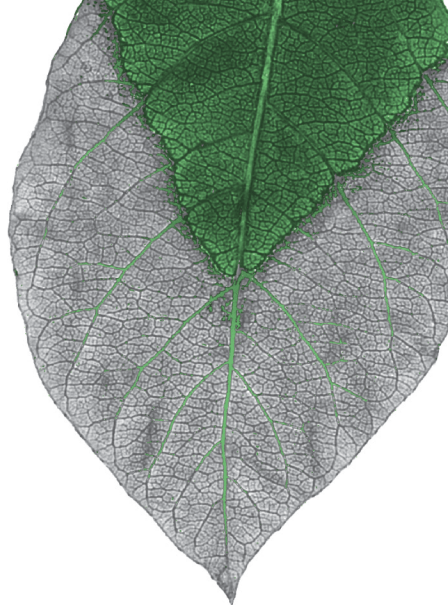


INTRODUCTION

WE NEED A NEW STORY



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

—FRANCIS FUKUYAMA, POLITICAL SCIENTIST, 1989

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

—LESLIE NEWBIGIN, MISSIOLOGIST, 1985

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

We didn't always feel this way, at least not to this extent. Only several decades ago, many from the dominant American culture—middle- to upper-class white Americans—were remarkably optimistic, not just about our future, but about the future of the entire world. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union led many to believe that *Pax Americana*,

an era of American-led peace and prosperity, would become the new world order. Indeed, little could hinder the United States, the world's lone superpower, from exporting Western values and institutions across the globe.

Globalization was there to accelerate this process. As multinational corporations, technology, financial capital, information, and entertainment crisscrossed borders at lightning speed, the global economy and the world's metropolises became increasingly Western. One can now order a Big Mac and Coke in virtually any major city of the world.

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

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

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

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

Concurrent with our internal political struggles, the surreal images of the 9/11 attacks on the Pentagon and World Trade Center—symbols of American military and economic might—brought the world's

lone superpower to its knees. Life has never been the same since. Heightened airport security, color-coded warnings of threat levels, and repeated acts of terrorism remind us that we're not as safe as we once were. Additionally, a steady stream of mass murders instigated by racists, lonely schoolboys, and deranged men have become almost commonplace. On top of that, unresolved racial tensions and police shootings of unarmed African Americans have resulted in protests, and even some reprisals, further dividing us along ethnic lines. *Pax Americana?* We don't even have *Pax Neighborhood!*

Our confidence in our economic system has been shaken as well. The Great Recession at the start of the twenty-first century was the most devastating economic crisis since the Great Depression, causing property foreclosures and unemployment to skyrocket. Moreover, the fundamental structure of the economy changed as new technology, foreign competition, and outsourcing moved jobs from the Rust Belt to Silicon Valley. As a result, blue-collar wages have stagnated, and income and wealth inequality have exploded. Alarmingly, the share of America's total income accruing to the top 1 percent of households is now equal to the share earned by the bottom 70 percent combined!⁴

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

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

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

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

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

Unfortunately, the Western church is on shaky ground as well. In a culture that is increasingly cynical about any claims to objective truth, damage is done when the church’s behavior suggests that it doesn’t believe in the objective truths that it supposedly upholds. The Bible says, “Blessed are the meek” (Matt. 5:5), but the church seems fixated on wielding political power at home and abroad. The Bible says, “You cannot serve both God and money” (Matt. 6:24), but the church seems as materialistic as the surrounding culture. The Bible says, “Spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed” (Isa. 58:10), but the church seems largely indifferent to the plight of the poor and marginalized right in its own backyard.

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

Our recent problems didn’t just happen overnight. Rather,

much of what we're experiencing is the consequence of longstanding issues that are deeply embedded within the dominant American culture. And many from America's subdominant cultures, including minorities and the poor, have been painfully aware of these problems for far, far longer than people from the dominant culture.

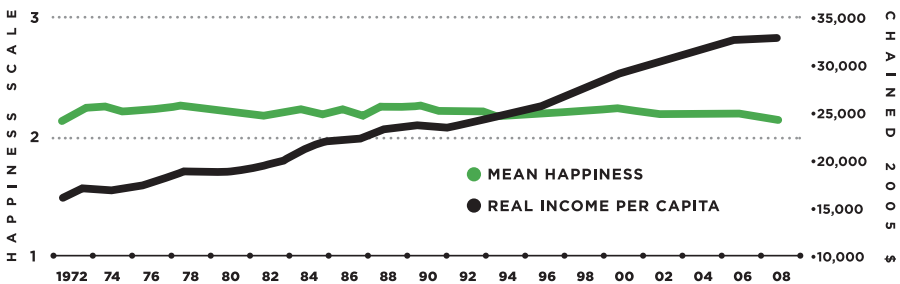
THE PARADOX OF UNHAPPY GROWTH

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

But we also need to ask some serious questions about the overall impact of Western culture on human flourishing. Consider this: while real income per capita *tripled* in the US between 1946 and 2014, the self-reported happiness of the average American stayed the same (see Figure I.1).¹⁰ We got richer, but not happier. And we're not alone. Similar results have been found for a number of other wealthy nations.¹¹

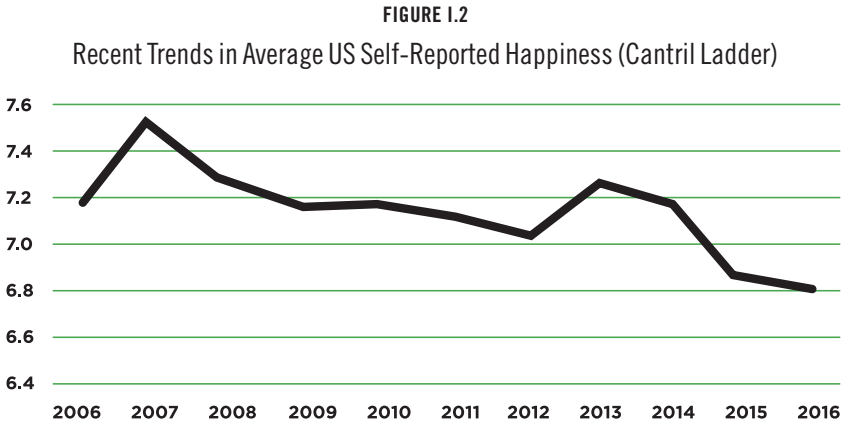
FIGURE I.1

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



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

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



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

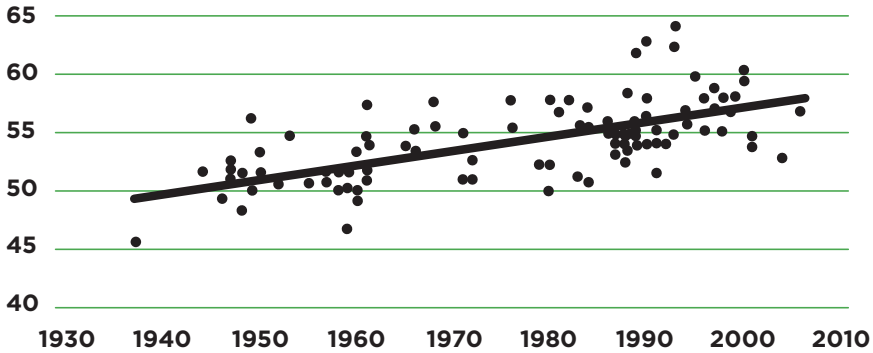
Additionally, a number of more objective measures of physical, social, and psychological health are on the decline in the US as well.¹³ For example, life expectancy dropped in 2015, as death rates increased for nine of the top ten leading causes of death: heart disease, chronic lower respiratory illness,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

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

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

and by an additional 24 percent from 1999 to 2014 for all age groups combined.¹⁷ Unfortunately, the church is not immune to all this, as depression and anxiety among Christians has increased as well.¹⁸

FIGURE 1.3
Long-Run Trends in Depression Among US College Students



MMPI Depression (D) scale scores of college students, 1938–2007

Adapted from Jean M. Twenge, Brittany Gentile, C. Nathan DeWall, Debbie Ma, Katharine Lacefield, David R. Schurtz, “Birth Cohort Increases in Psychopathology among Young Americans, 1938–2007: A Cross-Temporal Meta-Analysis of the MMPI”, *Clinical Psychology Review* 30, no. 8 (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2010), 151.

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

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

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

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

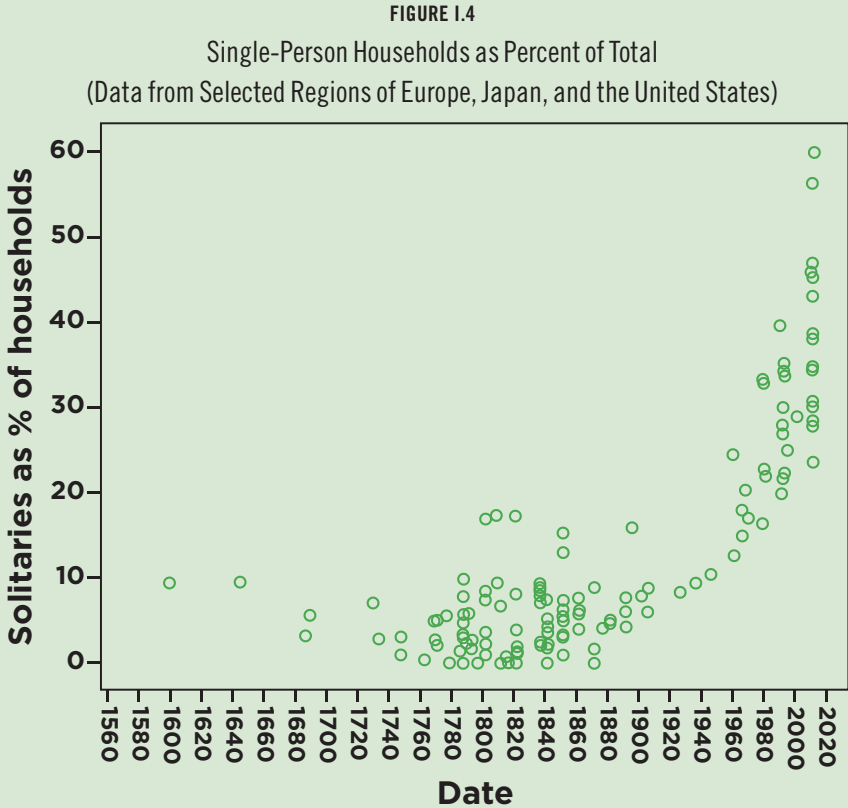
The Loneliness Epidemic

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

The United Kingdom is not unique. Researchers have found that more than half a million people in Japan stay at home for at least six months at a time without having any contact with the outside world.²³ Similarly, rates of loneliness in the US have doubled since the 1980s, reaching “epidemic levels” in which nearly half of Americans report that they “sometimes or always” feel alone. The problem is particularly acute for younger people, with Generation Z, born in 1997 or later, and millennials, born between 1982 and 1996, being lonelier and in worse health than older generations.²⁴

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

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



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

is consistently linked to increased incidence of heart attack, strokes, cancers, depression, anxiety, and premature death.²⁷

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

WE NEED A DIFFERENT STORY

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

we talking about poor people and how to help them?

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

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

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

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

As the filming drags on, things only get worse. Your neck, shoulders, and legs ache. The horse runs away every time you approach

him, fearing that you're going to break his back. The director gets frustrated about having to reshoot every scene. The entire crew is discouraged, as they know the movie will flop. And your own self-image plummets, because you feel like a failure as an actor.

Now imagine that the filming lasts for decades. Things never get better. But for some reason, everybody keeps trying to make it work, rather than selecting a different script that would fit you better.

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

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

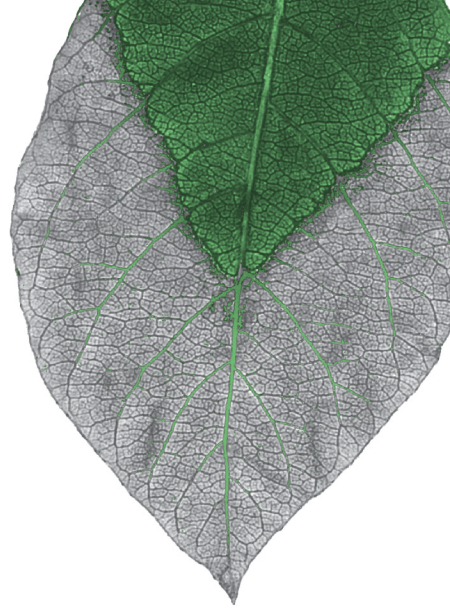
That's what this book is all about: helping us to change the story of our lives in general and of our poverty alleviation efforts in particular. To do this, we'll need to throw away the script we already know—the one that Western civilization has been asking us to live for centuries. That sounds scary,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

Hence, this book won't give you a detailed script in which every

line in the story is laid out in advance; rather it's more like an invitation for you to improvise with us.²⁹ Of course, in any improv, the actors need a prompt to get started, and in some ways this book serves as that prompt. Although we'll give you more guidance than most prompts do, going forward we all will need to experiment with how God's story applies in our own contexts, making mistakes, trying again, and sharing with one another the lessons we've learned. As we do, we will be improvising God's story together, a story that is already breaking forth into this world, making all the other stories come untrue for both poor people . . . and ourselves.

CHAPTER ONE

LOVE REALLY DOES MAKE THE WORLD GO 'ROUND



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

—JEREMIAH 17:9

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

—CELESTIN, *A VERY POOR MAN IN RWANDA*, 2014

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

Mr. Gordon was there, beaming brighter than ever. He had always had a positive attitude, but now, despite his aging body and the recent death of his wife of over fifty years, his face simply glowed. I reached out to shake his right hand, but he quickly clasped my hand between both of his. I asked how he was doing, expecting him to be grieving the recent loss of the love of his life. His eyes twinkled as he said, “Oh, I couldn’t be better! Look at the wonderful life I’ve

had, and look at where I am going! I will be with my wife again soon. God has been so good to me. How could I possibly complain?" Mr. Gordon had always been special, but now the joy emanating from his face seemed almost otherworldly. He was the same as always, but different.

As I walked down the hallway of the nursing home, I suddenly felt the hair stand up on the back of my neck. *No, it couldn't be him*, I thought. I got a little closer. Sure enough, although his hair was now gray and his face shriveled, this was old "Scrooge," the nickname we had given him as kids. As a boy, I was afraid to walk past Scrooge's house, for if my foot would even slip just partway onto his lawn, he would rush out of his house, screaming at me to get off his property. Hoping that age had mellowed him, I got a little closer, but I could immediately see that the scowl that had terrified me as a kid looked more bitter, angry, and hateful than ever. Like Mr. Gordon, Mr. Scrooge was who he had always been, only much more so.

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

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

But what are we becoming? Can it be predicted? Can we choose what we become? And how does the fact that we all are becoming something inform the way we walk with materially poor people? Can we help them change? If so, to what? And if individuals can

change, what about communities, institutions, or even nations? Can they change for the better too? If so, how? And what does “better” even mean?

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

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

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

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

OUR GOD IS A RELATIONAL GOD

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

Christians believe that God was never bored, nor was there a time when He wasn’t full of love. How can that be? Because this one God always has been a Trinity. From all eternity, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have existed in loving, intimate communion. At the very core

of God's triune being is love, for "God is love" (1 John 4:8).³ It may sound strange, but it is true and right: God loves Himself. This is only possible because of the distinctive truth that this God is eternally Father, Son, and Spirit.

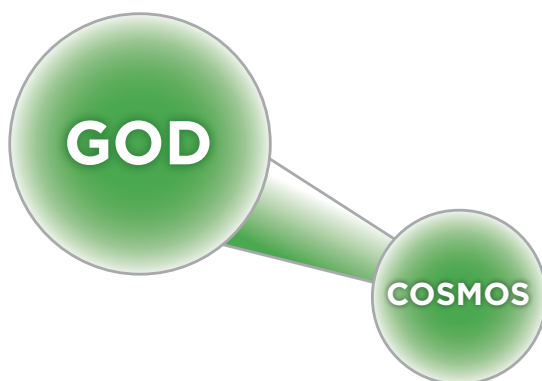
God did not create the world in order to become loving. Rather, He created because He is loving. If we're ever going to reflect God's heart to a hurting world, we must start with this basic truth: God is love. And since He creates the physical world out of His triune love, He doesn't reluctantly love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

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

The loving relationships within the inner life of the Trinity overflow not simply as the triune God creates His world, but as He continues to care for it.⁵ God didn't just wind up the world like a watch and then hope it would keep running on its own. No, God remains actively concerned about His world. The entire cosmos was originally created and is now sustained by the Father, through the Son, and in the Spirit (Gen. 1:1–2; John 1:1–10; Rom. 8:18–27; Col. 1:15–20; Heb. 1:1–3). God is not detached from the everyday affairs of this world (see Figure 1.1). Rather, as a relational being, He is deeply and actively involved with His world, "sustaining all things by his powerful word" (Heb. 1:3). How amazing that the all-powerful God, who is seated in the heavens, actually cares for each sparrow's flight, for

every hair on our head, and even for the cattle owned by the wicked (Matt. 10:29–30; Jonah 4:11)! God’s triune love is the basis of His relationship with all creation. Love really does make the world go ’round.

FIGURE 1.1
Biblical View of God’s Relationship to His Creation



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

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

WHAT IS A HUMAN BEING?

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

The Human Being as Body and Soul/Heart

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

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

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

This has huge implications for the design of our poverty alleviation ministries. People are whole people. So, partial solutions that address *either* the body or the soul will not work as well as solutions that address *both* the body and soul. The effectiveness of an after-school tutoring program for low-income children might be hindered if the children are so hungry that they cannot pay attention to the lesson. And a job training program that increases a husband's income and physical well-being without addressing his spiritual condition could simply create a workaholic whose mental health deteriorates over time. The body and soul are highly interconnected. In

fact, they aren't really two different *things*, but refer to two aspects of *one person*. And together, these two aspects capture the fullness of the whole being.

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

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

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

In fact, the three features of the soul are so interrelated that the Bible uses the word *heart* (*leb*) to describe all of them.¹³ In Scripture, *heart* can refer to our minds as well as our emotions, to our actions as well as our desires. We intuitively know this; that's why we often ask

about the condition of people's "hearts." And when we do, we aren't asking about a particular organ in their bodies. Rather, we're asking, "How are *you* doing? What are your deepest longings and fears? How is your life going? How is your attitude toward God? How are you feeling?" Normally, these questions are concerned not just with people's emotional state, but with the very essence of their being. The simple word *heart* takes us to the center of the human creature.

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

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

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

First, when a woman walks into your church asking for help with

her electric bill, her behaviors both before and after that moment will fundamentally be driven by what she loves. Thus, if her need for financial assistance is a result of her own behaviors—and it might not be—then *effectively* helping her material condition requires addressing her heart condition. There are no shortcuts or alternatives; her heart is at the center of her personhood and drives her behaviors.

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

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

We need to make two important points of clarification.

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

Second, even if the woman is fully responsible for her own

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

Still, any effective and sustainable poverty alleviation strategy must consider the condition of people's hearts. At the foundation of communities are individual people, and according to God's Word, at the foundation of individual people is the human heart.

The Human Being as a Relational Creature

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

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

Theologians regularly point to four fundamental human relationships emphasized in Scripture: relationships with God, self, others, and the rest of creation (see Deut. 6:4–6; Gen. 1:26–28).²³ The

relationship with God is central, as it is the foundation for the other three. Part of the way that we both love God and experience His love for us is in our relationships with self, others, and the rest of creation. When we hold our little girl's hand as we walk along the beach, for example, we express the love of our heavenly Father to her and experience His love back to us in her adoring eyes. Our relationship to God is integral to how we experience the other three relationships.

It's important to understand that the nature of these relationships is not arbitrary. God has designed them to work in a certain way, and humans only flourish when we experience these relationships the way God intended. Further, these four relationships are highly integrated with a person's body and soul so that the human being is a mind-affections-will-body-relational creature.

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

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

FIGURE 1.2
Biblical View of Human Being



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

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

While our description of the human being as a mind-affections-will-body-relational creature is based on the work of biblical scholars spanning thousands of years, considerable research in the natural and social sciences supports a similar characterization of human

beings as integrally connected creatures with facets that may be characterized as mind, affections, will, and body.²⁶ And research in the fields of business, economics, education, neuroscience, positive psychology, and sociology support the notion that humans are intrinsically wired for loving relationships with God, self, others, and the rest of creation.²⁷

The Science of Happiness

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

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

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

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

THE GOAL OF POVERTY ALLEVIATION

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

The Goal of God's Story of Change

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

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