

Book Reviews

Becoming Whole: Why the Opposite of Poverty Isn't the American Dream

Brian Fikkert & Kelly M. Kopic. 2019. Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers. ISBN: 978-0-8024-0158-8. \$15.99 (paperback).

A Field Guide to Becoming Whole: Principles for Poverty Alleviation Ministries

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Historical Christianity has always advocated care for the poor as a central tenet of the gospel. This is not without biblical foundation; there are more than 2,000 verses in the Bible that relate to poverty and justice issues. Yet in its reaction to theological liberalism, the evangelical church retreated from biblical engagement with the poor in the latter part of the 19th century. Engagement with the poor was seen as a focus of more liberal mainline Protestant churches, while the focus of the evangelical movement was on spiritual matters of salvation by grace, evangelism, discipleship, and the nurturing of the Christian family.

Brian Fikkert and Kelly Kopic's *Becoming Whole: Why the Opposite of Poverty Isn't the American Dream* represents one of the latest in a series of books, beginning with Ron Sider's *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, whose prophetic purpose has been to return American evangelicalism to engagement with the poor. Some of the early books, such as *Rich Christians*, were primarily motivational. Their purpose was to biblically reconnect the church with the call to the poor and the marginalized. While *Rich Christians*, and subsequent books such as Rich Stearns' *The Hole in Our Gospel*, included practical action items in later chapters, their main purpose was biblical reconnection, not praxis. Their call was a wake-up call, and they formed part of a larger movement that, beginning nearly a half-century ago, brought concern for the poor back into the pulpit of the evangelical church. In this way the foundational books have helped till the soil for these more recent books such that for a predominant majority of millennial Christians, for example, the call to engagement with the poor is no longer seen as ancillary to the Christian life.

Fikkert's previous work, *When Helping Hurts* (with Steve Corbett), Bryant Myers' *Walking With the Poor*, and my own recent book, *Shrewd Samaritan*, initiate a movement towards praxis, the development of a Christian orthopraxy of Christian engagement with poverty rooted in a biblical worldview. The burning question in these books is not so much *whether*, but *how*?

In this context, *Becoming Whole* is written as a kind of second-generation prequel to *When Helping Hurts*, stepping back to create a theological framework that is more encompassing in its case for engagement with the poor than many of the more current books. But while it seeks to re-lay and even deepen biblical foundations, it also uses this foundation as a guide to orthopraxy. While the foundational books highlighted the biblical basis for engagement with poverty, it seems that none attempted to develop as full a theological framework for Christian orthopraxy with the same ambition as *Becoming Whole*. The book does this by re-asking some of the most basic questions, such as: "Why did Jesus come to earth?" Here Fikkert and Kopic lay out the case for a historic Christianity that is distinct from what they call evangelical gnosticism.

Most useful in this respect is their understanding of the power of narrative. Narrative, they argue, is what actually shapes our thinking and actions. And the narrative of evangelical gnosticism not only causes us to think wrongly about the story of our own redemption – it also causes us to export a misleading version of the gospel in our global missions work, community development work, and personal engagement with the poor. In response, Fikkert and Kopic articulate a biblically based framework for our own narrative of redemption, where we are not merely saved for heaven but, instead, are called as "priest-kings" in the redemption of the world around us.

Around this narrative, I find several themes within *Becoming Whole*, as well as within its accompanying *Field Guide*. The first is a clear articulation of our biblical purpose: the fostering of human flourishing within a four-dimensional relationship to God, Neighbor, Self, and Creation.

The first of these relationships, Fikkert and Kopic would argue, is less contested in American evangelicalism – we understand Christianity to be about the fall of humankind and our redemption through Christ, who is able to present us blameless before God. At least in terms of our *orthodoxy*, Fikkert and Kopic would probably argue that on theological terms, the evangelical church is strongest in the first of these dimensions.

It is in the other three, they argue, where we have gone most biblically astray, beginning with neighbor. They point to the negative psychosocial effects of living as isolated, consumer-oriented individuals as we adopt the western material worldview inherent to evangelical gnosticism:

Because the heart is at the center of the human being, humans are necessarily relational creatures; love must be expressed towards someone or something. As creatures who reflect the triune God, human beings are hard-wired for relationship. We are made to be lovers. We are not created to live as autonomous individuals. In fact, when humans live in isolation from others, the effects are devastating. (p. 46)

Loving neighbor is not a cost as such but, rather, Fikkert and Kopic argue that it is what we were *made for*, and our engagement with neighbor-in-need is part of the narrative that defines our own redemption.

Our relationship to “self” is the third dimension in this full picture of redemption. This not only implies a healthy psychology, but also a new identity in Christ, one of an image-bearer. Fikkert and Kopic convincingly argue that any approach to “development” is fundamentally flawed without emphasizing this new identity as image-bearer of God, indeed any approach to the gospel more generally. We must understand that full human flourishing is impossible without the realization of human dignity that is inherent to being an image-bearer.

Whereas evangelicalism separates us from creation, historic Christianity, rooted in the book of Genesis, views human beings not as exploiters of creation for short-term consumption but as stewards over creation, as caretakers of its goodness. The basis for this lies in Adam and Eve’s relationship to creation in the garden of Eden, in which all was good, given as a good gift from their loving Father God. They cite Beale and Kim in their book *God Dwells Among Us*:

Eden is a place of God’s presence; in the place of God’s presence is a place of worship. The expansion of Eden therefore is an expansion of worship. Worship fuels mission in Eden – bearers of the image of God reflect his presence in worship and are propelled forward in their mission to the Earth with reflections of God’s glory. (Genesis 1:28) (p. 29).

Thus, any gospel narrative of redemption, even our own redemption, must encompass a far more holistic sense of what redemption means, its change in our relationship to God, to others, to self, and to creation. And when this narrative pervades our own story, it will then translate into more transformative missions, community development work, and personal witness to others.

A second theme running throughout the book (as one might surmise from the subtitle) is an unrelenting critique of the American Dream, rooted in a worldview of western naturalism. Evangelical gnosticism has formed a syncretistic American domestic religion that is a hybrid of the western naturalism of the Renaissance, American materialism, and historic Christianity. One of the strongest points of the book is the authors' particularly clear identification of the heresy, how the American church has internalized it, and how it has tainted our missionary efforts as we have exported it throughout the world in global missions.

"What are we calling people to?" ask Fikkert and Kopic, "if in our missions and development work, we call people to be like us (North Americans)." By failing to call people to biblical, historic Christianity, and instead into the kind of materialism inherent to western naturalism, we are calling them not to Christ but to a kind of Christian heresy. I found this to be the strongest statement (and call to action) in the book for missionaries and development practitioners. We must have our theology and our own accurate narrative of the gospel straight before we can do effective missions or effective development work, else we be calling people to a false gospel.

A third theme is the reparation of brokenness of the different dimensions of relationship (God, Others, Self, Creation) and the effects of the fall and spiritual poverty on material poverty. Fikkert and Kopic offer five answers in response to the question, "Why is Jane Doe poor?" (p.189):

1. False gods and erroneous stories of change.
2. Broken individuals.
3. Destructive formative practices.
4. Broken systems at both the community and macro levels.
5. The influence of demonic forces.

In perhaps only this respect does my own view diverge slightly from the understanding of causes of poverty articulated in *Becoming Whole*.

The problem with emphasizing the role of demonic forces for world poverty is the fact that, for all except the very recent past of human history, people have lived in poverty. Indeed, even the most faithful believers of the early church, whose lives we seek to emulate, lived in a state of material welfare that by any standard today would be considered extreme poverty, including God's chosen nation of Israel for all of its ancient history. Moreover, how certain pockets of western Europe emerged from poverty had not so much to do with increasing fidelity to the gospel, Weber's *Protestant Ethic* notwithstanding, but with specific institutional changes that altered the rules to favor investment and wealth accumulation, a pattern that we see repeated in both historically Christian and non-Christian countries (such as Japan and China) across the globe.

The argument can be re-framed by emphasizing that increasing the capacity of the poor to have growing material influence over their own lives allows them their own capacity to expand their love and care for others. In this age, because of the way our own economies have facilitated material prosperity, God's Providence has allowed us in the industrialized world some means to facilitate movement out of poverty for others. This is so that their lives may increasingly flourish, not through a western brand of individualistic consumption but through their own agency to more positively reach into the lives of neighbors in their own spheres of influence. Biblical development work is thus about increasing Spirit-led human agency, the freedom to increasingly offer more of their lives freely to God, neighbors, and creation.

In its totality, Fikkert and Kopic have given us a solidly biblical framework on which to build the foundations of development theory and practice. The accompanying *Field Guide* provides an even more specific guide (for those serving in missions, on boards of directors, and practitioners) to development orthopraxy within the framework laid out in the main book. *Becoming Whole* is both a fitting sequel and prequel to *When Helping Hurts*, and the framework it creates will emerge as a staple for institutions engaged in global poverty for many years to come.

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