12). The Sabbath year canceled debts for Israelites, allowed the poor to glean from the fields, and set slaves free as well as equipping the slaves to be productive (Deut. 15:1–18). The Jubilee year emphasized liberty; it released slaves and returned land to its original owners (Lev. 25:8–55). Other laws about debt, tithing, and gleaning ensured that the poor would be cared for each day of the year (Lev. 25:35–38; Deut. 14:28–29; Lev. 19:9–10). The

commands were so extensive that they were designed to achieve the ultimate goal of eradicating poverty among God's people: "There should be no poor among you," God declared (Deut. 15:4).

Unfortunately, Israel did not fulfill its task. She was a lousy sneak preview of the coming attraction, and God sent His chosen people into exile as a result. For what specific sins was Israel sent into captivity? Consider the following excerpts from passages in Isaiah in which God is indicting Israel for her sins and promising to send her into exile. What do you notice as you read these passages?

Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom; listen to the law of our God, you people of Gomorrah! "The multitude of your sacrifices—what are they to me?" says the Lord. "I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals; I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats. When you come to appear before me, who has asked this of you, this trampling of my courts? Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. New Moons, Sabbaths, and convocations—I cannot bear your evil assemblies.... Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow. (*Isa. 1:10–13, 16b–17*)

Shout it aloud, do not hold back. Raise your voice like a trumpet. Declare to my people their rebellion and to the house of Jacob their sins. For day after day they seek me out; they seem eager to know my ways, as if they were a nation that does what is right and has not forsaken the commands of its God. They ask me for just decisions and seem eager for God to come near them. "Why have we fasted," they say, "and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?" ... Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for a man to humble himself? Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed and for lying on sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord? Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I. If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday.

(Isa. 58:1–3, 5–10)

Why was Israel sent into captivity? Many of us have a picture in our minds of the Israelites getting out of bed every morning and running off to the nearest shrine to worship idols. Indeed, numerous passages in the Old Testament indicate that idolatry was a problem in Israel. But these passages give a broader picture. Here Israel appears to be characterized by personal piety and the outward expressions of formal religion: worshiping, offering sacrifices, celebrating religious holidays, fasting, and praying. Translate this into the modern era, and we might say these folks were faithfully going to church each Sunday, attending midweek prayer meeting, going on the annual church retreat, and singing contemporary praise music. But God was disgusted with them, going so far as to call them “Sodom and Gomorrah”!

Why was God so displeased? Both passages emphasize that God was furious over Israel’s failure to care for the poor and the oppressed. He wanted His people to “loose the chains of injustice,” and not just go to church on Sunday. He wanted His people to “clothe the naked,” and not just attend midweek prayer meeting. He wanted His people to “spend themselves on behalf of the hungry,” and not just sing praise music.

Personal piety and formal worship are essential to the Christian life, but they must lead to lives that “act justly and love mercy” (Mic. 6:8).

In the New Testament, God’s people, the church, are more than just a sneak preview of King Jesus. The church is the body, bride, and very fullness of Jesus Christ (Eph. 1:18–23; 4:7–13; 5:32). When people look at the church, they should see the very embodiment of Jesus! When people look at the church, they should see the One who declared—in word and in deed to the leper, the lame, and the poor—that His kingdom is bringing healing to every speck of the universe.

In fact, we see this from the very start of the church’s ministry. When Jesus sent out His twelve disciples for the first time, we read, “He sent them out to preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick” (Luke 9:2). Later, Jesus sent out seventy-two others, commanding them, “Heal the sick who are there and tell them, ‘The kingdom of God is near you’” (Luke 10:9). The message was the kingdom of God, and it was to be communicated in both word and deed.

And in the very first passage concerning the gathering of the church, we

read, “There were no needy persons among them” (Acts 4:34). Theologian Dennis Johnson explains that Luke, the author of Acts, is intentionally repeating the language we saw earlier in Deuteronomy 15:4 in which God told Israel: “There should be no poor among you.”⁵ Luke is indicating that while Israel had failed to care for the poor and was sent into captivity, God’s people have been restored and are now embodying King Jesus and His kingdom, a kingdom in which there is no poverty (Rev. 21:1–4). Indeed, throughout the New Testament, care of the poor is a vital concern of the church (Matt. 25:31–46; Acts 6:1–7; Gal. 2:1–10; 6:10; James 1:27). Perhaps no passage states it more succinctly than 1 John 3:16–18:

This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.

The Bible’s teachings should cut to the heart of North American Christians. By any measure, we are the richest people ever to walk on planet Earth. Furthermore, at no time in history has there ever been greater economic disparity in the world than at present.

Economic historians have found that for most of human history there was little economic growth and relatively low economic inequality. As a result, by the year 1820, after thousands of years of human development, the average income per person in the richest countries was only about four times higher than the average income per person in the poorest countries.⁶ Then the Industrial Revolution hit, causing unprecedented economic growth in a handful of countries but leaving the rest of the world behind. As a result, while the average American lives on more than ninety dollars per day,⁷ approximately one billion people live on less than one dollar per day and 2.6 billion—40 percent of the world’s population—live on less than two dollars per day.⁸ If God’s people in both the Old and New Testaments were to have a concern for the poor during eras of relative economic equality, what are we to conclude about God’s desire for the North American church today? “If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?”

What is the task of the church? We are to embody Jesus Christ by doing

what He did and what He continues to do through us: declare—using both words and deeds—that Jesus is the King of kings and Lord of lords who is bringing in a kingdom of righteousness, justice, and peace. And the church needs to do this where Jesus did it, among the blind, the lame, the sick and outcast, and the poor.

AN ARMY OF OUTCASTS

Given the focus of Jesus' ministry, carried on through His body, it is not surprising that James makes the following observation about the early church: "Listen, my dear brothers: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?" (James 2:5). Similarly, Paul drives this point home in his letter to the very unlovely Corinthian church when he says:

Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. (*1 Cor. 1:26–29*)

Commenting on these passages, Mark Gornik, a theologian, pastor, and community developer in the United States, says, "Here then from both James and Paul is a central witness drawn from all of Scripture: God has sovereignly chosen to work in the world by beginning with the weak who are on the 'outside,' not the powerful who are on the 'inside.'"9

The claim here is not that the poor are inherently more righteous or sanctified than the rich. There is no place in the Bible that indicates that poverty is a desirable state or that material things are evil. In fact, wealth is viewed as a gift from God. The point is simply that, for His own glory, God has chosen to reveal His kingdom in the place where the world, in all of its pride, would least expect it, among the foolish, the weak, the lowly, and the despised.

It is strange indeed to place the poor at the center of a strategy for expanding a kingdom, but history indicates that this unconventional strategy has actually been quite successful. Sociologist Rodney Stark documents that the early church's engagement with suffering people was crucial to its

explosive growth. Cities in the Roman Empire were characterized by poor sanitation, contaminated water, high population densities, open sewers, filthy streets, unbelievable stench, rampant crime, collapsing buildings, and frequent illnesses and plagues. “Life expectancy at birth was less than thirty years—and probably substantially less.”¹⁰ The only way for cities to avoid complete depopulation from mortality was for there to be a constant influx of immigrants, a very fluid situation that contributed to urban chaos, deviant behavior, and social instability.

Rather than fleeing these urban cesspools, the early church found its niche there. Stark explains that the Christian concept of self-sacrificial love of others, emanating from God’s love for them, was a revolutionary concept to the pagan mind, which viewed the extension of mercy as an emotional act to be avoided by rational people. Hence, paganism provided no ethical foundation to justify caring for the sick and the destitute who were being trampled by the teeming urban masses. In contrast, Stark notes:

Christianity revitalized life in Greco-Roman cities by providing new norms and new kinds of social relationships able to cope with many urgent urban problems. To cities filled with the homeless and impoverished, Christianity offered charity as well as hope. To cities filled with newcomers and strangers, Christianity offered an immediate basis for attachments. To cities filled with orphans and widows, Christianity provided a new and expanded sense of family. To cities torn by violence and ethnic strife, Christianity offered a new basis for social solidarity. And to cities faced with epidemics, fires, and earthquakes, Christianity offered effective nursing services.¹¹

God’s kingdom strategy of ministering to and among the suffering was so powerful that other kings took note. In the fourth century AD, the Roman Emperor Julian tried to launch pagan charities to compete with the highly successful Christian charities that were attracting so many converts. Writing to a pagan priest, Julian complained, “The impious Galileans [i.e., the Christians] support not only their poor, but ours as well, everyone can see that our people lack aid from us.”¹²

As Christianity expanded across the Roman world, the urban poor were on center stage of the drama. And the same is true today. Historian Philip Jenkins documents that Christianity is experiencing explosive growth in Africa, Latin America, and parts of Asia, regions of the world often called the

“Majority World.” For example, by 2025, in terms of numbers of adherents, Africa will have replaced Europe and the United States as the center of Christianity. By 2050, Uganda alone is expected to have more Christians than the largest four or five European nations combined. And like the early church, the growth in the church in the Majority World is taking place primarily with the poor on center stage. Jenkins observes: “The most successful new denominations target their message very directly at the have-nots, or rather, the have nothings.”¹³

The Great Reversal

The idea that the church should be on the front lines of ministry to the poor is not a new concept in the North American context. As numerous scholars have noted, prior to the twentieth century, evangelical Christians played a large role in ministering to the physical and spiritual needs of the poor.¹⁴ However, this all changed at the start of the twentieth century as evangelicals battled theological liberals over the fundamental tenets of Christianity. Evangelicals interpreted the rising social gospel movement, which seemed to equate all humanitarian efforts with bringing in Christ’s kingdom, as part of the overall theological drift of the nation. As evangelicals tried to distance themselves from the social gospel movement, they ended up in large-scale retreat from the front lines of poverty alleviation. This shift away from the poor was so dramatic that church historians refer to the 1900–1930 era as the “Great Reversal” in the evangelical church’s approach to social problems.¹⁵

It is important to note that the Great Reversal preceded the rise of the welfare state in America. Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty did not occur until the 1960s, and even FDR’s relatively modest New Deal policies were not launched until the 1930s. In short, the evangelical church’s retreat from poverty alleviation was fundamentally due to shifts in theology and not—as many have asserted—to government programs that drove the church away from ministry to the poor. While the rise of government programs may have exacerbated the church’s retreat, they were not the primary cause. Theology matters, and the church needs to rediscover a Christ-centered, fully orbed perspective of the kingdom.

An Important Task but Not an Exclusive Task

Although the Bible teaches that the local church must care for both the spiritual and physical needs of the poor, the Bible does not indicate that only the local church must care for the poor. There is evidence in Scripture that even in simple societies, individuals (Matt. 25:31–46), families (1 Tim. 5:8), and even governments (Dan. 4:27; Ps. 72) have responsibilities to the poor. Of course, in the highly complex societies of today, a wide range of parachurch ministries is capable of ministering to the poor as well. While the parachurch should never undertake tasks that are exclusively given to the church—for example administration of the sacraments—the Scriptures indicate that care of the poor is not an exclusive task of the church.

Hence, while the church must care for the poor, the Bible gives Christians some freedom in deciding the extent and manner in which the local church should do this, either directly or indirectly. Sometimes, the local church might feel it is wise to own and operate a ministry to the poor under the direct oversight of its leadership. In other situations, the local church might feel that it would be wiser to minister indirectly by starting or supporting a parachurch ministry or simply by encouraging individuals to reach out to the poor. Wisdom must be used to determine the best course of action in each situation. However, whenever God’s people choose to minister outside of the direct oversight of the local church, they should always be seeking to partner with the local church, which has God-given authority over people’s spiritual lives.

What Do Laurel, Mississippi, and Kigali, Rwanda, Have in Common?

I had just finished presenting much of the material in this chapter to an audience in Africa. A very tall and muscular African man in the audience approached me with tears in his eyes. He said, “This is not what the missionaries taught us. They told us just to do evangelism to save people’s souls. But you are saying that Jesus cares about all of creation and that He wants us to minister to people’s bodies and souls. I can’t argue with the Bible passages you cited. But now how am I supposed to feel about the missionaries? They are my heroes.” He was visibly shaken.

“I am not fit to carry the shoes of those missionaries,” I assured him. “They packed their coffins in the ships that brought them to Africa, and many of them were martyred for the sake of the gospel. They are worthy of your highest admiration. But like all of us, they had some weaknesses.”

Unfortunately, this man's experience was not unique. The Great Reversal has shaped the North American church's mission strategies since the late nineteenth century. Often lacking an appreciation of the comprehensive implications of the kingdom of God, many missionaries have focused on evangelism to save people's souls but have sometimes neglected to "make disciples of all nations." Converts need to be trained in a biblical worldview that understands the implications of Christ's lordship for all of life and that seeks to answer the question: If Christ is Lord of all, how do we do farming, business, government, family, art, etc., to the glory of God?

Failure to include this "all of life" element in the gospel has been devastating in the Majority World. There is perhaps no better example of this than Rwanda. Despite the fact that 80 percent of Rwandans claimed to be Christians, a bloody civil war erupted in 1994 in which the Hutu majority conducted a brutal genocide against the Tutsi minority and Hutu moderates. Over a three-month period, an estimated 800,000 people were slaughtered, the vast majority of them Tutsis.

How could this happen? In their book *Changing the Mind of Missions: Where Have We Gone Wrong?* missiologists James Engle and William Dyrness explain that the answer lies in the Rwandan church's failure to apply a biblical worldview, a kingdom perspective, to all of life. For most Rwandans, Christianity was "little more than a superficial, privatized veneer on a secular lifestyle characterized by animistic values and longstanding tribal hatred and warfare.... The church was silent on such critical life-and-death issues as the dignity and worth of each person made in the image of God."¹⁶ In other words, the church in Rwanda lacked a Christ-centered, fully orbed kingdom perspective and hence was not equipped to fulfill the Great Commission by "discipling the nation."

So what do Laurel, Mississippi and Kigali, Rwanda have in common? Two things.

First, they both had churches that did not fully understand the implications of why Jesus came to earth. As a result, what was taught from the pulpit on Sunday morning didn't have the impact that the gospel should have had on people's lives from Monday through Saturday.

Second, despite the failures of His people, King Jesus brought His healing to the churches in both places. Over time, Reverend Marsh came to a fuller understanding of the implications of the gospel, eventually preaching a

sermon entitled “Amazing Grace for Every Race” and taking a public stand against racism. And today, churches in Rwanda are helping the Hutus and the Tutsis to reconcile with one another. The healing of the kingdom cannot be stopped. And announcing this good news—this gospel of the kingdom—is the reason that Jesus Christ came to earth.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

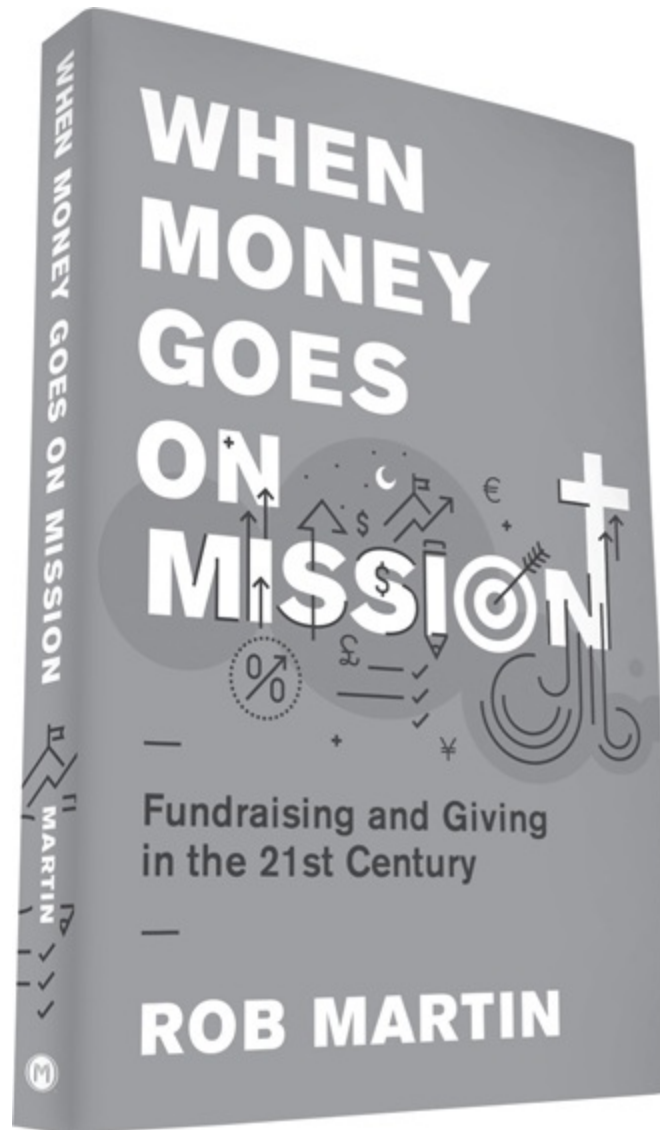
Please write responses to the following:

1. Reflect on your answer to the question at the start of this chapter: why did Jesus come to earth? How has your answer to this question shaped the way you live your life? How might you live a life that more fully reflects a Christ-centered, kingdom perspective? Be specific.
2. Did you know before reading this chapter that one of the reasons Israel was sent into captivity was her failure to care for the poor? If not, why not? What does the North American church’s ignorance about the cause of the captivity suggest about the way it is reading Scripture?
3. Reflect on how your church answers the question: what is the primary task of the church? Your church’s answer to this question might not be explicit. Hence, you might have to discern your church’s implicit answer to this question by thinking about the messages from the pulpit, the types of ministries pursued, and the way those ministries are conducted. How might your church more fully reflect a Christ-centered, kingdom theology in its ministries? Be specific.
4. When poor people look at your church, in what ways do they see the embodiment of Jesus Christ and the comprehensive healing of His kingdom? What else could your church be doing?
5. List three specific things you will try to do as a result of this chapter. Pray for God to give you the strength to be faithful in doing these things.

* * *

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