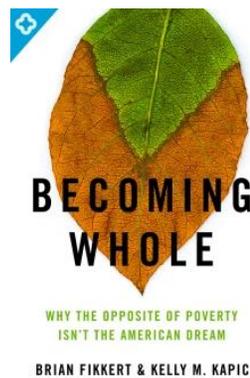


BOOK REVIEW

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

By Brian Fikkert and Kelly M. Kapic

Reviewed by Rosie Fyfe



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I first read Brian Fikkert's earlier work, *When Helping Hurts* (2014, and co-authored with Steve Corbett), when working as a community development practitioner in the Middle East. While the critiques outlined in that book challenged me and influenced my work, I was left wanting more constructive solutions. *Becoming Whole*, designed to be a companion book to *When Helping Hurts*, fulfills this purpose and provides a more systematic treatment of the same underlying concepts. Drawing on Christian theology, the book articulates an overarching framework designed to help readers develop more effective poverty alleviation initiatives. Brian Fikkert, a professor of economics and community development at Covenant College in the United States, co-wrote the book with his colleague Kelly Kapic, professor of theological studies. The book is a worthwhile read for anyone working in the field of community development who wants to engage their Christian faith in their work.

Becoming Whole argues that addressing poverty is fundamentally about fostering change. Therefore, the story of change believed by those implementing poverty alleviation initiatives affects the way projects are designed and carried out. Underlying these stories of

change are people's understanding of the nature of God, humanity, and human flourishing. Fikkert and Kapic argue that initiatives enacted by Western Christians are often rooted in false metanarratives that are more influenced by worldviews from the surrounding culture than a biblical understanding of the world. They first critique "Western Naturalism," which holds that there is no God. The authors argue that the false god of society thus becomes "a purely material, individualistic, self-interested, consuming machine" (74). They use the term "Evangelical Gnosticism" to describe another false story that bifurcates spiritual and physical life, separating out Sunday worship from the way life is lived the rest of the week. The subtitle of the book "why the opposite of poverty isn't the American Dream" points to the destructive nature of these two stories. Fikkert and Kapic argue that these false metanarratives not only result in poverty alleviation efforts that do not reflect the wholeness of human flourishing described in Scripture, but also spread the "virus" of these false stories to those they are purporting to help in the developing world. The book concludes with a section on how the story of Scripture shapes the way Christians should properly understand human flourishing, and how this could be enacted in poverty alleviation initiatives.

Becoming Whole is a helpful contribution to a growing field of Christian practitioners and academics wrestling with the question of how to do community development work in ways that are faithful to Scripture. Drawing on James K. A. Smith's hypothesis that people are ultimately shaped by what they desire and their vision of the good life, this book reminds community development practitioners to be careful about taking on the assumptions and false visions of their surrounding culture. Fikkert and Kapic challenge Christians to instead design their "ministries in ways that people end up worshipping the one reality worthy of praise: the triune God" (54). The book also usefully draws on Charles Taylor's work to emphasize the role of spiritual forces in community development work. Using the

metaphor of the Toronto Skydome to describe Taylor's concept of the "porous self," they argue that Western Christians often live as if the roof is closed. This means that poverty alleviation ministries are designed in ways that assume that the spiritual world does not enter the material world, rather than with the understanding that the world is "enchanted," meaning that the spiritual and material are intertwined.

The final section of the book is effective in connecting the biblical narrative of creation, fall, Christ's redemptive work, and new creation, with poverty alleviation initiatives. The examples provided are valuable in illustrating what this looks like in practice; for example, the impact of a program that teaches a biblical view of human agency.

Navigating the interactions between two fields, theology and community development, is necessarily complex. And though commendable in explicitly working through these connections, the book's approach to theology comes across at times as overly formulaic, reifying complex topics into sharp categories. For example, the diagrams of a "community that embodies God's Kingdom" and a "biblical view of a human being" seem overly simplistic, and the latter does not do justice to the two biblical texts used to validate this model. Throughout the book there is also a tendency towards simplistic analysis that does a disservice to the complexities of actual practice. It is not helpful, or accurate, to propose that there are only three metanarratives in the world, and that every other worldview held by cultures the world over sits under one of these umbrellas. Finally, the attempt to arrive at the one ideal Christian model of working in poverty alleviation is based on an erasure of Christian difference, whether on denominational, theological, or cultural grounds, and misguided in its ambitions. There may be a range of ways to live faithfully as Christians in the practical outworking of community development.

Becoming Whole provides an excellent starting point for Christians working or studying in the areas of relief, development, and advocacy, and wanting to integrate their faith in their work. There has been an identified need for Christians working in community development to engage theologically. Brian Fikkert and Kelly Kopic make a solid contribution in this space, especially in their engagement with the narrative of Scripture, and the difference this makes to poverty alleviation efforts. The focus on wholeness depicted in Scripture, and ultimately displayed by Jesus Christ, is a refreshing and necessary corrective for the NGO arena as well as for parts of the Church. *Becoming Whole* is not purely an academic exercise, but a calling for Christians to live as new creations in the fullness of God's mission in the world: "preaching the Word *and* digging wells, starting schools *and* administering the

sacraments, offering prayers *and* dispensing penicillin, fellowship with Christ's body *and* financing microenterprises" (265).

References

Corbett, Steve and Fikkert, Brian. 2014. *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty Without Hurting the Poor . . . and Yourself*. Chicago: Moody Publishers.

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