



Book Review of *When Helping Hurts* by Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert

LMPG Network Resources

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We are living in a unique time in history. No other time in all of human existence has the world seen such disparity in wealth. Forty percent of the world lives less on \$2 per day, while the average American lives at a standard that has been unthinkable for most of history (13). As Corbett and Fikkert—authors of *When Helping Hurts* and economists at the Chalmers Center at Covenant College—put it,

If you are a North American Christian, the reality of our society's vast wealth presents you with an enormous responsibility, for throughout the Scriptures God's people are commanded to show compassion to the poor. In fact, doing so is simply part of our job description as followers of Jesus Christ (Matt. 25:31-46). (13)

So often, however, it is easy to feel overwhelmed with the amount of need in the world and the weight of responsibility believers have in light of it. Despite our good intentions, it can be easy to hurt the poor and ourselves as we seek to love our neighbors as Christ has called us. For so many of us—whether we realize it or not—if we have not carefully thought through the ways through which we seek to minister to our hurting neighbors, we can appear as Marie Antoinette did to the starving French. Our desires are right headed, but cake is not the answer. As we begin to understand the real needs of those hurting around us, it is then also easy to hurt through giving in a way that is disempowering. We might not give cake, but we do so in a way that creates dependency and does not help the poor out of their poverty. In their book, *When Helping Hurts*, Corbett and Fikkert seek to lay out a framework through which we can seek to

help the poor without hurting them; this is done through identifying the deeper needs of the poor and empowering them to live in a right relationship with God, self, others, and creation.

Mankind's Poverty of Being

To diagnose poverty correctly, we must understand the fundamental nature of reality, which all starts with God (54). Human beings are inherently relational creatures. After the fall, all our relationships—our relationship with God, self, others, and creation—were broken. When these relationships function properly, we can experience life the way God intended—we can fulfill our mandate over the earth and glorify God through supporting ourselves and our families, glorifying God in our work and relationships (55). In a fallen world, however, all of mankind experiences poverty of being—systems are broken, relationships are broken, and we are broken. So, what is unique about “poverty” in our world today? “Poverty is the result of relationships that do not work, that are not just, that are not for life, that are not harmonious or enjoyable. Poverty is the absence of shalom in all its meanings” (59). All mankind lives in a broken system and with a poverty of spiritual intimacy, but for some, the consequence of this exacerbated poverty is material poverty. Mankind is all mutually broken—until we grasp this, ministry to the materially poor around us will most likely hurt more than it will help (61).

Without recognizing our mutual brokenness, especially for the rich who seek to assist the materially poor in the world, a subtle “god-complex” can arise, an

unconscious sense of superiority in which [the rich] believe that they have achieved their wealth through their own efforts and that they have been anointed to decide what is best for low-income people, whom they view as inferior to themselves. (61)

If you are unsure if you have this god-complex, ask yourself, *why do you really want to help the poor?* Do you want to feel noble, to accomplish something in your life, or feel guilty if you do not? This comes out quickly when we begin to work with the materially poor:

One of the biggest problems in many poverty-alleviation efforts is that their design and implementation exacerbates the poverty of being of the economically rich—their god-complexes—and the poverty of being of the economically poor—their feelings of inferiority and shame (62).

Through defining poverty, not with its base in broken relationships, but in only a lack of material goods, we shoot the poor in the foot. So often, the North American church gets stuck in a bad equation:

Material		God-		Feelings of		Harm to
Definition	+	complexes	+	Inferiority	=	both
of Poverty		of		of		Materially
		materially		Materially		Poor and
		non-poor		Poor		Non-Poor

How can we escape from this Catch 22? First, we must repent of the health and wealth gospel that has so deeply pervaded our hearts. We must repent of our god-complexes, realize we and our impoverished neighbors are both spiritually impoverished in need of grace, and then we can move towards helping the hurting.

Helping through Empowering—Relief, Rehabilitation, and Development

When seeking to help those suffering from the effects of material poverty in our midst, we must realize that not all poverty is the same. First, though all poverty, at its base, is caused by sin (either in creation, systems, relationships, or ourselves), there are an infinite number of reasons causing material poverty. The reason and context can call for one of three responses—relief, rehabilitation, or development. If treated incorrectly, the effects of poverty can easily be exasperated, so it is vital to be able to differentiate between these three responses.

Relief is 1) probably the easiest to recognize, but 2) the most incorrectly and over-prescribed response to poverty alleviation. It can be defined as, “the urgent and temporary provision of emergency aid to reduce immediate suffering from a natural or man-made crisis” (100). Relief needs to happen quickly and end quickly; it is the “stop the bleeding” aspect of poverty alleviation. Fast, free, and generous handouts from outsiders should be given in times of relief, but sadly, relief is regularly treated as the only treatment for poverty. Someone comes to us for money, groceries, and etcetera, and more often than not, we give relief instead of much needed rehabilitation or development. This “help” we think we might be giving through

misused relief is actually stingy, because it is not addressing the deeper needs of our hurting neighbors—the ways they are treating their relationships with God, self, others, and creation.

Rehabilitation begins “as soon as the bleeding stops; it seeks to restore people and their communities to the positive elements of their pre-crisis conditions” (100). The main point of rehabilitation is that you are working *alongside* the one who is hurting. It is all about cooperation, working with the individual, not giving out emergency aid that could hurt and create dependency. To get individuals back to their pre-crisis states, the one who is hurting must be an active part of designing, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating the program put in place (106). A big part of empowerment comes from identifying the vulnerable individual’s gifts and putting them to practice in order to let the individual help herself and her community. Paternalism (doing something for people that they can do for themselves) can easily sneak into this process, but be aware of this and give people the space and freedom to use their gifts to improve their lives, even if this process takes a bit longer than you might wish.

Development is the “process of ongoing change that moves all the people involved – both the ‘helpers’ and the ‘helped’—closer to being in right relationship with God, self, others, and the rest of creation” (100). Development is oftentimes slow and long, stepping alongside people as they grow more in line with how God intended them to live. In this process, particularly when working in cross-cultural settings, it is vital that the direction of development is determined by the poor themselves (or others on the ground in the context of that culture). Because of a multitude of cultural differences—including how time, relationships, and many other concepts are viewed—well-meaning developers can ruin their witness, waste time and resources, and hurt themselves and the poor if they do not intimately work alongside those who understand the problems best—i.e. those on the field or in the community. Tangentially, this aspect is also *essential* in short term missions and vision trips (see more in chapter 7 of *When Helping Hurts*).

Closing Thoughts

It could be somewhat easy after reading this book to think that the process of giving aid is simply too complicated, and out of a fear of hurting your neighbor, you bury your head in the

sand and don't help anyone. This is *not* the point of this book, though I confess, this was one of my struggles in reading this book. But think back to the Biblical narrative—we must help those around us! The essence of Christ's mission on earth, as He described it in Luke 4, was to “proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor” (Luke 4:18-19). Jesus' disciples will be known by their love for one another (John 13:35). Israel was rejected because of their neglect for the poor (Is 1). Clearly, the Biblical narrative calls believers to take action when we see individuals suffering around us. This amazing metanarrative of Scripture is one in which a good, loving, and just God created a world that fell away from Him. Into this world, He sent His Son to die for those who are completely helpless and vulnerable. Jesus came to the earth for blind, the leper, the sick, and the hurting—for those who are poor and could not help themselves.

The point of this book is *not* to discourage action, but to *examine our form of action*. Are we stingily handing out dependency-creating-relief that debilitates the vulnerable? Are we stepping aside and empowering those who need empowerment? If our definition of poverty is simply “a lack of material goods,” then we will seek to meet poverty with only material goods. However, if we can change our understanding of poverty to one that is an extreme brokenness in relationships with God, self, others, and creation, we will seek to combat poverty relationally. Though it is time consuming and difficult, it empowers those we seek to serve and, God willing, brings many to Himself.