

Brian Fikkert: Alleviate poverty by reconciling relationships

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HOUSTON—Until Christians acknowledge their own brokenness, their attempts to assist the materially poor are more likely to hurt the poor than help them, economist Brian Fikkert said.

The first step toward poverty alleviation involves Christians repenting of their sins of pride, their feelings of superiority to the poor and their embrace of materialism, he said.

“Broken people create broken systems, and broken systems create broken people,” said Fikkert, co-author of *When Helping Hurts*.

Some churches that criticize government for throwing money at problems do the same thing when it comes to how they approach the poor, Fikkert, founding president of the Chalmers Center for Economic Development at Covenant College, told participants at the No Need Among You Conference in Houston. The [Texas Christian Community Development Network](#) sponsored the Oct. 6-8 event.

Misdiagnosing the problem

Too often, Christians prescribe the wrong treatment for poverty because they have misdiagnosed the ailment, he asserted.

They focus only on material poverty, rather than looking also at poverty of spiritual intimacy, poverty of being, poverty of stewardship and poverty of community, he asserted.

In essence, Christians base their view of humanity on the western economic

model that sees a human being as “a physical, highly individualistic, self-centered, materialistic creature,” he said.

“The Christian church has embraced the story of western materialism but tacked a soul onto it: Get the soul to heaven for all eternity, and live the American dream right now. ...We need a better story. We need to rediscover the gospel,” Fikkert said.

In contrast to the materialistic worldview, the biblical model presents human beings as “highly integrated body-soul relational creatures who are deeply wired for relationships,” he explained.

“Poverty alleviation is about reconciling relationships,” he said.

Relief, rehabilitation and development

Churches miss the mark when they treat people living in chronic poverty the same way they respond to those who need emergency relief, Fikkert said.

“Know how to distinguish between relief, rehabilitation and development,” he said.

Relief is an appropriate short-term response to victims of a natural disaster or unexpected crisis, comparable to applying first aid to stop bleeding, he explained.

Rehabilitation begins after the bleeding stops, and it seeks to work with victims of a disaster to restore the positive elements of their pre-crisis condition.

Development, on the other hand, is a long-term ongoing process of “walking alongside” people to “bring them into right relationship with God, self, others and the rest of creation,” Fikkert said.

Rather than asking poor people what is wrong and what they need, ask them to identify their gifts, abilities and resources, he recommended.

“Don’t habitually do things for people that they can do for themselves,” he said.

Rather than adopting a paternalistic approach that gives poor people a blueprint to follow, help the materially poor discover their own solutions, he suggested.

“Live into a different story,” he said.