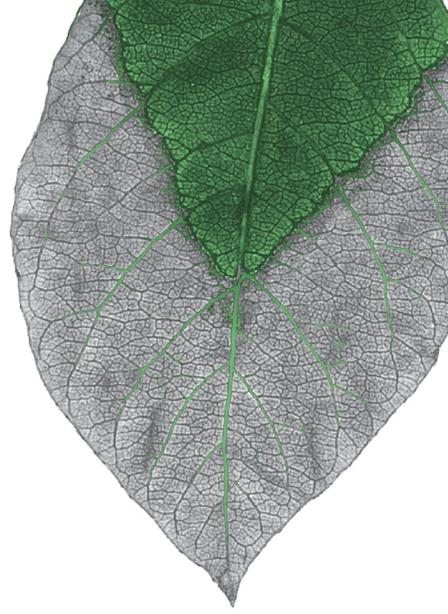


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CHAPTER ONE

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.

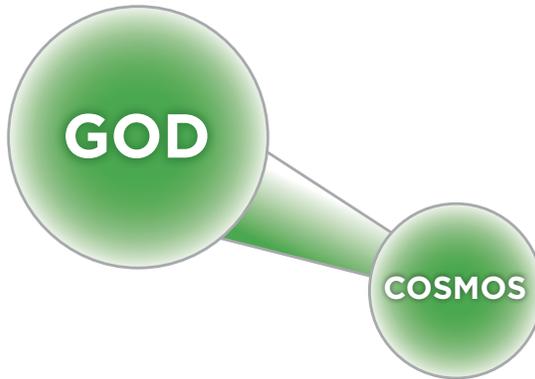
God did not create the world in order to become loving. Rather, He created because He is loving. If we're ever going to reflect God's heart to a hurting world, we must start with this basic truth: God is love. And since He creates the physical world out of His triune love, He doesn't reluctantly love 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.