



RECONSIDER: POVERTY



WHEN HELPING HURTS

STEVE CORBETT
and BRIAN FIKKERT

Derived from *When Helping Hurts* and
When Helping Hurts Small Group Experience.



WHEN HELPING HURTS

*How to Alleviate Poverty
without Hurting the Poor...
and Yourself*

STEVE CORBETT
and BRIAN FIKKERT

Forewords by John Perkins and David Platt

PRAISE FOR *WHEN HELPING HURTS*

For over fifteen years I've worked alongside other Christians in efforts to effectively address poverty at home and abroad. I can honestly report that *When Helping Hurts* is the single best book I've seen on this topic. While accessible to beginners, it is rich with insight for veterans, too. With solid biblical exegesis, engaging stories from the front lines, and practical, no-nonsense advice, Corbett and Fikkert offer essential wisdom desperately needed in today's church. The book will make many readers uncomfortable: it reveals the unhealthy and frankly unbiblical ways congregations have undertaken to help the poor in their local communities and abroad through short-term missions. But it quickly offers hope in the form of understandable, feasible new strategies that better grasp the dignity and promise of the materially poor. This book deserves a #1 spot on the reading list of every Christian who wants to follow Jesus in genuine, mutually transforming love of neighbor.

—**AMY L. SHERMAN, PHD**, *Senior Fellow and Director, Sagamore Institute Center on Faith in Communities; author of Restorers of Hope*

What an opportunity evangelicals have to make a difference in our world through the church as we move deeper into the third millennium! Corbett and Fikkert build on the growing momentum of holistic witness that's sweeping our country and globe. Given their work nationally and internationally both personally and through the Chalmers Center, Corbett and Fikkert are eminently qualified and positioned to take motivated kingdom citizens on a Christ-centered and comprehensive journey that will pay huge dividends for impoverished people and for Christians in our broken world. *When Helping Hurts* will help the hurting—and us as well.

—**DR. RONALD J. SIDER**, *President, Evangelicals for Social Action Professor of Theology, Holistic Ministry, and Public Policy; Palmer Theological Seminary; author of Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*

From the early pages, where the authors promptly and humbly confess how they have “messed up” in their own efforts to alleviate poverty, to the last chapters where their vast experience and on-the-street wisdom show through so helpfully, this is a book that wonderfully combines heavy-duty thinking with practical tools. As a journalist, I appreciate the authors' storytelling and descriptive abilities. As a churchman, I appreciate their zeal to root all strategies in the institution God has ordained to bring about His goals. No donor should invest another dollar in any kind of relief effort before digesting the last page of this important book.

—**JOEL BELZ**, *Founder and writer, World magazine*

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STEVE CORBETT AND BRIAN FIKKERT

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FOREWORD – 2012

We live in a world of urgent spiritual and physical need.

Nearly three billion people are living on less than two dollars a day, and over a billion of them dwell in desperate poverty. They are starving in slums, sold into slavery, orphaned due to AIDS, and dying of preventable diseases. Some of them are our Christian brothers and sisters while others of them have never even heard of Christ.

So what are we to do? In light of massive need in the world and in view of God's merciful concern for the poor, how are we in the church to respond? This question forms the foundation for the pages that lie ahead. Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert have undertaken a mammoth task in this book, and I praise God for how they have carried it out.

They start with the Word of God, which is where we must begin. A book filled with practical thoughts and economic tips would be vain apart from eternal truth. This book is saturated with Scripture as the authors continually ground their assertions in God-breathed authority. They address poverty alleviation through the lens of redemptive history, and in so doing they rightly exalt Christ as the supreme healer of every human heart, whether rich or poor.

The authors move from God's Word to God's people, specifically the local church. Their conviction (which I share) that the local church has a unique

role to play in poverty alleviation affects everything they write. In a real sense, they are writing to the church and for the church; they want to see local churches carry out the commands of Christ in ways that are gracious to the poor, good for God's people, and glorifying to God's name.

But this book does not stall in the sphere of the theological and theoretical. It moves wonderfully from timeless truth to contemporary application. As you read, you won't just learn about problems in the world; you will discover how poverty in the world can actually be addressed. In the process of reading case studies, exploring critical questions, and analyzing current events, you will realize that God has given you—and your church—a unique opportunity to be a part of His global plan to make His great mercy known in your community and among all the nations.

For all of these reasons (and more), this book is virtually required reading for everyone in our church who is intentionally engaging the poor here and around the world. I cannot recommend it highly enough for anyone who is passionate about spreading and showing the love of Christ to the “least of these.”

Simply put, I have never read a better book on practically serving the poor, and I pray that God will use this new edition to equip his people to accomplish His purposes in a world of urgent spiritual and physical need for the glory of His great name.

—**DAVID PLATT**

Pastor, Church at Brook Hills, Birmingham, AL and author of Radical: Taking Back Your Faith from the American Dream

INITIAL THOUGHTS

Take a few minutes to answer the following question:

What is poverty? Make a list of words that come to your mind when you think of poverty.

WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

THE POOR SPEAK OUT ON POVERTY

At the end of World War II, the Allies established the World Bank to finance the rebuilding of war-torn Europe. The World Bank's efforts were remarkably successful, and the European economies experienced the fastest growth in their history. Given this success, the World Bank tried a similar approach to assisting low-income countries: lending them money on generous terms to promote economic growth and poverty reduction. The results were less than stellar. Pouring in capital had worked to rebuild countries like France, but it did little to help in places like India. On the surface the problems in both places looked the same—poverty and starvation, refugees, lack of infrastructure, inadequate social services, and anemic economies—but something was different about the Majority World.

Solving the problem of poverty continues to perplex the World Bank, which remains the premier public-sector institution trying to alleviate poverty in low-income countries. Hence, during the 1990s, after decades of very mixed results, the World Bank tried a new approach. It consulted with “the true poverty experts, the poor themselves,”¹ by asking more than sixty thousand poor people from sixty low-income countries the basic question: what is poverty? The results of this study have been published in a three-volume series of books

called *Voices of the Poor*. Below is a small sample of the words that the poor used to describe their own situation:

For a poor person everything is terrible—illness, humiliation, shame. We are cripples; we are afraid of everything; we depend on everyone. No one needs us. We are like garbage that everyone wants to get rid of.²

— MOLDOVA

When I don't have any [food to bring my family], I borrow, mainly from neighbors and friends. I feel ashamed standing before my children when I have nothing to help feed the family. I'm not well when I'm unemployed. It's terrible.³

— GUINEA-BISSAU

During the past two years we have not celebrated any holidays with others. We cannot afford to invite anyone to our house and we feel uncomfortable visiting others without bringing a present. The lack of contact leaves one depressed, creates a constant feeling of unhappiness, and a sense of low self-esteem.⁴

— LATVIA

When one is poor, she has no say in public, she feels inferior. She has no food, so there is famine in her house; no clothing, and no progress in her family.⁵

— UGANDA

[The poor have] a feeling of powerlessness and an inability to make themselves heard.⁶

— CAMEROON

Your hunger is never satisfied, your thirst is never quenched; you can never sleep until you are no longer tired.⁷

— SENEGAL

If you are hungry, you will always be hungry; if you are poor, you will always be poor.⁸

— VIETNAM

What determines poverty or well-being? The indigenous people's destiny is to be poor.⁹

— ECUADOR

What one shouldn't lack is the sheep, what one cannot live without is food.¹⁰

— CHINA

Please take a few minutes to list some key words or phrases that you see in the quotes listed above. Do you see any differences between how you described poverty at the start of this chapter and how the poor describe their own poverty? Is there anything that surprises you?

We have conducted the previous exercise in dozens of middle-to-upper-class, predominantly Caucasian, North American churches. In the vast majority of cases, these audiences describe poverty differently than the poor in low-income countries do. While poor people mention having a lack of material things, they tend to describe their condition in far more psychological and social terms than our North American audiences. Poor people typically talk in terms of shame, inferiority, powerlessness, humiliation, fear, hopelessness, depression, social isolation, and voicelessness. North American audiences tend to emphasize a lack of material things such as food, money, clean water, medicine, housing, etc. As will be discussed further below, this mismatch between many outsiders' perceptions of poverty and the perceptions of poor people themselves can have devastating consequences for poverty-alleviation efforts.

How do the poor in North America describe their own poverty? While there do not appear to be any comparable studies to the World Bank's survey, many observers have noted similar features of poverty in the North American context. For example, consider Cornel West, an African-American scholar, as he summarizes what many are now saying about ghetto poverty¹¹ in America:

The most basic issue now facing black America [is]: *the nihilistic threat to its very existence*. This threat is not simply a matter of relative economic deprivation and political powerlessness—though economic well-being and political clout are requisites for meaningful progress. It is primarily a question of speaking to the profound sense of psychological depression, personal worthlessness, and social despair so widespread in black America.¹²

Similar to the Majority World, while there is a material dimension to poverty in the African-American ghetto, there is also a loss of meaning, purpose,

and hope that plays a major role in the poverty in North America. The problem goes well beyond the material dimension, so the solutions must go beyond the material as well.

THE DISTINCTION IS MORE THAN ACADEMIC

Defining poverty is not simply an academic exercise, for the way we define poverty—either implicitly or explicitly—plays a major role in determining the solutions we use in our attempts to alleviate that poverty.

When a sick person goes to the doctor, the doctor could make two crucial mistakes: (1) Treating symptoms instead of the underlying illness; (2) Misdiagnosing the underlying illness and prescribing the wrong medicine. Either one of these mistakes will result in the patient not getting better and possibly getting worse. The same is true when we work with poor people. If we treat only the symptoms or if we misdiagnose the underlying problem, we will not improve their situation, and we might actually make their lives worse. And as we shall see later, we might hurt ourselves in the process.

Table 2.1 illustrates how different diagnoses of the causes of poverty lead to different poverty-alleviation strategies. For example, during the initial decade following World War II, the World Bank believed the cause of poverty was primarily a lack of material resources—the last row of table 2.1—so it poured money into Europe and the Majority World. The strategy worked in the former but not in the latter. Why? The fundamental problem in the Majority World was not a lack of material resources. The World Bank misdiagnosed the disease, and it applied the wrong medicine.

If We Believe the Primary Cause of Poverty Is . . .	Then We Will Primarily Try to . . .
A Lack of Knowledge	Educate the Poor
Oppression by Powerful People	Work for Social Justice
The Personal Sins of the Poor	Evangelize and Disciple the Poor
A Lack of Material Resources	Give Material Resources to the Poor

TABLE 2.1

Similarly, consider the familiar case of the person who comes to your church asking for help with paying an electric bill. On the surface, it appears that this person's problem is the last row of table 2.1, a lack of material resources, and many churches respond by giving this person enough money to pay the electric bill. But what if this person's fundamental problem is not having the self-discipline to keep a stable job? Simply giving this person money is treating the symptoms rather than the underlying disease and will enable him to continue with his lack of self-discipline. In this case, the gift of the money does more harm than good, and it would be better not to do anything at all than to give this handout. Really! Instead, a better—and far more costly—solution would be for your church to develop a relationship with this person, a relationship that says, “We are here to walk with you and to help you use your gifts and abilities to avoid being in this situation in the future. Let us into your life and let us work with you to determine the reason you are in this predicament.”

Unfortunately, the symptoms of poor people largely look the same around the world: they do not have “sufficient” material things.¹³ However, the underlying diseases behind those symptoms are not always very apparent and can differ from person to person. A trial-and-error process may be necessary before a proper diagnosis can be reached. Like all of us, poor people are not fully aware of all that is affecting their lives, and like all of us, poor people are not always completely honest with themselves or with others. And even after a sound diagnosis is made, it may take years to help people to overcome their problems. There will likely be lots of ups and downs in the relationship. It all sounds very time-consuming, and it is. “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. 58:10, italics added). “Spending yourself” often involves more than giving a handout to a poor person, a handout that may very well do more harm than good.

A sound diagnosis is absolutely critical for helping poor people without hurting them. But how can we diagnose such a complex disease? Divine wisdom is necessary. Although the Bible is not a textbook on poverty alleviation, it does give us valuable insights into the nature of human beings, of history, of culture, and of God to point us in the right direction. Hence, in the remainder of this chapter and the next, we root our understanding of poverty and its

alleviation in the Bible’s grand narrative: creation, the fall, and redemption. We recognize that some of the material in these two chapters is a bit abstract. Hang in there! It won’t hurt too much. By design, the book moves from the theoretical to the applied. We need to establish a solid theoretical foundation if we want to build successful poverty-alleviation efforts.

POVERTY: A BIBLICAL FRAMEWORK

In the Beginning

Bryant Myers, a leading Christian development thinker, argues that in order to diagnose the disease of poverty correctly, we must consider the fundamental nature of reality, starting with the Creator of that reality. Myers notes that the triune God is inherently a relational being, existing as three-in-one from all eternity. Being made in God’s image, human beings are inherently relational as well. Myers explains that before the fall, God established four foundational relationships for each person: a relationship with God, with self, with others, and with the rest of creation (see figure 2.1).¹⁴ These relationships are the

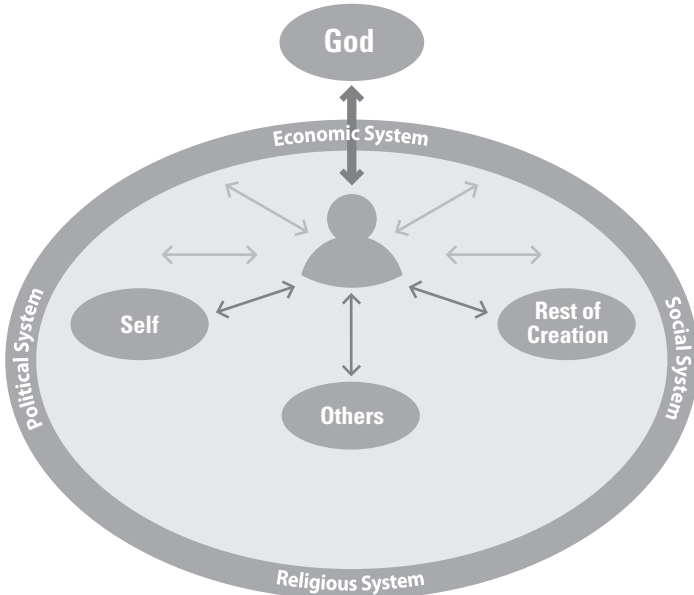


FIGURE 2.1

Adapted from Bryant L. Myers, *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1999), 27.

building blocks for all of life. When they are functioning properly, humans experience the fullness of life that God intended, because we are being what God created us to be. *In particular for our purposes, when these relationships are functioning properly, people are able to fulfill their callings of glorifying God by working and supporting themselves and their families with the fruit of that work.*

Note that human life is not all up for grabs! God designed humans to be a certain thing and to operate in a certain way in all of these relationships:

- **RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD:** This is our primary relationship, the other three relationships flowing out of this one. The Westminster Shorter Catechism teaches that human beings' primary purpose is "to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever." This is our *calling*, the ultimate reason for which we were created. We were created to serve and give praise to our Creator through our thoughts, words, and actions. When we do this, we experience the presence of God as our heavenly Father and live in a joyful, intimate relationship with Him as His children.

- **RELATIONSHIP WITH SELF:** People are uniquely created in the image of God and thus have inherent worth and dignity. While we must remember that we are not God, we have the high *calling* of reflecting God's being, making us superior to the rest of creation.

- **RELATIONSHIP WITH OTHERS:** God created us to live in loving relationship with one another. We are not islands! We are made to know one another, to love one another, and to encourage one another to use the gifts God has given to each of us to fulfill our *callings*.

- **RELATIONSHIP WITH THE REST OF CREATION:** The "cultural mandate" of Genesis 1:28–30 teaches that God created us to be stewards, people who understand, protect, subdue, and manage the world that God has created in order to preserve it and to produce bounty. Note that while God made the world "perfect," He left it "incomplete." This means that while the world was created to be without defect, God *called* humans to interact with creation, to make possibilities into realities, and to be able to sustain ourselves via the fruits of our stewardship.

The arrows pointing from human beings to the surrounding ovals in figure 2.1 highlight that these foundational relationships are the building blocks for

all of life. The way that humans create culture—including economic, social, political, and religious systems—reflect our basic commitments to God, self, others, and the rest of creation. For example, because William Wilberforce viewed “others” as being created in the image of God, he devoted his life as a politician to banning the slave trade in England at the start of the nineteenth century. Wilberforce shaped the political system in a way that reflected his fundamental commitment to love other human beings, including Africans. And the same is true of all other aspects of culture. The systems that humans create, including both formal institutions (governments, schools, businesses, churches, etc.) and cultural norms (gender roles, attitudes toward time and work, understandings of authority, etc.), reflect the nature of our foundational relationships to God, self, others, and the rest of creation.

But culture reflects more than just the expression of human effort. Consider again Colossians 1:16–17: “For by him [Jesus] *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” (italics added). Note in this passage that Christ is the Creator and Sustainer of more than just the material world. His creative and sustaining hand extends to “all things.” This sustenance is continuing, even in a fallen world. Hence, Christ is actively engaged in sustaining the economic, social, political, and religious systems in which humans live. There is certainly real mystery here, but the central point of Scripture is clear: as humans engage in cultural activity, they are unpacking a creation that Christ created, sustains, and as we shall see later, redeems.

As figure 2.1 illustrates, the arrows connecting the individual to the systems point both ways. *People affect systems, and systems affect people*. For example, much of our lives are spent working in organizations that play a huge role in shaping our self-images, our relationships to coworkers, the means by which we steward creation, and the setting in which we respond to God and in which He responds to us. And these organizations operate in the context of local, national, and global systems characterized by rapid flows of information, capital, and technology, which greatly impact the scope and nature of their operations.

More than ever before, the organizations in which we work are shaped by events on the other side of the world. For example, as China’s economic

policies emerge, the entire global economy is affected. Hence, the context in which we relate to God, self, others, and the rest of creation is influenced by actions of the Chinese government!

What's This Stuff Good for Anyway?

The importance of the doctrine of creation will become more evident as the book proceeds, but let's look at a few implications right away:

- The four key relationships highlight the fact that human beings are multifaceted, implying that poverty-alleviation efforts should be multifaceted as well. If we reduce human beings to being simply physical—as Western thought is prone to do—our poverty-alleviation efforts will tend to focus on material solutions. But if we remember that humans are spiritual, social, psychological, and physical beings, our poverty-alleviation efforts will be more holistic in their design and execution.

- Dirt matters, as do giraffes, wells, families, schools, music, crops, governments, and businesses. We must engage with the entire creation, including culture, for our Creator is deeply engaged with it.

- Our basic predisposition toward poor communities—including their people, organizations, institutions, and culture—should include the notion that they are part of the good world that Christ created and is sustaining. They are not *just* filth and rubble. (If you are wondering about the effects of sin, hang on until the next section.)

- We are not bringing Christ to poor communities. He has been active in these communities since the creation of the world, sustaining them “by his powerful word” (Heb. 1:3). Hence, a significant part of working in poor communities involves discovering and appreciating what God has been doing there for a long time! This should give us a sense of humility and awe as we enter poor communities, for part of what we see there reflects the very hand of God. Of course, the residents of these communities may not recognize that God has been at work. In fact, they might not even know who God is. So part of our task may include introducing the community to who God is and to helping them to appreciate all that He has been doing for them since the creation of the world. We will return to this issue in chapter 6.

The Fall Really Happened

Of course, the grand story of Scripture does not end with creation. Adam and Eve disobeyed God, and their hearts were darkened. The Genesis account records that all four of Adam and Eve’s relationships immediately became distorted: their relationship with God was damaged, as their intimacy with Him was replaced with fear; their relationship with self was marred, as Adam and Eve developed a sense of shame; their relationship with others was broken, as Adam quickly blamed Eve for their sin; and their relationship with the rest of creation became distorted, as God cursed the ground and the childbearing process.

Furthermore, as figure 2.2 illustrates, because the four relationships are the building blocks for all human activity, the effects of the fall are manifested in the economic, social, religious, and political systems that humans have created throughout history. For example, not loving “others” as they should have, politicians have passed laws institutionalizing slavery and racial discrimination. And not caring for “the rest of creation,” at times shareholders have allowed their companies to pollute the environment. The systems are broken,

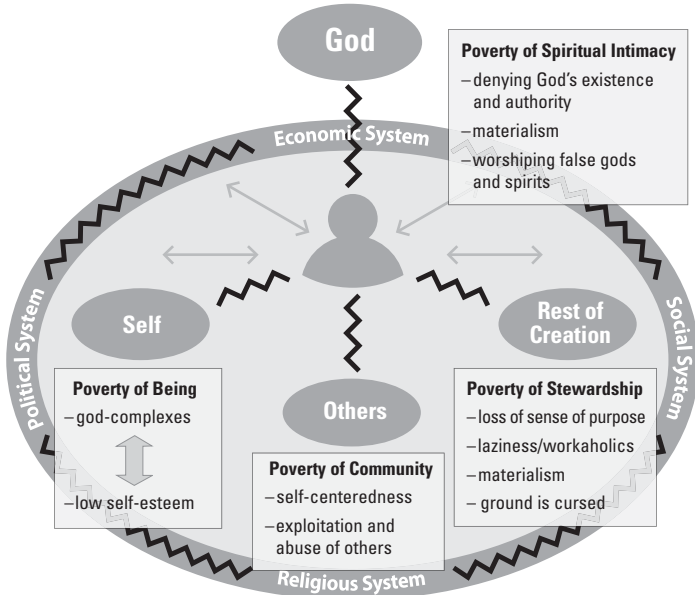


FIGURE 2.2

Adapted from Bryant L. Myers, *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1999), 27.

reflecting humans' broken relationships. Moreover, in addition to sinful human natures and behaviors, Satan and his legions are at work, wreaking havoc in both the individuals and systems.

These considerations lead to Myers's description of the fundamental nature of poverty:¹⁵

Poverty is the result of relationships that do not work, that are not just, that are not for life, that are not harmonious or enjoyable.

Poverty is the absence of shalom in all its meanings.

Although Myers's definition correctly points to the all-encompassing effects of the fall, it is important to remember that neither humans nor the systems they create are as bad as they could possibly be. Christ continues to "hold all things together" and to "sustain all things by his powerful word." Hence, while the good creation—including both individuals and the systems they create—is deeply distorted, it retains some of its inherent goodness. Flowers are still pretty. A baby's smile brings joy to all who see it. People are often kind to one another. Governments build roads that enable us to get around better. Companies often pay their workers decent wages. And both poor individuals and communities continue to exhibit God-given gifts and assets.

WHO ARE THE POOR?

Stop and think: If poverty is rooted in the brokenness of the foundational relationships, then who are the poor?

Due to the comprehensive nature of the fall, every human being is poor in the sense of not experiencing these four relationships in the way that God intended. As figure 2.2 illustrates, every human being is suffering from a poverty of spiritual intimacy, a poverty of being, a poverty of community, and a poverty of stewardship. We are all simply incapable of being what God created us to be and are unable to experience the fullness of joy that God designed for these relationships. Every minute since the fall, each human being is the proverbial "square peg in a round hole." We don't fit right because we were shaped for something else.

For some people the brokenness in these foundational relationships re-

sults in material poverty, that is their not having sufficient money to provide for the basic physical needs of themselves and their families. For example, consider Mary, who lives in a slum in western Kenya. As a female in a male-dominated society, Mary has been subjected to polygamy, to regular physical and verbal abuse from her husband, to fewer years of schooling than males, and to an entire cultural system that tells her that she is inferior. As a result, Mary has a poverty of being and lacks the confidence to look for a job, leading her into material poverty.

Desperate, Mary decides to be self-employed, but needs a loan to get her business started. Unfortunately, her poverty of community rears its ugly head, as the local loan shark exploits Mary, demanding an interest rate of 300 percent on her loan of twenty-five dollars, contributing to Mary's material poverty. Having no other options, Mary borrows from the loan shark and starts a business of selling homemade charcoal in the local market, along with hundreds of others just like her. The market is glutted with charcoal sellers, which keeps the prices very low. But it never even occurs to Mary to sell something else, because she does not understand that she has been given the creativity and capacity to have dominion over creation. In other words, her poverty of stewardship locks her into an unprofitable business, further contributing to her material poverty. Frustrated by her entire situation, Mary goes to the traditional healer (witch doctor) for help, a manifestation of her poverty of spiritual intimacy with the true God. The healer tells Mary that her difficult life is a result of angry ancestral spirits that need to be appeased through the sacrificing of a bull, a sacrifice that costs Mary a substantial amount of money and further contributes to her material poverty. Mary is suffering from not having sufficient income, but her problems cannot be solved by giving her more money or other material resources, for such things are insufficient to heal the brokenness of her four foundational relationships.

Mary's brokenness manifested itself in material poverty, but for other people the effects of these broken relationships are manifested in different ways. For example, for most of my life I have struggled with workaholic tendencies, reflecting a poverty of stewardship, a broken relationship with the rest of creation. Instead of seeing work as simply one of the arenas in which I am to glorify God, there are times in which I have made my work my god and have

tried to find all of my meaning, purpose, and worth through being productive. This is not how God designed humans' relationship with the rest of creation to be. Of course, I am unlikely to experience material poverty, as my high level of productivity will usually put food on my table; however, at times my poverty of stewardship has had serious consequences, including strained relationships with family and friends, physical and emotional ailments resulting from stress, and spiritual weakness from inadequate time for a meaningful devotional life.

The fall really happened, and it is wreaking havoc in all of our lives. We are all broken, just in different ways.

WHEN HELPING HURTS

One of the major premises of this book is that *until we embrace our mutual brokenness, our work with low-income people is likely to do far more harm than good*. As discussed earlier, research from around the world has found that shame—a “poverty of being”—is a major part of the brokenness that low-income people experience in their relationship with themselves. Instead of seeing themselves as being created in the image of God, low-income people often feel they are inferior to others. This can paralyze the poor from taking initiative and from seizing opportunities to improve their situation, thereby locking them into material poverty.

At the same time, the economically rich—including most of the readers of this book—also suffer from a poverty of being. In particular, development practitioner Jayakumar Christian argues that the economically rich often have “god-complexes,” a subtle and unconscious sense of superiority in which they believe that they have achieved their wealth through their own efforts and that they have been anointed to decide what is best for low-income people, whom they view as inferior to themselves.¹⁶

Few of us are conscious of having a god-complex, which is part of the problem. We are often deceived by Satan and by our sinful natures. For example, consider this: why do you want to help the poor? Really think about it. What truly motivates you? Do you really love poor people and want to serve them? Or do you have other motives? I confess to you that part of what motivates me to help the poor is my felt need to accomplish something worthwhile with my life, to be a person of significance, to feel like I have pursued a noble cause . . .

to be a bit like God. It makes me feel good to use my training in economics to “save” poor people. And in the process, I sometimes unintentionally reduce poor people to objects that I use to fulfill my own need to accomplish something. It is a very ugly truth, and it pains me to admit it, but “when I want to do good, evil is right there with me” (Rom. 7:21).

And now we have come to a very central point: *one of the biggest problems in many poverty-alleviation efforts is that their design and implementation exacerbates the poverty of being of the economically rich—their god-complexes—and the poverty of being of the economically poor—their feelings of inferiority and shame.* The way that we act toward the economically poor often communicates—albeit unintentionally—that we are superior and they are inferior. In the process we hurt the poor and ourselves. And here is the clincher: this dynamic is likely to be particularly strong whenever middle-to-upper-class, North American Christians try to help the poor, given these Christians’ tendency toward a Western, materialistic perspective of the nature of poverty.

This point can be illustrated with the story of Creekside Community Church, a predominantly Caucasian congregation made up of young urban professionals in the downtown area of an American city. Being in the Christmas spirit, Creekside Community Church decided to reach out to the African-American residents of a nearby housing project, which was characterized by high rates of unemployment, domestic violence, drug and alcohol abuse, and teenage pregnancy. A number of the members of Creekside expressed some disdain for the project residents, and all of the members were fearful of venturing inside. But Pastor Johnson insisted that Jesus cared for the residents of this housing project and that Christmas was the perfect time to show His compassion.

But what could they do to help? Believing that poverty is primarily a lack of material resources—the last row in table 2.1—the members of Creekside Community Church decided to address this poverty by buying Christmas presents for the children in the housing project. Church members went door to door, singing Christmas carols and delivering wrapped toys to the children in each apartment. Although it was awkward at first, the members of Creekside were moved by the big smiles on the children’s faces and were encouraged by the warm reception of the mothers. In fact, the congregation felt so good

about the joy they had brought that they decided to expand this ministry, delivering baskets of candy at Easter and turkeys at Thanksgiving.

Unfortunately, after several years, Pastor Johnson noticed that he was struggling to find enough volunteers to deliver the gifts to the housing project. At the congregational meeting, he asked the members why their enthusiasm was waning, but it was difficult to get a clear answer. Finally, one member spoke up: “Pastor, we are tired of trying to help these people out. We have been bringing them things for several years now, but their situation never improves. They just sit there in the same situation year in and year out. Have you ever noticed that there are no men in the apartments when we deliver the toys? The residents are all unwed mothers who just keep having babies in order to collect bigger and bigger welfare checks. They don’t deserve our help.”

In reality, there was a different reason that there were few men in the apartments when the toys were delivered. Oftentimes, when the fathers of the children heard the Christmas carols outside their front doors and saw the presents for their kids through the peepholes, they were embarrassed and ran out the back doors of their apartments. For a host of reasons, low-income African-American males sometimes struggle to find and keep jobs. This often contributes to a deep sense of shame and inadequacy, both of which make it even more difficult to apply for jobs. The last thing these fathers needed was a group of middle-to-upper-class Caucasians providing Christmas presents for their children, presents that they themselves could not afford to buy. In trying to alleviate material poverty through the giving of these presents, Creekside Community Church increased these fathers’ poverty of being. Ironically, this likely made the fathers even less able to apply for a job, thereby exacerbating the very material poverty that Creekside was trying to solve!

In addition to hurting the residents of the housing project, the members of Creekside Community Church hurt themselves. At first the members developed a subtle sense of pride that they were helping the project residents through their acts of kindness. Later, when they observed the residents’ failure to improve their situations, the members’ disdain for them increased. What is often called “compassion fatigue” then set in as the members became less willing to help the low-income residents. As a result, the poverty of being increased for the church members. Furthermore, the poverty of community

increased for everyone involved, as the gulf between the church members and the housing project residents actually increased as a result of this project.

Our efforts to help the poor can hurt both them and ourselves. In fact, as this story illustrates, very often the North American church finds itself locked into the following equation:

$$\begin{array}{ccccccc}
 \text{Material} & & \text{God-complexes} & & \text{Feelings of} & & \text{Harm to Both} \\
 \text{Definition} & + & \text{of Materially} & + & \text{Inferiority of} & = & \text{Materially Poor} \\
 \text{of Poverty} & & \text{Non-Poor} & & \text{Materially Poor} & & \text{and Non-Poor}
 \end{array}$$

What can be done to break out of this equation? Changing the first term in this equation requires a revised understanding of the nature of poverty. North American Christians need to overcome the materialism of Western culture and see poverty in more relational terms. Changing the second term in this equation requires ongoing repentance. It requires North American Christians to understand our brokenness and to embrace the message of the cross in deep and profound ways, saying to ourselves every day: “I am not okay; and you are not okay; but Jesus can fix us both.” And as we do this, God can use us to change the third term in this equation. By showing low-income people through our words, our actions, and most importantly our ears that they are people with unique gifts and abilities, we can be part of helping them to recover their sense of dignity, even as we recover from our sense of pride.

Repenting of the Health-and-Wealth Gospel

One Sunday I was walking with a staff member through one of Africa’s largest slums, the massive Kibera slum of Nairobi, Kenya. The conditions were simply inhumane. People lived in shacks constructed out of cardboard boxes. Foul smells gushed out of open ditches carrying human and animal excrement. I had a hard time keeping my balance as I continually slipped on oozy brown substances that I hoped were mud but feared were something else. Children picked through garbage dumps looking for anything of value. As we walked deeper and deeper into the slum, my sense of despair increased. *This place is completely God-forsaken*, I thought to myself.

Then to my amazement, right there among the dung, I heard the sound of a familiar hymn. *There must be Western missionaries conducting an open-air ser-*

vice in here, I thought to myself. As we turned the corner, my eyes landed on the shack from which the music bellowed. Every Sunday, thirty slum dwellers crammed into this ten-by-twenty foot “sanctuary” to worship the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The church was made out of cardboard boxes that had been opened up and stapled to studs. It wasn’t pretty, but it was a church, a church made up of some of the poorest people on earth.

When we arrived at the church, I was immediately asked to preach the sermon. As a good Presbyterian, I quickly jotted down some notes about the sovereignty of God and was looking forward to teaching this congregation the historic doctrines of the Reformation. But before the sermon began, the service included a time of sharing and prayer. I listened as some of the poorest people on the planet cried out to God: “Jehovah Jireh, please heal my son, as he is going blind.” “Merciful Lord, please protect me when I go home today, for my husband always beats me.” “Sovereign King, please provide my children with enough food today, as they are hungry.”

As I listened to these people praying to be able to live another day, I thought about my ample salary, my life insurance policy, my health insurance policy, my two cars, my house, etc. I realized that I do not really trust in God’s sovereignty on a daily basis, as I have sufficient buffers in place to shield me from most economic shocks. I realized that when these folks pray the fourth petition of the Lord’s prayer—*Give us this day our daily bread*—their minds do not wander as mine so often does. I realized that while I have sufficient education and training to deliver a sermon on God’s sovereignty with no forewarning, these slum dwellers were trusting in God’s sovereignty just to get them through the day. And I realized that these people had a far deeper intimacy with God than I probably will ever have in my entire life.

* * *

Surprisingly, as this story illustrates, for many of us North Americans the first step in overcoming our god-complexes is to repent of the health-and-wealth gospel. At its core, the health-and-wealth gospel teaches that God rewards increasing levels of faith with greater amounts of wealth. When stated this way, the health-and-wealth gospel is easy to reject on a host of biblical grounds. Take the case of the apostle Paul, for example. He had enormous faith

and lived a godly life, but he was shipwrecked, beaten, stoned, naked, and poor.

Think about it. If anybody dares suggest to me that the poor are poor because they are less spiritual than the rest of us—which is what the health-and-wealth gospel teaches—I am quick to rebuke them. I immediately point out that the poor could be poor due to injustices committed against them. Yet, all of this notwithstanding, I was still amazed to see people in this Kenyan slum who were simultaneously so spiritually strong and so devastatingly poor. Right down there in the bowels of hell was this Kenyan church, filled with spiritual giants who were struggling just to eat every day. This shocked me. At some level I had implicitly assumed that my economic superiority goes hand in hand with my spiritual superiority. This is none other than the lie of the health-and-wealth gospel: spiritual maturity leads to financial prosperity.

The health-and-wealth gospel is just one aspect of my “god-complex,” for there are all sorts of areas in which I need to embrace the message of the cross: “I stink, but God loves me anyway!” And without such repentance, my own arrogance is likely to increase the poverty of the materially poor people I encounter by confirming their feelings of shame and inferiority.

That day in the Kibera slum, God used the materially poor, people more visibly broken than I, to teach me about my own brokenness. They blessed me, even while I was trying to bless them.

One of These Things Is Not Like the Other

Although all human beings are poor in the sense that all are suffering from the effects of the fall on the four foundational relationships, it is not legitimate to conclude that there is nothing uniquely devastating about material poverty. Low-income people daily face a struggle to survive that creates feelings of helplessness, anxiety, suffocation, and desperation that are simply unparalleled in the lives of the rest of humanity.

Development expert Robert Chambers argues that the materially poor are trapped by multiple, interconnected factors—insufficient assets, vulnerability, powerlessness, isolation, and physical weakness—that ensnare them like bugs caught in a spider’s web.¹⁷ Imagine being caught in such a web. Every time you try to move, you just get more hung up on another strand. You think to yourself, *Maybe this time will be different*, so you try to make a change in your life. But

immediately you find yourself even more entangled than before. After a while you come to believe that it is better to just lie still. This is miserable, but any further movement only brings even greater misery. You hate your situation, but you have no choice.

Most of the readers of this book do not lead this type of life. We believe that we have choices and that we can make changes, and in our situations, this is a correct assumption. According to Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen, it is this lack of freedom to be able to make meaningful choices—to have an ability to affect one's situation—that is the distinguishing feature of poverty.¹⁸

Similarly, while “material poverty” is rooted in the brokenness of the four foundational relationships—a brokenness we all experience in different ways—this does *not* mean that there is nothing unique about “the poor” in Scripture. Although there are places in the Bible in which the term “poor” is used generically to describe the general plight of humanity, there are a host of texts (see chapter 1) in which the term is referring very specifically to those who are economically destitute. We cannot let ourselves off the hook by saying to ourselves, “I am fulfilling the Bible’s commands to help the poor by loving the wealthy lady next door with the troubled marriage.” Yes, this lady is experiencing a “poverty of community,” and it is good to help her. But this is not the type of person referred to in such passages as 1 John 3:17.

The economically poor are singled out in Scripture as being in a particularly desperate category and as needing very specific attention (Acts 6:1–7). The fact that all of humanity has some things in common with the materially poor does not negate their unique and overwhelming suffering nor the special place that they have in God’s heart, as emphasized throughout the Old and New Testaments.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

Please write responses to the following:

1. Reflect on your relationships with God, self, others, and the rest of creation. List specific things that you would like to see improved in your four key relationships.

2. Read Romans 5:6–11. To what extent do you embrace the message of the cross: God Almighty died for you while you were still His “enemy”? How worthy are you of God’s love expressed through Jesus Christ?
3. In what ways do you suffer from a “god-complex,” the belief that you are superior to others and are well-positioned to determine what is best for them? If you have this problem, what specific steps can you take to change this?
4. What really motivates you to want to help materially poor people?
5. Think about the approach of your church or your ministry to materially poor people. Is there any evidence of a god-complex?
6. Think back to a situation in which you have tried to minister to others. In what ways did your approach help both you and them to overcome a poverty of spiritual intimacy, a poverty of being, a poverty of community, and a poverty of stewardship? In what ways did your approach actually contribute to greater “poverty” in the four relationships for both you and them?
7. Now answer question 6 for your church by reflecting on the type of ministries that your church pursues and the manner in which it pursues them.
8. Think back to your answers to the question at the start of this chapter: *What is poverty?* Compare your answers to the answers that the poor themselves give. What differences do you see?
9. Do you have a “material definition of poverty”? If so, how has this influenced the way that you have approached ministry to the poor? What harm might this have done?
10. Are you or your church locked into the equation mentioned in this chapter (see p. 64)? If so, what steps can you take to break out of it?

INITIAL THOUGHTS

Please take a few minutes to write short answers to the following questions:

1. *What is poverty alleviation?*
2. *How do you define “success” in ministering to the materially poor?*

ARE WE THERE YET?

We need to have a clear concept of “success” if we want to have any hope of getting there. Just as our diagnosis of the causes of poverty shapes the remedies we pursue, so too does our conception of the ultimate goal. Building on the concept of poverty as being rooted in the brokenness of human beings’ four foundational relationships, this chapter explores what successful poverty alleviation entails and paves the way for the principles, applications, and methods to be discussed in the remainder of this book.

THE ENTRAPMENT OF ALISA COLLINS

During the 1990s, Alisa Collins and her children lived in one of America’s most dangerous public housing projects in inner-city Chicago.¹ Alisa had become pregnant at the age of sixteen, had dropped out of high school, and had started collecting welfare checks. She had five children from three different fathers, none of whom helped with child rearing. With few skills, no husband, and limited social networks, Alisa struggled to raise her family in an environment characterized by widespread substance abuse, failing schools, high rates of unemployment, rampant violence, teenage pregnancy, and an absence of role models.

From time to time, Alisa tried to get a job, but a number of obstacles prevented her from finding and keeping regular work. First, there were simply not a lot of decent-paying jobs for high school dropouts living in ghettos. Second, the welfare system penalized Alisa for earning money, taking away benefits for every dollar she earned and for every asset she acquired. Third, Alisa found government vocational training and jobs assistance programs to be confusing and staffed by condescending bureaucrats. Fourth, Alisa had child-care issues that made it difficult to keep a job. Finally, Alisa felt inferior and inadequate. When she tried to get vocational training or a job and faced some obstacle, she quickly lost confidence and rapidly retreated into her comfort zone of public housing and welfare checks. Alisa felt trapped, and she and her family often talked about how they couldn't "get out" of the ghetto.

How can your church or ministry help to alleviate poverty for people like Alisa? What does success look like? There are no easy answers to these questions, but moving in the right direction involves exploring the rest of the grand narrative of the Bible. In the previous chapter we diagnosed the problem of poverty by examining the first two acts of the biblical drama: "creation" and "fall." We saw that humans were created to live in right relationship with God, self, others, and the rest of creation, and that the fall has broken these relationships for each of us. But there is good news, for the drama is not over. We still need to consider the remaining act in the story: "redemption."

THE KINGDOM THAT IS BOTH HERE AND STILL COMING

We saw in the previous chapter that poverty consists of broken relationships. Furthermore, we saw that the brokenness in these relationships is expressed not just at a personal level but also in the economic, political, social, and religious systems that humans create.

In this light, how can we alleviate Alisa's poverty? Consider again Colossians 1:19–20:

For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him [Jesus], 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.
(italics added)

Reverend Marsh was wrong. Jesus is not just “beaming up” our souls out of planet Earth in Star Trek fashion; rather, Jesus is bringing reconciliation to every last speck of the universe, including both our foundational relationships and the systems that emanate from them. *Poverty is rooted in broken relationships, so the solution to poverty is rooted in the power of Jesus’ death and resurrection to put all things into right relationship again.*

Of course, the full reconciliation of all things will not happen until the final coming of the kingdom, when there will be a new heaven and a new earth. Only then will every tear be wiped from our eyes (Rev. 21:4). There is real mystery concerning how much progress we can expect to see before Jesus comes again, and good people can disagree. Fortunately, what we are to do every day does not hinge on resolving this issue, for the task at hand is quite clear. The King of kings is ushering in a kingdom that will bring healing to every last speck of the cosmos. As His body, bride, and fullness, the church is to do what Jesus did: bear witness to the reality of that coming kingdom using both words and anticipatory deeds. We can then trust God to “establish the work of our hands” as He chooses (Ps. 90:17).

HOW SHOULD WE THEN ALLEVIATE?

Jesus’ work focuses on “reconciliation,” which means putting things back into right relationship again. The church must pursue reconciliation as well:

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God. (2 Cor. 5:18–20)

We are not the reconciler; Jesus is. However, we are His ambassadors, representing His kingdom and all that it entails to a broken world, which leads to the following definition of poverty alleviation:

POVERTY ALLEVIATION

Poverty alleviation is the ministry of reconciliation: moving people closer to glorifying God by living in right relationship with God, with self, with others, and with the rest of creation.

Reconciliation of relationships is the guiding compass for our poverty-alleviation efforts, profoundly shaping both the goals that we pursue and the methods we use.

The goal is *not* to make the materially poor all over the world into middle-to-upper-class North Americans, a group characterized by high rates of divorce, sexual addiction, substance abuse, and mental illness. Nor is the goal to make sure that the materially poor have enough money. Indeed, America's welfare system ensured that Alisa Collins and her family had more than enough money to survive, but they felt trapped. Rather, the goal is to restore people to a full expression of humanness, to being what God created us all to be, people who glorify God by living in right relationship with God, with self, with others, and with the rest of creation. One of the many manifestations of these relationships being reconciled is material poverty alleviation:

MATERIAL POVERTY ALLEVIATION

Material poverty alleviation is working to reconcile the four foundational relationships so that people can fulfill their callings of glorifying God by working and supporting themselves and their families with the fruit of that work.

There are two key things to note in this definition. First, material poverty alleviation involves more than ensuring that people have sufficient material things; rather, it involves the much harder task of empowering people to *earn* sufficient material things through their own labor, for in so doing we move people closer to being what God created them to be. (Of course, we recognize that this is impossible for some people because of disability or other factors.) Second, work is an act of worship. When people seek to fulfill their callings by glorifying God in their work, praising Him for their gifts and abilities, and seeing both their efforts and its products as an offering to Him, then work is an

act of worship to God. On the other hand, when work is done to glorify oneself or merely to achieve more wealth, it becomes worship of false gods. How we work and for whom we work really matters.

Defining poverty alleviation as the reconciliation of relationships also shapes the methods our churches or ministries should use to achieve that goal. As we shall see later in this book, a reconciliation perspective has major implications for how we choose, design, implement, and evaluate our efforts. But before getting into those specifics, the remainder of this chapter lays out some initial implications of the reconciliation perspective for our methods of poverty alleviation.

Praying for Transformation Together

Because every one of us is suffering from brokenness in our foundational relationships, all of us need “poverty alleviation,” just in different ways. Our relationship to the materially poor should be one in which we recognize that both of us are broken and that both of us need the blessing of reconciliation. Our perspective should be less about how we are going to fix the materially poor and more about how we can walk together, asking God to fix both of us.

Think about it. If poverty alleviation is about reconciling relationships, then we do not have the power to alleviate poverty in either the materially poor or in ourselves. It is not something that we can manufacture through better techniques, improved methods, or better planning, for reconciliation is ultimately an act of God. Poverty alleviation occurs when the power of Christ’s resurrection reconciles our key relationships through the transformation of both individual lives and local, national, and international systems.

Do we strive for such reconciliation? Of course, for we are “ministers of reconciliation”! We must do our best to preach the gospel, to find cures for malaria, and to foster affordable housing. But part of our striving is also to fall on our knees every day and pray, “Lord, be merciful to me and to my friend here, because we are both sinners.” And part of our striving means praying every day, “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven, for without You we cannot fix our communities, our nations, and our world.”

Faith Comes from Hearing

Ultimately, the profound reconciliation of the key relationships that comprise poverty alleviation cannot be done without people accepting Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Yes, people can experience some degree of healing in their relationships without becoming Christians. For example, although it is typically more difficult, unbelievers can often stop drinking, become more loving spouses, and improve as employees without becoming Christians. And as these things happen for unbelievers, they are more likely to earn sufficient material things. However, none of the foundational relationships can experience fundamental and lasting change without a person becoming a new creature in Christ Jesus. Furthermore, simply having sufficient material things is not the same as “poverty alleviation” as we defined it above. We want people to fulfill their calling “to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever” in their work and in all that they do. Again, this requires that people accept and experience Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

While the biblical model is that the gospel is to be communicated in both word and deed, the Bible indicates that without the verbal proclamation of the gospel, one cannot be saved: “How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?” (Rom. 10:14).

A host of contextual issues determine the best manner and the appropriate time to present the gospel verbally, particularly in militant Muslim or Hindu settings. But without such a presentation, it is not possible for people to be personally transformed in all their relationships, which is what poverty alleviation is all about.

This implies that the local church, as an institution, has a key role to play in poverty alleviation, because the gospel has been committed by God to the church. This does *not* mean that the local church must own, operate, and manage all ministries. Parachurch ministries and individuals have a role to play as well. However, it does mean that we cannot hope for the transformation of people without the involvement of the local church and the verbal proclamation of the gospel that has been entrusted to it.

People and Processes, Not Projects and Products

The goal is to see people restored to being what God created them to be: people who understand that they are created in the image of God with the gifts, abilities, and capacity to make decisions and to effect change in the world around them; and people who steward their lives, communities, resources, and relationships in order to bring glory to God. These things tend to happen in highly relational, process-focused ministries more than in impersonal, product-focused ministries.

This point can be illustrated with the story of Sandtown, a seventy-two-block area in Baltimore, Maryland, that embodies the typical characteristics of a North American, inner-city ghetto; high rates of drug abuse, out-of-wedlock pregnancy, violence, dilapidated houses, and unemployment. But in the midst of Sandtown's carnage is New Song Urban Ministries and Community Church, which has created a fifteen-block beacon of hope in the darkness. Now in its twentieth year, New Song employs more than eighty staff members and manages a multimillion-dollar annual budget to run its programs for housing, job placement, health care, education, and arts. More than two hundred homes have been rehabilitated, and there is hope in the eyes of the residents for the first time in decades. Deservedly, New Song has received national attention as one of the premier models of church-based community development in North America.

I visited New Song for the first time in 1996, hoping to understand their formula for success. Impressed with all the houses they had rehabilitated and the numerous ministries they had started, my questions focused on how to start and operate all their programs: "How do you manage your ministry? What are the costs of each program? How do you raise the money? Who is on your board? Where can I read the operations manuals? How did you find the housing contractors?"

The cofounders of New Song, Mark Gornik and Allan and Susan Tibbels, patiently answered my questions, but they kept trying to redirect my thoughts away from money and programs toward something else, which is captured in the following passage from Mark Gornik's powerful book:

We [Mark, Allan, and Susan] decided to relocate to an inner-city neighborhood—not to change it or save it, but to be neighbors and to learn the

agenda of the community and to live on the terms set by our neighbors. . . . We held tightly to a commitment of God's *shalom* for Sandtown, but we had no plans or programs. Instead of imposing our own agendas, we sought to place our lives in service to the community. . . . For over two years we weren't working to renovate houses, we were out and around in the community, "hanging out." . . . During this time the foundational relationships of the church were formed. . . . Everything revolved around building community together. So during the summer, for example, at least once a month all of us would pile into a couple of vans and go to a park for a picnic. We would go downtown and sometimes take trips to other cities. Community came through having fun together, sharing our lives, and learning to be followers of Christ together.²

Imagine going to a donor and asking for funds to transform a city through "hanging out"! Yes, buildings, programs, budgets, and boards would eventually come to New Song, but all of those were established upon a process that was intentionally highly *relational* from its inception. As Mark, Allan, and Susan developed friendships with the long-standing residents, they all began to dream together about what could be done to improve the community. The community members identified a need for improved housing as their priority, and with only one dollar and no housing expertise, decided to form a chapter of Habitat for Humanity in order to renovate vacant homes for community residents. Gornik explains:

This was a community-based strategy that would enable the people of the community—who had always been left out of the process and the benefits of urban development—to own, manage, and be stewards of their architectural and economic environments. We didn't start planning by considering the funding or even what funds we thought could be raised. Instead, we began with what was right for Sandtown and faithful to the gospel.³

In 1990, four years after Mark, Allan, and Susan moved into the neighborhood, Sandtown Habitat for Humanity completed its first housing renovation. Four years to produce a single house? If the goal was to build a house, this was not a very impressive program. But as Gornik explains, the goal was a *process*, not a *product*:

Is such a housing process too slow? Why not let professional developers do it? Questions like these indicated a misperception of our undertaking. New Song and Sandtown Habitat were building people, leaders, community, an economic base, and capacity, not a product for profit.⁴

One of the hallmarks of Mark, Allan, and Susan's success is that they no longer direct New Song. Instead, New Song continues to thrive under the leadership of community members, low-income *people* who were empowered by a relational *process* that focused on reconciling their foundational relationships instead of on implementing *projects* to produce *products*.

EVERYTHING I REALLY NEEDED TO KNOW I LEARNED IN SUNDAY SCHOOL [WELL, ALMOST!]

A long-standing debate in the political arena concerns the extent to which people are materially poor due to their personal failures or to the effects of broken systems on their lives. Political conservatives tend to stress the former, while political liberals tend to emphasize the latter. Which view is correct?

Many of us learned as children in Sunday school that Adam and Eve's sin messed up absolutely everything, implying that *both* individuals and systems are broken. Hence, Christians should be open to the idea that individuals and/or systems could be the problem as we try to diagnose the causes of poverty in any particular context. This much we learned in Sunday school.

Unfortunately, what few of us seem to have learned in Sunday school is that Jesus' redemption is cosmic in scope, bringing reconciliation to both individuals and systems. And as ministers of reconciliation, His people need to be concerned with both as well, the subject to which we now turn.

Working at the Individual Level: Worldview Matters

When working at the level of individual poor people, it is imperative that they and we have a correct understanding of the nature of God, self, others, and creation *and* the way that God intends for human beings to relate to each of them. Another way of stating this is that the correct functioning of these foundational relationships requires a proper *worldview*, which may be defined as the "total set of beliefs or assumptions that comprise the mind-set of an individual and determine what they believe and how they behave."⁵ Our worldview

is the spectacles through which we see and interpret reality, shaping the way we relate to God, self, others, and creation on both the personal and systemic levels. As the following examples illustrate, faulty worldviews can be a major cause of material poverty.

Distorted Worldview Concerning God

A Christian relief and development agency attempted to improve crop yields for poor farmers in Bolivia's Alto Plano. Although successful in increasing output, the impact on the farmers' incomes was far less than hoped because of the farmers' deep reverence for Pachamama, the mother earth goddess who presides over planting and harvesting. Seeking Pachamama's favor, farmers purchased llama fetuses, a symbol of life and abundance, to bury in their fields before planting. At the time of the harvest, the farmers held a festival to thank Pachamama. The larger the harvest, the larger the celebration was. In fact, a large percentage of the farmers' income was being spent on the fetuses and on the harvest festival, thereby contributing to the farmers' material poverty. Furthermore, by increasing agricultural output without worldview transformation, the development agency realized it was actually adding to these farmers' idolatry, as the farmers were giving increasing levels of praise to Pachamama for her benevolence.

Distorted Worldview Concerning Self

Alisa Collins's daughter Nickcole described the economic impact of Alisa's broken worldview: "Every once in a while, Mom tried to get off public aid, but it was like she was trapped there. Finding and keeping a job was a struggle, because with kids, no high school diploma and little confidence, I know she had it in her mind that she couldn't succeed."⁶

In addition to preventing her from looking for work, Alisa's feelings of inferiority likely contributed to her material poverty in more subtle ways. David Hilfiker, an inner-city medical doctor, explains, "For many young women (young girls, really), having a child may be the only way of finding someone to love and be loved by. Sex and childbirth among teenagers in the ghetto . . . [is] about personal affirmation."⁷ Getting pregnant as a teenager caused Alisa to drop out of high school. Without a diploma and with nobody to watch her children, Alisa's teenage pregnancy led to economic ruin for her and her family.

Distorted Worldview Concerning Others

One day, “Johnny” and “Tyrone,” two boys aged ten and eleven respectively, killed Eric Morse, a five-year old, by dropping him out of the fourteenth-floor window of a low-income housing project in a Chicago ghetto. Eric had refused to steal candy for Johnny and Tyrone from the neighborhood store. LeAlan and Lloyd, teenagers who have lived their entire lives in that same neighborhood, reflect upon the incident:

LeAlan: If you took the time to think about all the death that goes on around here, you’d go crazy! But that shows you how life is valued now when ten-year-old kids kill for a piece of candy. Life has the value of a quarter now—not even that! It’s funny, if you think about it, but it’s sad. I mean, killing over a piece of candy!

Lloyd: They were raised like that, I guess. They were just following footsteps. That’s how it all began.

LeAlan: No one around them appreciates life, so why should they? Look at the building [where the crime happened]—you walk in and it smells like urine, you walk up the stairs and it’s dark, broken lights. When you live in filth, your mind takes in filth and you feel nothing.⁸

Carl Ellis, a scholar who has studied “ghetto nihilism” extensively, notes that incidents like this emanate from a worldview of “predatory gratification” that is embraced by some members of the criminal subset of ghetto populations. This worldview sees other human beings simply as “prey” that may be destroyed if it fills the hunter’s belly.⁹ Crimes emanating from such a worldview obviously contribute directly to the material poverty of their victims, but the total impact on ghetto residents’ material poverty is more subtle and far more comprehensive. Living in the context of violence, some ghetto children correctly assume that they will not live very long. This can make them very present-oriented¹⁰ and give them little incentive to invest in their futures through such things as being diligent in school. And of course, a failure to get a good education contributes to their long-run material poverty.

Distorted Worldview Concerning the Rest of Creation

A common feature of animism, the worldview that dominates in many regions of the Majority World, is that unpredictable spirits control the rest of creation, implying that the creation is chaotic and uncontrollable by humans. This can lead to a fatalism that prevents animistic people from exercising dominion and improving their material well-being.

For example, the Pokomchi Indians are some of the poorest people in Guatemala. Through the efforts of missionaries, many of the Pokomchi converted to Christianity. Unfortunately, the missionaries failed to communicate a biblical worldview concerning human stewardship over the rest of creation; hence, the Pokomchi continued in their fatalism, literally just waiting to die in order to be delivered from the horrors of this life. Over the years, a number of development organizations tried to help the Pokomchi by building schools and latrines for them, but these largely went unused.

Arturo Cuba, a pastor and community development worker, decided to confront the worldview lies that lay at the foundation of the Pokomchi culture. Arturo noticed that the Pokomchi failed to use adequate crop storage facilities, allowing rats to eat the harvest and contributing to widespread malnutrition. Arturo asked the Pokomchi farmers, “Who is smarter, you or the rats? Do you have dominion over the rats, or do the rats have dominion over your lives?”¹¹ The farmers admitted that they were allowing the rats to get the best of them. Arturo then explained the biblical worldview that humans are created to have dominion over the rest of creation. As the Pokomchi began to embrace the biblical worldview, dramatic changes took place: better food storage facilities were created, children went to school, women learned to read, and the men adopted improved agricultural techniques.

As these examples illustrate, faulty worldviews can be key obstacles, implying that worldview transformation must often play a central role in poverty-alleviation efforts. In fact, in some cases people’s worldviews are so distorted that it is difficult to bring about any progress at all until the people undergo a major paradigm shift. This has huge implications for the design of our programs and ministries and for the funding sources that we choose. Governments are not usually good donors for biblical worldview transformation! In this regard, consider the insightful comments of LeAlan and Lloyd,

the teenagers from the Chicago housing project mentioned above, concerning the need for a worldview change—not just more money or resources—to solve their community’s problems:

Now they’re talking about tearing down all the high-rises and putting everyone in low-rise buildings as the solution [to children dropping other children out of high-rise windows]. True, it’s a start. But “Tyrone” and “Johnny” could have thrown Eric out of a vacant apartment in the low-rises and he could have fallen and broken his neck. So what are you going to do—make the low-rise homes lower? It’s more than just the buildings. You don’t know how it is to take a life until you value life itself. Those boys didn’t value life. Those boys didn’t have too much reason *to* value life. Now they killed someone and a part of them is dead too.¹²

Of course, we must always remember that our own worldviews need transformation as well. North American Christians have been deeply affected by modernist and now postmodernist worldviews resulting in secularism, materialism, and relativism, all of which have contributed to addictions, mental illnesses, and broken families in our own culture. For example, in pursuit of more material possessions as the source of our happiness, many American couples are running themselves ragged, with both parents working long hours in high-stress jobs. In the process, children and marriages are often neglected, tearing families apart and leading to a host of long-range psychological and social problems. Like some of the materially poor, our own worldviews need transformation.

Although worldview transformation is often necessary for material poverty alleviation, such transformation is often insufficient to alleviate poverty for several reasons. First, having the right concept about how a relationship is supposed to work does not automatically make the relationship work well. For example, I know I am supposed to love my wife, but knowing this is not sufficient to make me get off the couch to help her with the dishes! Healthy relationships require transformed hearts, not just transformed brains. Second, Satan and his legions are at work in the world and have the capacity and desire to damage our relationships. Even if all humans had the correct worldview, Satan would still be on the prowl, attacking us and the rest of creation, thereby causing “poverty” in many manifestations (Eph. 6:12).

Third, one of the results of the fall is that the entire creation is cursed (Gen. 3:17–19), meaning that crops fail and tsunamis happen even when our worldviews are not faulty. Fourth, other people sometimes actively work against or undermine the efforts of an individual poor person to change his situation. Finally, most of the systems in which the materially poor live—systems that contribute to their poverty—are outside of their control. Transforming the worldview of the materially poor will not transform these systems, a point that will be elaborated on in the next section.

BROKEN SYSTEMS CONTRIBUTE TO POVERTY TOO

During the 1970s, OPEC restricted output and drove up oil prices around the world. Members of OPEC earned huge dollar revenues, many of which they deposited into US banks, which then lent these “petrodollars” to countries across the Majority World in dollar-denominated, variable-interest rate loans. The oil price rises caused rampant inflation in the United States, prompting the US Federal Reserve Board to lower the money supply, which caused interest rates to skyrocket and the dollar to appreciate. Faced with rising interest rates and an appreciating dollar, the borrowers in the Majority World could no longer repay their loans. Needing assistance, these countries turned for help to the International Monetary Fund, which responded by re-scheduling the loans as long as the borrowers cut their federal expenditures, devalued their currencies, slashed trade barriers, abolished inflation indexing for wages, and moved toward free market economies.

Did you catch all of that? It sounds pretty complicated, doesn’t it? The farmers in Bolivia’s Alto Plano and the Pokomchi Indians in Guatemala did not understand these events either, and they had absolutely nothing to do with causing any of them to happen. Still, these events had a tremendous impact on their entire economic situation.

Look back at figure 2.2 on page 58. The vast majority of the economic, social, religious, and political systems in which a particular individual lives are not created or even influenced by that individual. Rather, most of these systems are the result of thousands of years of human activity operating on a local, national, and international scale. Yes, these systems have been and continue to be shaped by human beings, but most individuals, particularly the materially poor,

have very little control over them. Nevertheless, these systems can play a huge role in contributing to their material poverty.

The systems are particularly tricky because they tend to be invisible when we are working with individual poor people. For example, the events initiated by OPEC's actions impacted all the prices that matter to farmers in Bolivia—prices of fertilizer, seed, credit, land, labor, petroleum, output, etc.—and thus played a major role in these farmers' economic well-being. But if one is working at the community level, one does not easily observe this entire global story and the role it plays in the farmers' poverty. All one sees are materially poor people who waste their money worshipping the Pachamama. It is easy to conclude that the majority of the problem lies with the people themselves—their worldviews, behaviors, and values—because the people's faults are far more obvious than the fallen systems in which they live.

The Broken American System

Take the case of Alisa Collins. While her worldview, values, and behaviors clearly contributed to her material poverty, as an African-American woman growing up in a ghetto, she is also a victim of powerful systemic forces that have dealt her a different set of cards than those received by most North Americans. The ghetto into which Alisa was born, through no choice of her own, originated in the massive migration of African Americans from the rural South to northern cities from 1910 to 1960 as a result of the increased mechanization of Southern agriculture.¹³ Centuries of slavery and racial discrimination contributed to the relatively low levels of education of these migrants, who fled north looking for blue-collar manufacturing jobs. Upon their arrival in the North, a combination of economic forces, public policy, and housing discrimination caused the migrants to concentrate in inner cities.

Despite the crowded conditions, in the early 1950s the African-American sections of America's inner cities were largely viable, stable communities; however, the subsequent three decades were quite destabilizing. Federal urban renewal and highway programs required land in inner cities, and African-American neighborhoods were often razed. Low-income African Americans were then relocated into publicly funded housing projects, while middle- and upper-class African Americans were forced to relocate

elsewhere. Using a set of policies that both explicitly and implicitly discriminated against African Americans, the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) then began to offer subsidized mortgages that enabled millions of Caucasians to purchase homes in the suburbs and flee the cities. Ironically, advances in the civil rights movement later reduced suburban housing discrimination, allowing middle- and upper-class African Americans to relocate to the suburbs as well. As a result of this suburban flight, the remaining inner-city, African-American communities lost leaders, role models, working families, and a solid economic base.

And then the jobs left. America transitioned from a predominantly manufacturing economy to a service economy. From 1970 to 1985, millions of high-paying, blue-collar jobs simply disappeared from inner cities, moving to other parts of the country or overseas. Unemployment in the inner cities skyrocketed, and many African-American inner-city residents joined the welfare rolls, a system that penalized them for working by taking away benefits for every dollar they earned.

Which Came First, the Broken Individual or the Broken System?

What happens when society crams historically oppressed, uneducated, unemployed, and relatively young human beings into high-rise buildings; takes away their leaders; provides them with inferior education, health care, and employment systems; and then pays them not to work? Is it really that surprising that we see out-of-wedlock pregnancies, broken families, violent crimes, and drug trafficking? Worse yet, we end up with nihilism, because these broken systems do serious damage to people's worldviews. *Worldviews affect the systems, and the systems affect the worldviews.* The arrows in figure 2.2 point both ways.

For example, as Gornik explains, high rates of unemployment caused by a broken economic system can be devastating to one's view of self:

In our capitalist society, where identity is measured by economic and individual success, the absence of work brings shame and discouragement. Since our society also defines identity by individual success, the absence of meaningful employment corrodes a sense of self and, by extension, family and community. To feel unable to support a family and the wider community—which is what occurs with the structural absence of work in the inner

city—can severely constrain the manner in which one thinks, feels, and acts with respect to the future. The effects of this in Sandtown have been severe.¹⁴

Again, worldviews affect the systems, and the systems affect the worldviews.

These considerations ought to give us some pause before deciding that we know what the fundamental problem is with people like Alisa Collins. The fall really happened, affecting both Alisa *and* the systems into which she was born. Unfortunately, as recent research has demonstrated, Caucasian evangelicals in the United States, for whom the systems have worked well, are particularly blind to the systemic causes of poverty and are quick to blame the poor for their plight.¹⁵ Evangelicals tend to believe that systemic arguments for poverty amount to shifting the blame for personal sin and excusing moral failure.

Evangelicals are certainly correct that the Bible never allows one's circumstances to be an excuse for one's sin. Period. Yes, Alisa sinned by having extramarital sex, and this was a major contributor to her poverty. But many people commit the same sin without plunging into decades of poverty. Why? Part of the answer is that for a variety of historic and contemporary reasons, ghetto residents are embedded in systems that are distinctly different from that of mainstream society. Some of these systems are of their own making, but many of them are not.

Our being cognizant of this background makes all the difference when Alisa walks into our church asking for assistance. Does Alisa have personal sins and behaviors that are contributing to her material poverty? Yes! But to reduce her problem to this ignores the comprehensive impact of the fall on both individuals and systems and blinds us to our need to bring the reality of Christ's redemption to bear on both.

WHEN WORLDVIEWS COLLIDE

We Are Not Neutral

As we work with materially poor people, it is crucial that we realize that we are not coming to them as blank slates. Rather, the way that we act toward the materially poor expresses our own worldview, painting a picture for them of our understanding about the nature of God, self, others, and the rest of creation. Unfortunately, our own worldviews are broken, causing us to communicate a

perspective, a way of understanding reality, that is often deeply at odds with a biblical perspective.

Development thinker Darrow Miller summarizes the situation in figure 3.1.¹⁶

DIFFERENT VIEWS OF REALITY

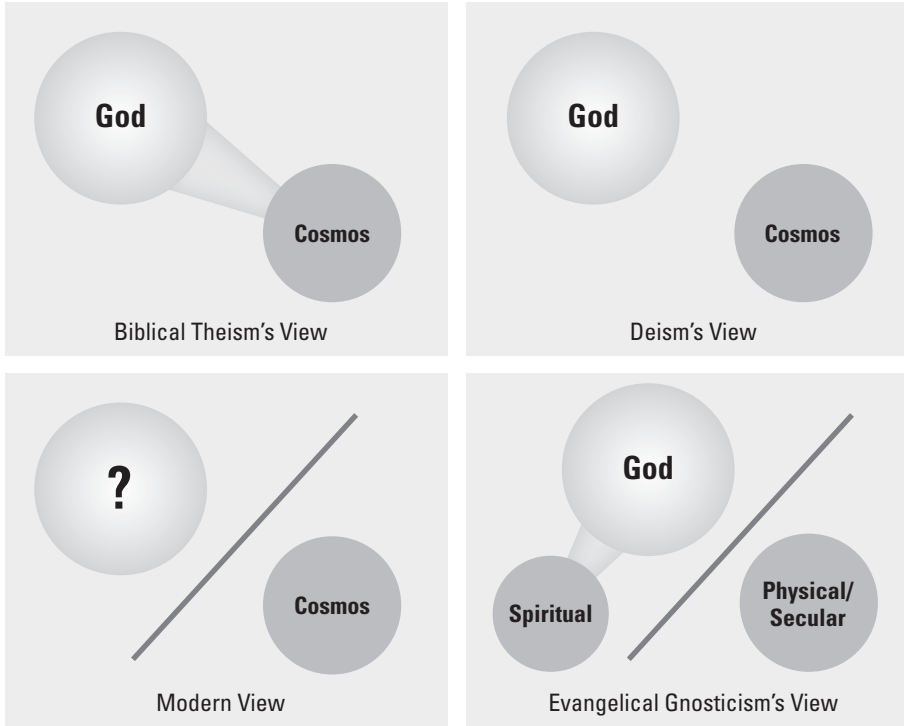


FIGURE 3.1

Adapted from Darrow L. Miller with Stan Guthrie, *Discipling the Nations: The Power of Truth to Transform Cultures* (Seattle, WA: YWAM, 2001), figures 1.7–1.10, pp. 43–4.

The worldview of biblical theism describes a God who is distinct from His creation but connected to it, a reality in which the spiritual and material realms touch each other. Indeed, Colossians 1 describes God, in the person of Jesus Christ, as the Creator, Sustainer, and Reconciler of all things, including the material world. He holds the universe in the palm of His hand, and He is actively working on it to bring the blessings of His kingdom “as far as the curse is found.”

Unfortunately, Enlightenment thinking of the seventeenth century introduced the worldview of deism, a perspective in which God is separated from His world. Although deism sees God as the creator of the universe, He is irrelevant to its daily functioning. The God of deism created the world to operate on its own, winding it up like a clock and letting it run according to natural laws without any need for His sustaining hand. In this worldview, humans are largely independent from God and are able to use their own reason to understand the world that He created.

The modern worldview, sometimes called “Western secularism,” took deism one step further, removing the need for God altogether. In the modern worldview, not only do the spiritual and material realms not touch, the spiritual realm does not even exist! In the modern worldview, the universe is fundamentally a machine whose origins and operations are rooted in natural processes that humans can master through their own reason.

And therein lies the root cause of the first two terms in the equation on page 64:

- The material definition of poverty emanates from the modern worldview’s belief that all problems—including poverty—are fundamentally material in nature and can be solved by using human reason (science and technology) to manipulate the material world in order to solve those problems. Indeed, from the World Bank, to short-term missions teams, to handing a quarter to the homeless person on the street corner, the Western approach to poverty alleviation is to provide material resources and the technology we have developed to master those material resources.
- The god-complexes of the materially non-poor are also a direct extension of the modern worldview. In a universe without God, the heroes are those who are best able to use their reason to master the material world. In other words, the materially non-poor are the victors in the modern worldview, the gods who have mastered the universe and who can use their superior intelligence and the material possessions they have produced to save mere mortals, namely the materially poor.

In this light, repenting of the first two terms in the equation requires us to go even deeper: repenting of the modern worldview that underlies these terms. Repentance never sounds like much fun, but in this case it is the key to discovering a God who is connected to His world, a God who is relevant to every facet of our everyday lives, and a God who can actually respond to our prayers.

Although Christians reject modernism’s denial of God, like many others, Darrow Miller argues that North American Christians have engaged in syncretism, combining biblical theism with the modern worldview into a hybrid he calls “evangelical gnosticism,” a sacred-secular divide in which God is lord of the spiritual realm—Sunday worship, devotions, evangelism, discipleship, etc.—but is largely irrelevant to the “physical” or “secular” realms—business, the arts, politics, science, and poverty alleviation. This sacred-secular divide severely cripples Christianity in North America, making it irrelevant to the day-to-day functioning of our individual lives and culture. And as discussed in chapter 1, too often the North American missions movement has exported this sacred-secular divide to other cultures, failing to communicate the full implications of Christ’s kingdom for all aspects of life.

Moreover, evangelical gnosticism often permeates the poverty alleviation efforts of North American Christians. Too often we drill wells, dispense medicine, and provide food without narrating that Jesus Christ is the Creator and Provider of these material things. Then later we offer a Bible study in which we explain that Jesus can save our souls. This approach communicates evangelical gnosticism: material things solve material poverty, and Jesus solves spiritual poverty. In other words, we communicate “Star Trek Jesus” rather than “Colossians 1 Jesus.” As a result, we fail to introduce materially poor people to the only one who can truly reconcile the broken relationships that underlie their material poverty.

When faulty worldviews—whether modernism or evangelical gnosticism—collide with the worldviews of the materially poor themselves, the results can be devastating . . .

Pachamama and Penicillin

For example, as we saw earlier with the Bolivian farmers who worshiped the Pachamama, many of the materially poor in the Majority World have an ani-

mistic worldview; they believe that the world is controlled by powerful and unpredictable spirits. When North Americans introduce new technology or material resources into such settings—whether agricultural methods, Western medicine, or money—they often prove more powerful than the spirits. Seeing this, the Bolivian farmers may very well go from worshiping the Pachamama to worshiping the penicillin! In other words, we may inadvertently replace the traditional worldview with a secular, “modern” worldview, which puts its faith in science, technology, and material things.¹⁷ Or alternatively, the farmers may engage in syncretism, simply enfolded the new technology into their worship of Pachamama, thanking her for providing them with the power in the penicillin.

A similar dynamic can be present when working with the materially poor in North America, particularly in the context of the US government’s “Faith-Based Initiative,” which allows Christian organizations to receive federal funds for the “nonspiritual” components of their ministries. For example, I once served on the board of an inner-city ministry that serves an African-American population. We applied for federal funds to pay for part of our jobs preparedness training program for unemployed people. As part of this program, our ministry was very committed to using a curriculum that communicated a biblical worldview concerning work, including the need for Jesus Christ to restore us to being productive workers.

The government’s grant administrator, who happened to be a Christian, informed us that the law prohibited us from using the government’s money to cover the costs of such an explicitly gospel-focused curriculum. He was doing his job in informing us of this law. No problem with that. However, he then said, “Brian, just remove the explicitly Christian material from the lessons. You can teach the same values that you want to teach—responsibility, punctuality, respect, hard work, discipline, etc.—without articulating their biblical basis. These values work whether people see them as coming from God or not.” In essence, the grant administrator was encouraging us to apply evangelical gnosticism, separating Christ from His world, encouraging us to use Christ’s techniques without recognizing Him as the Creator of the techniques and without calling on Him to give people the power to employ those techniques.

We decided not to use the federal funds to pay for the curriculum. Teaching the values of a “Protestant work ethic” without teaching about the Creator of

those values and about the transforming power of Jesus Christ is like giving out penicillin without ever explaining the source of the penicillin's power. Yes, like penicillin, these values work. But how sad it would have been if we had ended up communicating to the program participants: "You can pull yourselves up by your own bootstraps. Become more disciplined, hardworking, and responsible, and you too can achieve the American dream of material prosperity." Even if the participants had then managed to change their behaviors without the biblical teaching, the result might have been people who put their faith in middle-class values and in their ability to adopt those values. We would have replaced their own worldview with that of the modern worldview, which believes that humans can achieve progress through their own strength.

It is interesting to consider that in this case, many of the participants in the jobs program already embraced, at least at an intellectual level, most of the elements of a Christian worldview. The prominence of churches in the life of the African-American community ensured this. Ironically, had we simply communicated middle-class American values in our curriculum, our "ministry" might have replaced those elements of a biblical worldview that the participants already embraced with a modern or an evangelical gnostic worldview! Failing to root the curriculum in an explicitly biblical worldview could have been devastating, even if the program participants successfully obtained jobs and increased their incomes as a result of the program. Remember, the goal is for everyone involved to glorify God, not just to increase people's incomes.

The dynamics just described are particularly dangerous for North American Christians in the twenty-first century. On the one hand, all of us have been heavily influenced by the modern worldview, which believes that human reason and effort are able to understand and control the material world without a need for understanding or relying upon God. As a result, we are very prone to putting our trust in ourselves and in technology to improve our lives, forgetting that it is God who is the Creator and Sustainer of us and of the laws that make the technology work.

On the other hand, many of us are now being influenced by a postmodern worldview, which argues that absolute truth is not knowable: "What is true for me might not be true for you. What this Bible passage says to me, it might not say to you." The influence of postmodernism is making many

North American Christians fearful of engaging in evangelism and discipleship activities, lest they be imposing their culturally bound interpretation of Scripture onto other cultures. “Who are we to tell them what the Bible says?”

While postmodernism has provided some helpful corrections to modernism’s overconfidence, shackling people from communicating the transcendent truth of the Scriptures is not one of them. Yes, we are finite, frail, and sinful creatures who are deeply influenced by our own cultural settings in ways that we cannot even identify. We really do need to be careful that we are not imposing our culturally bound interpretations and applications of Scripture’s transcendent truths onto other people. But while these cautions are in order, the Bible never suggests that these realities should prevent us from studying, applying, and communicating the gospel and its implications to others (Ps. 119:105, 130; Matt. 28:18–20; 2 Tim. 3:16–4:5). Yes, we must be humble and must constantly reexamine ourselves in the light of Scripture. But we must not shy away from declaring biblical truth, for our confidence rests in the power of the Word of God and in the active presence of the Holy Spirit to overcome our inadequacies.

In summary, at the end of the day, people need to move from worshipping Pachamama to worshipping the Creator of the penicillin. Such a move requires a verbal articulation of biblical theism: the penicillin works because the Creator makes it work. Fall down and worship Him.

Material Poverty Alleviation for Alisa Collins

After decades of living on welfare checks, Alisa Collins suddenly started finishing her high school degree, working full-time as a kindergarten teacher, and getting up at 4:00 a.m. to wash her family’s clothes before she was due at work. What happened? Alisa’s worldview changed *and* the system in which she lived changed.

It all began when Miss Miller, the principal of the local school, hired Alisa to work part-time as a teacher’s aide. Miss Miller soon observed that Alisa had natural teaching gifts and took the time to encourage her to get the education and certification required to pursue a teaching career. With Miss Miller’s relational and nurturing approach, Alisa began to gain confidence. And while her worldview was changing, two important changes also occurred in Alisa’s economic environment. First, Congress passed welfare-reform legislation,

making welfare more “pro-work” and placing limits on the length of time people could stay on it. Alisa knew her days on welfare were coming to an end and that she simply had to find a full-time job. Second, Miss Miller offered Alisa a job as a full-time teacher, thereby making the economic system finally work for Alisa.

Churches are uniquely positioned to provide the relational ministries on an individual level that people like Alisa need. While making major changes to national and international economic systems is more difficult, churches can often make just enough changes in local systems to allow people like Alisa to move out of material poverty. Such systemic change can take on the form of political advocacy, but more often it simply means changing the economic options for the materially poor so that they have an opportunity to support themselves. For example, business owners in your church could provide jobs for poor people, giving them a rare opportunity to make a fresh start. Or your church might hire poor people part-time, giving them practical experience and an opportunity to develop strong work habits that can lead to full-time employment elsewhere.

Of course, churches can also offer Alisa something that Miss Collins could not: a clear articulation of the gospel of the kingdom so that Alisa can experience the profound and lasting change required to achieve material poverty alleviation in its fullest sense: *the ability to fulfill her calling of glorifying God through her work and life.*

Parts 2, 3, and 4 of this book will elaborate further on ways the church can address both individuals and the systems in which they live in order to be ministers of reconciliation.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

Please write responses to the following:

1. Reflect on your answers to the questions at the start of this chapter. Have your views changed at all? If so, how? Be specific.
2. Have you ever felt trapped by life’s circumstances to the point where you believed that you could not do anything to change the situation? If so, describe the emotions and behaviors that this produced in you. Did you ever feel like just giving up?

3. When you get sick, what do you do? Now read 2 Chronicles 16:7–9, 12 and Psalm 20:7. What was Asa’s sin? One of the features of the modern worldview is an unbiblical separation between the spiritual and the physical realms. Like Asa, we tend to rely on science—medicine, technology, machines, power, etc.—to solve our problems and forget to call on the one who created and upholds the universe. Are you like Asa? How does your worldview need to be transformed?
4. Think about your church’s ministries and missions efforts. Do they include a clear, verbal articulation of the gospel? If not, what are some specific things that could be done to improve this?
5. Again, think about your church’s ministries and mission efforts. Are they about *people* and *processes* or about *projects* and *products*? List some specific things that you could do to improve these initiatives.
6. Answer questions 4 and 5 for any parachurch ministries with which you are involved.
7. Consider your community, city, or region. How might the economic, social, religious, and political systems be unjust and oppressive to some people? If you are able, ask several materially poor people or people who are ethnic minorities (e.g., Native Americans, African Americans, Hispanics in the Southwestern part of the United States) to share their perspective on this with you. Spend some time really listening to them and considering what they have to say. Then ask: is there anything you or your church could do to make these systems more just?
8. Do the ministries to the poor with which you are involved narrate that God is the Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer of the technology, resources, and methods that you are bringing? Or are you inadvertently communicating that the power is in the technology, resources, and methods?

CHAPTER 2

What's the Problem?

1. World Bank, *Hear Our Voices: The Poor on Poverty*, DVD (New York: Global Vision, 2000).
2. As quoted in Deepa Narayan with Raj Patel, Kai Schafft, Anne Rademacher, Sarah Kock-Schulte, *Voices of the Poor: Can Anyone Hear Us?* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press for the World Bank, 2000), 65.
3. *Ibid.*, 37.
4. *Ibid.*, 70.
5. *Ibid.*, 38.
6. *Ibid.*, 39.
7. *Ibid.*, 35.
8. *Ibid.*, 43.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*, 50.
11. There are many different locations and types of poverty in North America, including inner-city ghettos, rural communities, immigrants, and the new suburban poverty.
12. Cornel West, *Race Matters* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 19–20.
13. Defining what is a “sufficient” level of material things is a nontrivial exercise that goes beyond the scope of the present discussion.
14. There is solid scriptural support for the foundational nature of these four relationships. Matthew 22:37–40 teaches us to love God and then others as much as we love ourselves, saying that all the law and the prophets hang on these commands. And the first command

to humans in Genesis 1:28 is to steward the rest of creation.

15. Bryant L. Myers, *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1999), 86.
16. Jayakumar Christian, *Powerlessness of the Poor: Toward an Alternative Kingdom of God Based Paradigm of Response* (Pasadena, Calif.: Fuller Theological Seminary Ph.D. thesis, 1994).
17. Robert Chambers, *Rural Development: Putting the Last First* (London: Longman Group, 1983).
18. Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Anchor Books, 1999).

CHAPTER 3

Are We There Yet?

1. Alisa Collins's story can be viewed in Tod Lending, *Legacy*, DVD (Chicago: Nomadic Pictures, 1999).
2. Mark R. Gornik, *To Live in Peace: Biblical Faith and the Changing Inner City* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2002), 170–73.
3. *Ibid.*, 175.
4. *Ibid.*, 177.
5. Scott D. Allen and Darrow L. Miller, *The Forest in the Seed: A Biblical Perspective on Resources and Development* (Phoenix: Disciple Nations Alliance, 2006), 15.
6. As quoted in Lending, *Legacy*.
7. David Hilfiker, *Urban Injustice: How Ghettos Happen* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2002), 50.
8. LeAlan Jones and Lloyd Newman with David Isay, *Our America: Life and Death on the South Side of Chicago* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1997), 97.
9. Carl Ellis, “The Rise of Ghetto Nihilism,” presentation given at the Second Annual Christian Economic Development Institute of the Chalmers Center for Economic Development, Covenant College, Lookout Mountain, GA, May 2004.
10. See Ruby K. Payne and Bill Ehlig, *What Every Church Member Should Know About Poverty* (Baytown, Tex.: RFT Publishing, 1999).
11. This story is taken from Disciple Nations Alliance, *Aturo Cuba's Ministry among the Pokomchi in Guatemala* (Phoenix: Disciple Nations Alliance, 2004), 2.
12. Jones and Newman, *Our America*, 141.
13. This section draws on the following: Hilfiker, *Urban Injustice*; William Julius Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1987); and William Julius Wilson, *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor* (New York: Knopf, 1996).
14. Gornik, *To Live in Peace*, 45–46.

15. Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000).
16. Darrow L. Miller with Stan Guthrie, *Discipling the Nations: The Power of Truth to Transform Cultures* (Seattle, WA: YWAM, 2001), 31–46
17. See Myers, *Walking with the Poor*, chapter 8 for a helpful discussion of this point.



*An Online Video-Based Study
on Alleviating Poverty*

UNIT 1

RECONSIDERING
THE MEANING
OF POVERTY

WHEN HELPING HURTS ... THE SMALL GROUP EXPERIENCE

STEVE CORBETT
and BRIAN FIKKERT

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STEVE CORBETT AND BRIAN FIKKERT

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A NOTE TO LEADERS: HOW TO USE THIS SERIES

Over the past two decades, we have seen an enormous increase in the North American church's efforts to help the poor. We are incredibly excited about this development, but we are also concerned because we see this reenergized church doing many harmful things. Good intentions are not enough; it is possible to hurt poor people in the very process of trying to help them. The goal of this series is to equip the North American church with a ministry framework that restores the poor to fulfilling their God-given callings and potential.

We pray that God would use this series to affect your heart, your mind, and your actions, both as individuals and as a church community. Ultimately, that change is a work of the Holy Spirit. However, we do have a few suggestions about how to use this series.

Prepare for leading the group by reading *When Helping Hurts*; for your reference, we are listing the chapters of *When Helping Hurts* that correspond with each unit at the end of this opening section. Reading these chapters will give you a deeper personal understanding of the content, enabling you to facilitate class discussion more effectively.

We have designed each unit to be completed within an hour, though your discussion can certainly be extended beyond that. Each unit has the same basic components, as described below with rough time estimates:

OPEN (5–10 minutes): This section includes preliminary questions and an introductory paragraph. Discussing the preliminary questions as a group is a vital part of mentally and spiritually preparing for the rest of the unit. Use this time to foster an environment of openness and dialogue, creating a safe atmosphere where participants feel comfortable sharing their ideas, questions, and concerns.

WATCH (15–20 minutes): Encourage people to close their books while watching the video so that they can fully listen to and engage with the material.

APPLY (20 minutes): These questions are designed to create discussion—they do not have right or wrong answers. The goal is to foster reflection, understanding, and change in the participants’ hearts. As such, it is important to give adequate time for discussion. Don’t be afraid of a bit of silence, and don’t be afraid of asking people to expand on their answers. You will find that having people wrestle with questions and issues together, so long as it is done in a spirit of respect, is enormously beneficial and even powerful.

CLOSE (5 minutes): Read this paragraph together as you conclude the session. Ask if anyone has questions. If there is not time to adequately discuss each one, ask the group to contemplate these questions throughout the week.

PRAY (5 minutes): Use this final statement and prayer prompt as a call for reflection and action. Encourage participants to return to this prompt as they pray throughout the week, and then close in prayer together.

GO DEEPER (flexible): If you have a longer Sunday school or small group session, consider using modules from the Go Deeper section once you have completed the basic discussion questions. You could also extend each unit over two weeks by completing the basic unit one week, followed by the Go Deeper materials the next week.

Please note that Go Deeper is made up of stand-alone modules with short text explanations and questions. You can pick and choose which additional modules you would like to use based on the makeup and interests of your group. If you do plan to use the Go Deeper section, it is particularly important that you have recently read *When Helping Hurts*. To that end, we have included page numbers from *When Helping Hurts* so that you can easily review the specific portions of the book

covered in each module. Having extra background will be essential to explaining and facilitating discussion about the Go Deeper content. Further, we highly encourage you to have group members read the relevant sections of *When Helping Hurts*, particularly for those modules marked “Use in Conjunction with *When Helping Hurts*.”


Go Deeper will enrich your study of these important topics. We encourage you to incorporate at least some of the modules as your group meets together.

In addition to these sections, we have included a series of Getting Started questions and a list of suggested resources. We are providing these materials so your group can begin taking concrete steps in more effectively responding to poverty in your immediate community. Working through the Getting Started portion will take considerable amounts of time and research. If your group is interested and committed to doing so, we recommend that you work on it together over the course of several weeks.

We cannot overemphasize the centrality of prayer in this series. The principles in this course require that each of us honestly examines our own heart and actions. Spend time praying that God would soften your heart and the hearts of the participants. But also pray that your group would see, internalize, and celebrate the hope rooted in the work of Christ. God is at work in this world, and we have the incredible joy and responsibility of joining in that work. Pray together at the beginning and end of each session, and encourage participants to pray with one another throughout the week.

Through the reconciling work of Christ, places as diverse as Atlanta, Georgia, and Kampala, Uganda, can be healed of their brokenness. Jesus Christ is making all things new, and it is the church’s great privilege to proclaim that message. We are praying that this series can be a blessing as you live out that calling in your community.

—Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert



SMALL GROUP EXPERIENCE
UNIT NUMBERS AND
CORRESPONDING CHAPTERS OF
WHEN HELPING HURTS

Unit 1: Reconsidering the Meaning of Poverty	Chapters 2-3
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Unit 2: Seeing God at Work	Chapters 2-3
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Unit 3: Understanding Why Good Intentions Are Not Enough	Chapters 4,7
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Unit 4: Joining God's Work	Chapters 5-6
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Unit 5: Fostering Change	Chapter 10
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Unit 6: Moving Forward	Chapter 11
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UNIT 1

RECONSIDERING THE MEANING OF **POVERTY**

OPEN

Discuss these questions before beginning this week's unit.

- What is poverty? List the first five to ten words or phrases that come to your mind when you think of poverty.

- List the first five areas (e.g., of your city, community, the world) that come to mind when you think of poverty.

What's the Problem?

The average North American enjoys a standard of living that has been unimaginable for most of human history. Meanwhile, 40 percent of the earth's inhabitants eke out an existence on less than two dollars per day. Indeed, the economic and social disparity between the haves and the have-nots is on the rise both within North America and between North America and much of the Majority World (Africa, Asia, and Latin America).

If you are a North American *Christian*, the reality of our society's vast wealth presents you with an enormous responsibility, for throughout the Scriptures God's people are commanded to show compassion to the poor. In fact, doing so is simply part of our job description as followers of Jesus Christ (Matthew 25:31–46). While the biblical call to care for the poor transcends time and place, passages such as 1 John 3:17 should weigh particularly heavily on the minds and hearts of North American Christians: “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?”

WATCH

Close your books and use the accompanying QR code to watch this week's video.



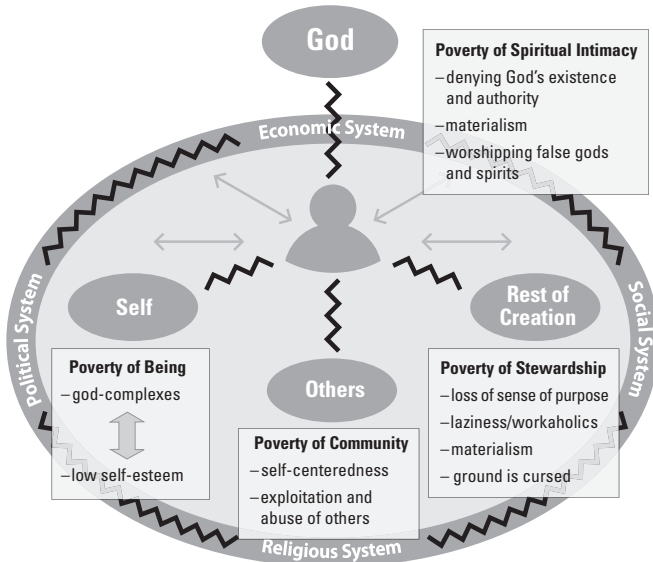
www.helpingwithouthurting.org/smallgroup-1

APPLY

1. Did the words the materially poor used to describe poverty in the video differ from the words you listed in the preliminary questions? If so, what words and differences did you find most surprising?

2. The brokenness of the four relationships illustrated below can lead to behaviors and circumstances that contribute to poverty.

THE FOUR BROKEN RELATIONSHIPS



Adapted from Bryant L. Myers, *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1999), 27.

Consider the story of a friend or family member who is poor. Where do you see evidence of each of the four broken relationships in his or her life? Can you see ways that this brokenness has led to his or her poverty?

- Broken Relationship with God:

- Broken Relationship with Self:

- Broken Relationship with Others:

- Broken Relationship with the Rest of Creation:

3. How might thinking about this person's poverty in terms of these broken relationships change the way you interact with him or her? Are there new ways you could show the love and healing work of Christ to this person or family in each of the broken relationships?

CLOSE *(or proceed to Go Deeper if time permits)*

Poverty is the result of broken relationships. But as we will explore in the rest of this series, broken relationships can be restored by the work of Christ. He came to make all things new, breaking the hold of sin and death “far as the curse is found.” He came to show us that we can have a relationship with our Father, that we have dignity as creatures made in God’s image, that we are to love one another in nourishing community, and that we have the privilege of stewarding the rest of creation. The fall has marred what God intended for us at creation, but the work of Christ offers hope that what is broken, both inside of us and around us, will be repaired. His victory over sin and death is certain, and His healing power is our comfort and peace. Let’s walk together as we explore what God’s reconciling work in this world looks like, and how we can effectively partner with Him in ministering to people who are poor.

PRAY

“Human beings are fundamentally wired to experience these four relationships. It’s not all arbitrary, it’s not all up for grabs. When we experience these relationships in the way that God intended them, we experience humanness in the way God intended.”

Spend time this week praying that God would open your eyes to the beauty and potential around you, including in the lives of people who are poor. Pray that He would help you to break free of a material understanding of poverty, leading you to love and serve these people in ways that point them back to His original design for their lives.

GO DEEPER

Use one or more of the following modules to further explore principles of poverty alleviation.

THE ROOT OF POVERTY

(Reference *When Helping Hurts*, 52–54.)

“At that moment, it doesn’t matter how much the doctor loves you. It doesn’t matter how compassionate the doctor is, it doesn’t matter how many good intentions the doctor has. . . . If the doctor misdiagnoses what’s wrong with you, you won’t get better, and you might get worse.”

Look over the frequently cited causes of and responses to poverty below:

If We Believe the Primary Cause of Poverty Is . . .	Then We Will Primarily Try to . . .
<p>A Lack of Knowledge</p> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>	<p>Educate the Poor</p> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>

If We Believe the Primary Cause of Poverty Is . . .	Then We Will Primarily Try to . . .
<p data-bbox="168 252 469 280">Oppression by Powerful People</p> <hr data-bbox="168 320 511 325"/> <hr data-bbox="168 357 511 362"/> <hr data-bbox="168 394 511 399"/> <hr data-bbox="168 432 511 437"/>	<p data-bbox="552 252 775 280">Work for Social Justice</p> <hr data-bbox="552 320 895 325"/> <hr data-bbox="552 357 895 362"/> <hr data-bbox="552 394 895 399"/> <hr data-bbox="552 432 895 437"/>
<p data-bbox="168 494 458 523">The Personal Sins of the Poor</p> <hr data-bbox="168 560 511 564"/> <hr data-bbox="168 596 511 601"/> <hr data-bbox="168 633 511 638"/> <hr data-bbox="168 671 511 676"/>	<p data-bbox="552 494 873 523">Evangelize and Disciple the Poor</p> <hr data-bbox="552 560 895 564"/> <hr data-bbox="552 596 895 601"/> <hr data-bbox="552 633 895 638"/> <hr data-bbox="552 671 895 676"/>
<p data-bbox="168 737 455 766">A Lack of Material Resources</p> <hr data-bbox="168 799 511 804"/> <hr data-bbox="168 836 511 841"/> <hr data-bbox="168 873 511 877"/> <hr data-bbox="168 911 511 916"/>	<p data-bbox="552 737 898 766">Give Material Resources to the Poor</p> <hr data-bbox="552 799 895 804"/> <hr data-bbox="552 836 895 841"/> <hr data-bbox="552 873 895 877"/> <hr data-bbox="552 911 895 916"/>

1. In the space within the table, write down examples of how you or your church have built ministries to address the various causes of poverty. (For example, under “A Lack of Knowledge,” you might write, “Students were dropping out of high school . . . so we started after-school tutoring programs.”)
2. Does your work seem focused on addressing one particular cause?
3. How might each of the causes of poverty listed in the table actually flow from brokenness in the four relationships? How might this

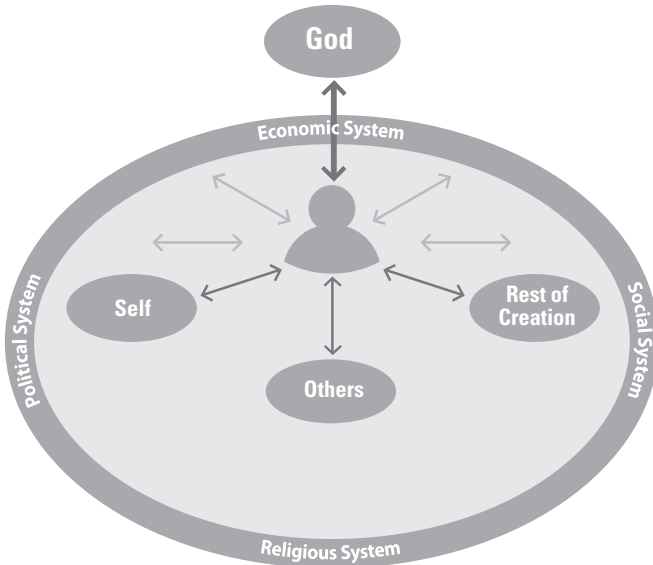
deeper diagnosis impact the ways you interact with people around you who are poor?

BROKEN RELATIONSHIPS AND MATERIAL POVERTY¹

(Reference *When Helping Hurts*, 54–59.)

When the four relationships are functioning properly, humans experience the fullness of life that God intended—we are being what God created us to be.

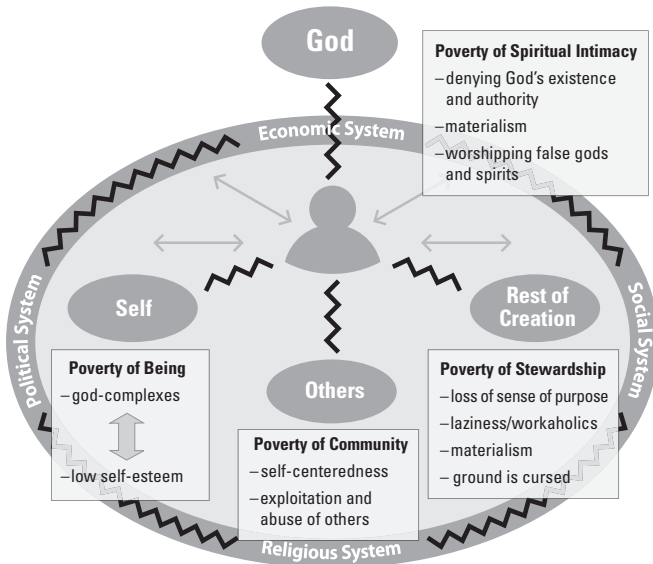
THE FOUR FOUNDATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS



Adapted from Bryant L. Myers, *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1999), 27.

But as we discussed in the video, the fall broke these relationships.

THE FOUR BROKEN RELATIONSHIPS



Adapted from Bryant L. Myers, *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1999), 27.

From this framework, poverty isn't about a lack of material things. Instead, it is about much deeper issues:

POVERTY

“Poverty is the result of relationships that do not work, that are not just, that are not for life, that are not harmonious or enjoyable. Poverty is the absence of shalom in all its meanings.”

—**Bryant Myers**, *Walking with the Poor*²

With this definition of poverty and the four broken relationships in mind, read the following story about Mary:

Mary lives in a slum in western Kenya. As a female in a male-dominated society, Mary has been subjected to polygamy, to regular physical and verbal abuse from her husband, and to fewer years of

schooling than males. As a result, Mary lacks the confidence to look for a job.

Desperate, Mary decides to be self-employed, but needs a loan to get her business started. Unfortunately, the local loan shark exploits Mary, demanding an interest rate of 300 percent on her loan of twenty-five dollars. Having no other options, Mary borrows from the loan shark and, along with hundreds of others just like her, starts a business of selling homemade charcoal in the local market. The market is glutted with charcoal sellers, which keeps the prices very low. But it never even occurs to Mary to sell something else, because charcoal is the only resource she knows how to access. Frustrated by her entire situation, Mary goes to the traditional healer (shaman) for help. The healer tells Mary that her difficult life is a result of angry ancestral spirits that need to be appeased through buying and sacrificing a bull.

1. Where do you see each of the four broken relationships in Mary's story, and how does each specifically contribute to her material poverty?

- Broken Relationship with God:

- Broken Relationship with Self:

- Broken Relationship with Others:

- Broken Relationship with the Rest of Creation:

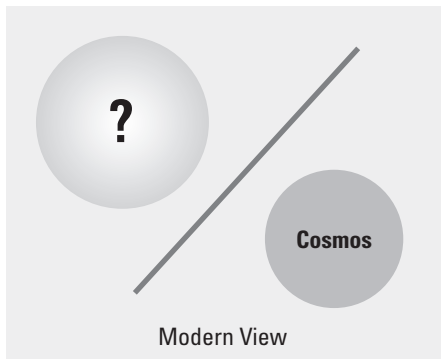
WORLDVIEW MATTERS³

(Use in conjunction with *When Helping Hurts*, 87–90.)

If we are to move forward in helping without hurting, we have to fully embrace a relational view of poverty, setting aside our tendency to view poverty as primarily a material condition that can be solved primarily with material things.

We are deeply conditioned by our society’s modern worldview to view everything around us in material terms. Thus, the way that we act toward the materially poor often paints a faulty picture of the nature of God, self, others, and the rest of creation.

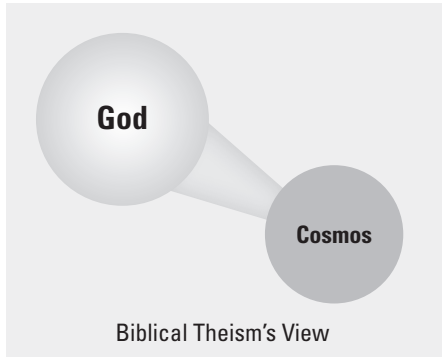
THE MODERN WORLDVIEW



Adapted from Darrow L. Miller with Stan Guthrie, *Discipling the Nations: The Power of Truth to Transform Cultures* (Seattle, WA: YWAM, 2001), figures 1.7–1.10, pp. 43–4.

The modern worldview, sometimes called “Western secularism,” holds that the spiritual realm does not even exist. The universe is fundamentally a machine with origins and operations rooted in natural processes that humans can master through their own reason.

The material definition of poverty emanates from the modern worldview’s belief that all problems—including poverty—are fundamentally material in nature and can be solved by using human reason (science and technology) to manipulate the material world in order to solve those problems or achieve these goals.

BIBLICAL THEISM

Adapted from Darrow L. Miller with Stan Guthrie, *Discipling the Nations: The Power of Truth to Transform Cultures* (Seattle, WA: YWAM, 2001), figures 1.7–1.10, pp. 43–4.

The worldview of biblical theism describes a God who is distinct from His creation but connected to it, a reality in which the spiritual and material realms touch each other. Indeed, Colossians 1 describes God, in the person of Jesus Christ, as the Creator; Sustainer; and Reconciler of all things, including the material world. Thus, our approach to poverty alleviation should reflect this worldview, addressing the materially poor's physical and spiritual needs, not just one or the other.

1. When you get sick, what do you do?

2. Read 2 Chronicles 16:7–9 and Psalm 20:6–8. What was Asa's sin?

3. Because of the ways we have unintentionally accepted the modern worldview, we tend to rely on science and our own reason to solve our problems. We forget to call on the one who created and upholds the universe. Are you like Asa? How does your worldview need to be transformed to reflect a biblical understanding of God and creation?

NOTES

Unit 1: Reconsidering the Meaning of Poverty

1. This section draws on Bryant L. Myers, *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1999).
2. Ibid., 86.
3. This section draws on Darrow L. Miller with Stan Guthrie, *Discipling the Nations: The Power of Truth to Transform Cultures* (Seattle, WA: YWAM, 2001), 31–46.

Move your church forward
in helping without hurting.



The Chalmers Center equips churches and ministries with gospel-driven tools designed to point the materially poor to Jesus and produce sustained transformation. Whether you are

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