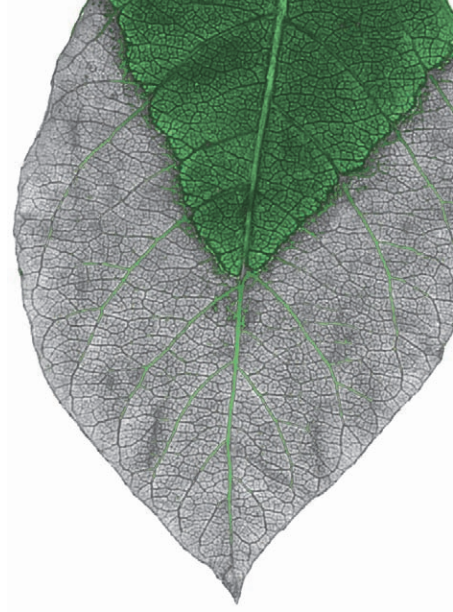


BECOMING WHOLE

WHY THE OPPOSITE OF POVERTY
ISN'T THE AMERICAN DREAM

BRIAN FIKKERT & KELLY M. KAPIC

YOU CAN BE A HARP-PLAYING GHOST FOREVER



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

—N. T. WRIGHT, *THEOLOGIAN*, 2008

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

—LESSLIE NEWBIGIN, *MISSIONOLOGIST*, 1991

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

Although being the pastor’s kid often felt like martyrdom to me, there was one sacrifice that topped them all: wearing a hideous

robe and singing in the junior choir in the third grade. And as if that wasn't enough of a trial, God orchestrated the circumstances so that my older sister was the choir director, putting her in the ideal position to regularly humiliate me in front of my peers. But apparently not even that was enough suffering in God's eyes, as He gave me the opportunity to earn even more jewels on my crown: my sister made me sing a solo in front of the entire congregation, threatening to report me to our parents if I complained even once. But the height of this entire torturous experience—the thing that made it almost more than I could bear—was that I believed this is what heaven would be like—forever, and ever, and ever. Somehow I had gotten the idea that when I died, my soul would go to heaven, where I would spend all eternity as a ghost, wearing a choir robe, singing in the junior choir, and playing a harp.

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

Like many Western Christians, I had absorbed ideas that are a mix of Western Naturalism and biblical truth. As a result, I had a highly distorted view of God, human beings, and life in general. Some of these erroneous ideas have plagued me well into adulthood, doing considerable damage to me and some of the people I've impacted. And I'm not alone. Western Christianity has some deep flaws, flaws that hurt us and that we often *unknowingly* and *unconsciously* impose on others, including the poor people we are trying

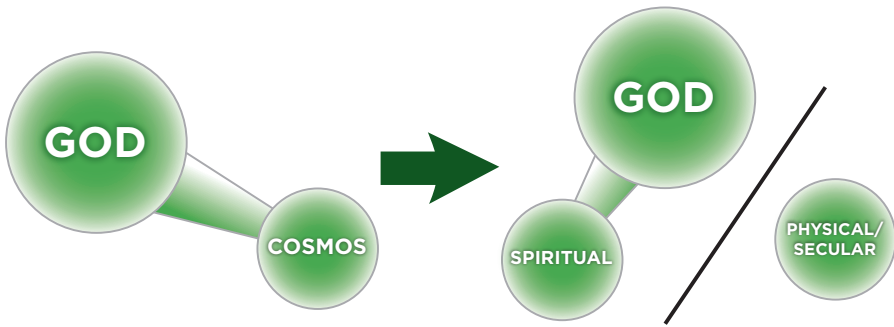
to help. There is a better way of being human in the world, for both ourselves and materially poor people. Unfortunately, we've been immersed in Western Christianity's distorted understanding of reality for so long that we don't even know what that better way of being in the world looks like, much less how to attain it. We have been so thoroughly influenced by the dominant story of change of Western Christianity that our minds, affections, wills, and bodies can't even imagine an alternative set of goals or way of achieving those goals. Poor people aren't the only ones who need transformation. You and I need transformation as well.

EVANGELICAL GNOSTICISM'S STORY OF CHANGE

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

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

FIGURE 4.1
Evangelical Gnosticism's Limitation of God's Reign



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

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

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

shops and a powder that they can use to sprinkle curses on their competitors' products. In traditional religion, the spiritual and material realms are integrated.

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

Things do seem different in the US. For example, when I get sick, I often go to the doctor numerous times before I remember to pray for healing. Yes, we should go to the doctor and we should take medicine, but we should also pray that the Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer of the entire cosmos, the Great Physician, will use either modern medicine or miraculous intervention to cure our bodies. My prayerlessness reflects Evangelical Gnosticism. I ask God to save my soul, but I often treat Him as though He is irrelevant to my everyday, physical life.

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

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

“We should study hard.”

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

“We should learn how to write a résumé.”

“We should use our parents’ connections.”

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

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

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

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

As pictured in Figure 4.2, the separation of the physical and the

spiritual extends to Evangelical Gnosticism's understanding of human beings. There are three key points to note here:

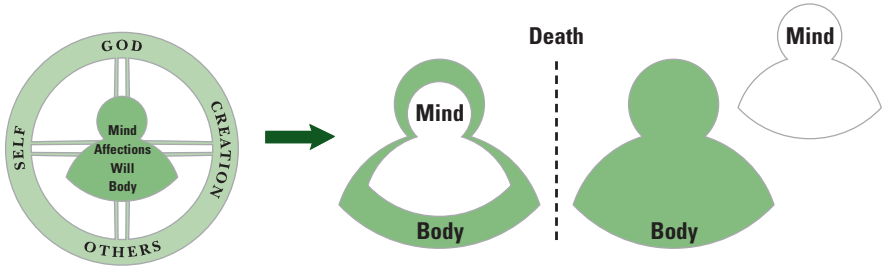
First, Evangelical Gnosticism typically views the soul as being superior in importance to the body. The soul is seen as eternal, destined to sing in the junior choir forever. While we have vague notions that our bodies will be resurrected, somehow they don't seem to be that important in our thinking.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

Second, Evangelical Gnosticism tends to reduce the soul to just the mind, rather than a mind, affections, and will that are fully integrated both with each other and with the body. As will be discussed further in Part 3, this singular focus on the mind negatively impacts the way that training is conducted in many poverty alleviation programs. Information is disseminated as if program participants are just “brains on sticks” rather than as whole people whose affections, wills, bodies, and relationships must be impacted, not simply their minds.

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

FIGURE 4.2

Evangelical Gnosticism's Deformation of the Human Being



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

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

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

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

The erroneous concepts of Evangelical Gnosticism are not just abstract philosophical matters. They shape every aspect of our lives, deforming us as image bearers of the triune God from the creature on the left side of Figure 4.2 to the one on the right side. Rather than living like highly integrated, physical and spiritual creatures that

experience deep communion with God, self, others, and the rest of creation, we live dis-integrated lives. We worship on Sunday and then largely live like Western Naturalists the rest of the week, chasing the American Dream and becoming increasingly individualistic, materialistic, and self-interested.

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

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

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

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

For example, Western churches and ministries regularly dispense food, clothing, and money to the same poor people over long periods of time. There is an appropriate time and place for providing such resources. But when ongoing handouts to able-bodied people

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

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

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

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

Ironically, these approaches are *not* demonstrating Jesus' love. Jesus cared for whole people—body, soul (mind, affections, and will), and relationships. Jesus cared deeply enough about every square inch of the cosmos to be tortured unto death to save it. Moreover, these approaches are *not* sharing the gospel, which is the good news that Jesus' kingdom is bringing healing as far as the curse is found. The gospel is *not* that Jesus is beaming our souls up out of this world into some ethereal mass of harp-playing ghosts. Consider how Colossians 1:15–23 describes both Jesus and the gospel:

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

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

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

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

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

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

If American Christians visit these places today, they are greeted enthusiastically, for Santa Claus has returned for another visit. Soon, requests for handouts are made, even though no evidence suggests that any progress was made with the handouts that were provided on the previous visit. Rather than empowering the local people to see themselves as image bearers of the triune God who are called to

steward their gifts, the local people have been reduced to the groveling materialists depicted on the right side of Figure 4.2: pathetic, consuming machines who are merely trying to deaden the pain while they wait for their souls to go to heaven when they die.

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

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

POVERTY ALLEVIATION STRATEGY #2: ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT + EVANGELISM

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

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

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

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

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

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

EVANGELICAL GNOSTICISM'S DEFORMATION OF THE HUMAN BEING

Consider again the contrast between the images on the left and right of Figure 4.2.

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

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

Again, nobody is fully transformed into the creature on the right. As we saw in the previous chapter, our structure as mind-affections-will-body-relational beings resists complete deformation. Moreover, the Evangelical Gnostic story of change is not the only story

influencing us. Most of us have some sense that God is sovereign over all aspects of our lives, and we often pray for His intervention. Furthermore, narratives and practices regarding intimacy with God, dignity, community, and stewardship are part of most of our lives, diluting the impact of Evangelical Gnosticism. But these caveats notwithstanding, Evangelical Gnosticism still negatively affects us in many ways.

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

I'm not alone. The story of change, systems, and formative practices of Western Christianity, which isolates God from everyday life, can't help but transform people into creatures who often look a whole lot like Western Naturalists, people who are also living as though God is irrelevant to everyday life. When our story from Monday through Saturday is the same as that of unbelievers—"pull yourself up by your bootstraps and pursue the American Dream"—should we really expect to look much different from them?

And we don't look different. About a dozen years ago, Ron Sider drew attention to this crisis in his book *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience: Why Are Christians Living Just Like the Rest of the World?* Sider

cited a host of disturbing evidence, mostly from the 1990s, showing that evangelical Christians looked amazingly similar to our unbelieving neighbors:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

When Evangelical Gnosticism Addresses Poverty in the Majority World

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

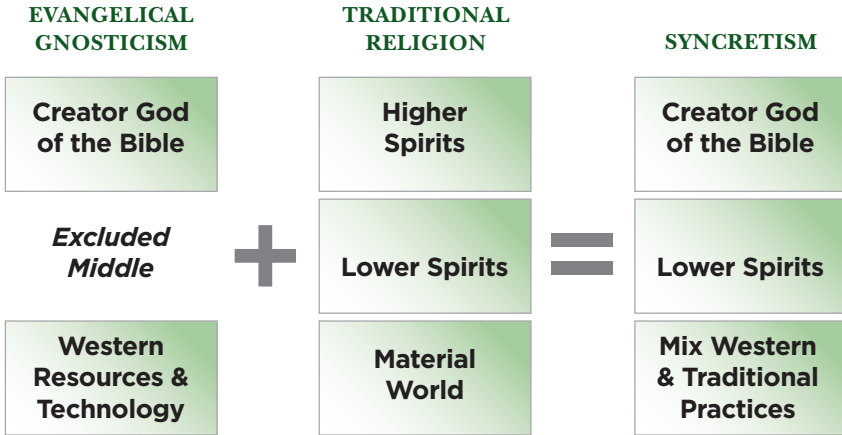
What will be the outcome of such an approach?

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

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

FIGURE 4.3

When Evangelical Gnosticism Meets Traditional Religion



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

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

Bringing the Whole Gospel to the Irish

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

When Evangelical Gnosticism Addresses Poverty in Rural Appalachia

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

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

To understand this, it's important to note that, despite the Bible Belt's reputation, church attendance there is actually very low. In southwestern Ohio, where Vance was born, the rate of church attendance is about the same as "ultraliberal" San Francisco.²⁵ Most residents there simply are not participating in the corporate body of Christ.

Moreover, when rural Appalachians do attend church, they often encounter some of the most extreme forms of Evangelical Gnosticism. For a brief period of time during his early teenage years, for

example, Vance attended church with his estranged biological father. Using apocalyptic images, the preaching emphasized retreating from this evil world and reduced the Christian life to combatting evolutionary teaching, avoiding extramarital sex, not listening to rock music, and sharing the “gospel.”²⁶ As Vance explains, “Dad’s church required so little of me. It was easy to be a Christian. The only affirmative teachings I remember drawing from church were that I shouldn’t cheat on my wife and that I shouldn’t be afraid to preach the gospel to others. So I planned a life of monogamy and tried to convert other people.”²⁷

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

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

If Christ isn’t really King, then another god with another story of change is needed to get through the day. Describing the religion of his grandmother, Vance writes, “Mamaw [Grandma] always had two gods: Jesus Christ and the United States of America.”²⁹ The latter god clearly took precedence, as life was dominated by a quest for achieving the American Dream against a backdrop of nationalistic patriotism.³⁰ So what role does Jesus Christ play? “By Mamaw’s reckoning, God never left our side. He celebrated with us when times were good and comforted us when they weren’t. . . . God helps those who help themselves. This was the wisdom of the book of Mamaw.”³¹

We have seen this pathetic god before. He is not the King of kings

and Lord of lords. Rather, he is like the Divine Butler of the millennial generation's Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, a friendly chap who assists people in the pursuit of their ultimate god: the materialistic, individualistic, self-centered, consuming robot at the heart of the American Dream. Ironically, Mamaw and many others in rural Appalachia were at least two generations ahead of the millennials.

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

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

Reflection Questions

1. Look back at your answer to Question 1 in the Initial Thoughts at the start of Part 2.
 - a. Do you see any evidence of Evangelical Gnosticism in your answer?
 - b. What specific actions might you take to reduce the influences of Evangelical Gnosticism in your life?
2. List ways in which the culture around you—your workplace, the media, your family, your friends, and so on—is promoting the worship of *homo economicus*, a self-interested, individualistic, materialistic, consuming robot.
3. Reflect on your answer to the previous question and on your own thoughts, choices, and behaviors. Can you discern any ways in which you are being transformed into the image of *homo economicus*? If so, be specific in your answer.
4. What specific practices will you pursue to resist the deforming influences of *homo economicus* in your life? For more help with this, consider reading *Practicing the King's Economy: Honoring Jesus in How We Work, Earn, Spend, Save, and Give* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2018) by Michael Rhodes and Robby Holt with Brian Fikkert.
5. Look back at your answers to Question 2 in the Initial Thoughts at the start of Part 2. Is there any evidence of Evangelical Gnosticism in the following:
 - a. Your church? Be specific.

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

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

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