



Our Framework for Transformation

INTEGRATING PHYSICAL & SPIRITUAL

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Integrating Physical & Spiritual	1
Consequences of the sacred/secular divide	2
Our lives became divided	3
We make our God seem weak and irrelevant	5
We lost the impact of the gospel	7
Our vision became small	8
We lost the importance of loving vulnerable people	11
The way we address poverty was broken	13
An integrated response	15
A new goal	17
Key teachings	23
Loving and serving	23
Stewardship	27
The power of obedience	30
The whole gospel	34
Conclusion	37
Reflect and Apply	39

INTEGRATING PHYSICAL & SPIRITUAL

It seems we got a little off course. Somewhere in the past 500 years the Christian life got divided into two parts: the sacred and the secular. The sacred—those things God was immensely concerned about—included things like scripture, church, theology, and evangelism. Everything else was secular: things like work, art, politics, and caring for the poor.

Those things that were considered sacred were valued more highly. A person who was a pastor or missionary was considered a full-time Christian worker, having chosen a higher calling. Our activities on Sunday became the most important. From Monday to Saturday, as long as we lived moral lives, read our Bibles, and were a good witness, it was believed God expected little more of us. How we cared for our health or property wasn't important to Him at all. It's what I was brought up to believe.

It wasn't always this way. During the Reformation it was understood that everything we did was to be done "before the face of God," *Coram Deo*. If a carpenter made a table, he would finish the bottom as carefully as the top because "God sees the bottom." God was believed to be involved in everything, and everything was done to glorify Him.¹

The Reformation concept of *Coram Deo* is true to God's word. The Bible states clearly that everything we do from eating and drinking to working should be done before God and in ways that bring glory to Him (see I Corinthians 10:31 and Colossians 3:17). For most of us, that's a familiar idea. And yet, in reality, we are often a little unsure how that actually plays out. We don't have a strong theology of an undivided life. How work, caring for our health, and upkeep of our homes and gardens relate to God isn't something that we can clearly articulate.

Consequences of the sacred/secular divide

This divided view of life—seeing "spiritual" things as more important and higher, while everything else is lower and less important—has impacted all of us. It dominates much of the Western church and, as missionaries in past years sacrificially headed out to reach unreached nations, it also shaped the foundational beliefs of the churches that they started. It's impacted our understanding of what it means to be a Chris-

1 My first introduction to these ideas was through Disciple Nations Alliance, coramdeo.com

tian, how we are to live our lives, and the approaches we use to serve. As we think about how to see the lives of vulnerable people flourishing, let's consider some of the most common consequences of this divided view of life.

Our lives became divided

A few years ago, my husband visited a Christian businessman who bought coffee from farmers and sold it to factories. My husband saw some scales and climbed on. He was shocked to discover that he had lost around 20 pounds (nine kilograms). He told the businessman, who laughed and unashamedly explained that those were the scales for buying coffee off the farmers—they weren't correct. If he wanted to know what he really weighed, he needed to use the scales inside the shop—the ones used to weigh the beans he was selling. When my husband confronted him that what he was doing was dishonest, the businessman's response was, "If I was honest, I wouldn't be able to stay in business, because that's what everyone does."

“Everything we do should be done ‘before the face of God’ and in ways that bring glory to Him.”

While that story mostly leaves us shaking our heads, more shocking is the story of the pastor's wife our team met in India. As a way to serve her community, she was going around performing abortions. "After all," she reasoned, "If a woman

has eight children and can't feed them, then isn't aborting the ninth a way to help?"

These stories get our attention because they violate the "moral"—our sense of right and wrong—which we tend to put in the sacred box, the things God cares deeply about. But the impact doesn't end there. In almost every Majority World country I have visited, Christians are notoriously the worst workers. They turn up late and leave early because they are busy at Bible studies, choir practices, and prayer meetings. They spend their time evangelising at the office rather than getting their work done. When these workers are confronted about their work habits, they declare themselves 'persecuted.'

“A divided view of life taints our understanding of what it means to be a Christian, how we are to live, and our approach to serving.”

In the area where I worked early in my career, people would say, "You can tell the Christian areas and families because they are the poorest." Indeed, it was easy to spot the pastors' families, because their children were the dirtiest. The pastor and his wife neglected their children while they were off doing "more important" spiritual things.

Around the world so many have only heard a narrow gospel message. They know they are to repent and believe, attend church, pray, and read their Bibles. But they have rarely heard how the Christian message impacts the way we work, parent, or care for others. Many of the people in these stories have

been to Christian trainings, where they've learned all about evangelism and prayer. And yet, of those I have talked to, none of them had any idea that what they were doing was wrong.

We make our God seem weak and irrelevant

In too much of the world, Christianity is largely presented as a way to get to heaven. It's not seen as offering much in terms of guidance for how to live on earth. People do their best to obey what they've been taught; but they do so to ensure their place in heaven. They have little expectation that life on earth should be any different.

In one of our trainings we ask the group to imagine a village that had been extremely poor for generations—they had poor sanitation and food shortages, few children went to school, and families lived in broken-down homes. The farms were poorly cared for and there was litter in the village. Twenty years ago an evangelist came and everyone made a commitment to Christ. However, today the village has not changed at all—they are still extremely poor, still have food shortages, poor sanitation, few children that are educated, etc. We ask the students if they are shocked by this story. Mostly they are amused by the

“*So many have only heard a narrow gospel message. They know they are to repent and believe...but they have little expectation that life on earth should be any different.***”**

question. Many say, “You are describing my village. Of course nothing has changed—why should it? How would becoming Christians impact any of these things?”

However, we are called to display God, to make Him visible to the nations. Most people, especially in the Majority World, don’t suddenly pick up a Bible to learn about God. They judge who God is by the lives of His people. As non-believers see dirty villages and neglected families, they aren’t left in awe of how powerful and loving our God is. Rather they are left believing God is irrelevant to the needs of today—the needs they are concerned with. God is seen as weak and unable to help His own people.

In contrast, in the TCT program, it’s common to see churches grow as they demonstrate God’s concern for all areas of life. One church shared that many people in their community had bad backs. The problem was that people had to carry heavy crops on their backs because there was only a footpath to their fields. So the church went out with picks and shovels and widened the path so a motorbike carrying a cart could get through. The community was amazed to see the church working so hard. When asked why they were doing it, they shared that God cared about the health of the community, so they were building a road to reduce back problems. Attracted by a God who cared about things like health, many were added to the church.

God’s reputation—as either weak or powerful, loving or demanding—rests in large part on how His people display Him to their communities. Perhaps that’s why the Bible reminds us to

live our lives in such a way that others see our good deeds and glorify God (1 Peter 2:12).

We lost the impact of the gospel

As I started to work amongst the rural poor in Asia, I was shocked to discover that Christians still went to witch doctors when they were sick or concerned about the harvest. They'd slaughter a chicken, or whatever the witch doctor claimed was required, in order to (theoretically) gain favor. The sad fact is, Christianity—at least the divided version they were given—lacked answers to their everyday problems. While it helped them relate to God and get to heaven (both of which they were happy about), the gospel message they had heard had nothing to say about life on earth. The problems they faced—from growing sufficient crops to staying healthy—were not covered by their new religion, so they kept old practices in place to cover the gap.

“ *The gospel message, when limited to Christ and salvation, fails to answer the question of how we ought to live today.* ”

In Africa, you can see the other extreme. There, I was amazed to find that prayer was incredibly central to much of what they do. Many churches have 24-hour prayer. Almost all seem to have daily 5:30 a.m. prayer. When they face a problem, they pray—often not leaving the church until an answer comes. And yet, there seems to be a troubling disconnect between the amount of prayer that happens and the state of their lives.

With a little more digging, I came to understand that, while prayer was central, it was also all they did. If they needed money, for instance, they'd pray for a miracle. Because they did not have a theology that included God's concern for things like work, people weren't praying, "God, help me to find a job to earn more," but rather, "God, send me money." There was no Christian message for their everyday issues, so they spiritualized everything, expecting miracles as the only way God works.

These are two sides of the same problem. The gospel message, when limited to Christ and salvation, fails to answer the question of *how we ought to live today*. As a result, some just keep up their old practices with nothing new to replace it. Others use the only tool they have been given—prayer answered by miracles. Both paths prevent us from living as God intended.

Our vision became small

Because of our divided view of life, we have stopped believing we can and should seek to transform every aspect of society. In contrast to the Great Commission, where we are told to "go and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:16-20), we now focus almost exclusively on church planting and evangelism. Instead of discipling whole nations, we seek only to convert individuals. As Christians, we should be redeeming every aspect of society.

My Ugandan colleague was teaching a group of bishops the idea that we are to redeem all of life. She asked them what they would say to a young person who wanted to be a politi-

“Without a strong understanding of our Christian call to redeem society, we are left watching from the sidelines as things go from bad to worse.”

cian. They agreed—they would cast Satan out of that young person. While they laughed in acknowledgment that it may be just a little over the top, they were expressing a common sentiment. Everywhere in Africa I've gone, I've found general agreement: if a young person wanted to go into politics, the church

would help them to see that wasn't God's will and persuade them to do something different. I haven't found anyone who's said they would affirm this great calling and disciple the young person so that they could be a godly leader in their nation. One of the great sufferings in Africa is the corruption amongst their political leaders, and yet this is an area that the vast majority of the church has no vision to redeem. Because it is corrupt, they run in the opposite direction, rather than asking God how to bring change.

Africa certainly isn't alone here. I remember taking a group of Asian business owners to visit a “kingdom business” in China. It was impressive. The Chinese business had worked hard to bring glory to God into everything they did. They hired people who were deaf because, they explained, “We have a responsibility to provide opportunities, especially to those who society neglects.” Because they believed “it is more blessed to give than to receive,” they had a giving program for their employees; every week the staff contributed to a fund for unexpected needs (a major medical expense, for instance). They had

organized savings groups, because they wanted to teach good stewardship of money. Every aspect of the business—from hiring to paying their accounts—was looked at through the lens of what would glorify God most.

The business owners who went on the trip with me were excited. They went home and began trying to make the same sorts of changes to their own businesses, only to be shut down by their Christian colleagues, who told them, “The church is the only suitable place to talk about Christian things—don’t bring it to the workplace.” There was no space in their minds to redeem business for the glory of God.

Other business people I’ve encountered do believe that Christians play a role in the workplace but, for the most part, they only mean evangelizing or organizing a Bible study. They don’t have a vision for what it means to bring glory to God through every aspect of work.

Likewise, many of my American friends are distraught as they watch society become increasingly more secular and churches shrinking instead of growing. Indeed, three out of five young people raised in Christian homes in the United States are leaving the church as young adults (according to studies by Barna Group and Pew Research). While we stand alarmed that our nations are decaying and that corrupted culture is pulling people away from the church, we haven’t fought to redeem society. Instead, we’ve retreated into a spiritualized version of Christianity that tells us the church should only concern itself with things like Bible study, prayer, and church attendance.

Without a strong understanding of our call as Christians to redeem all of life, we lose our vision. We are left watching from the sidelines as things go from bad to worse.

We lost the importance of loving vulnerable people

When I first started the TCT program, I went to a number of denominational leaders and explained that I wanted to teach churches how to love the poor well. They all turned me down. Not one thought it was a worthwhile use of time. Some even explained that teaching Christians to help the poor was sinful, because it was going to distract them from evangelism which, quite simply, was the most important thing that the church could do.

That isn't what the Bible teaches. James 1:27 reminds us, "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress..." In Isaiah, we find the people of Israel praying and fasting—they apparently have the sacred side of life down. But God refuses to listen to their prayers because of their treatment of the poor. He says, "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?" (Isaiah 58:6-7). Then, in Ezekiel 16:49, we read about the sin that was so bad that it prompted God to destroy the town of Sodom with fire

and brimstone: “Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; **they did not help the poor and needy.**” The Bible is clear—we are called to serve those who are vulnerable.

However, as the evangelical church embraced a divided theology, caring for the poor became the government’s or nonprofit organizations’ responsibility. A secular, not sacred, pursuit. Any effort to address poverty or injustice moved to a small department off to the side, while the primary focus of the church’s energies and finances were dedicated to the sacred activities of Bible study and Sunday worship.

That’s not to say that we are unaware of passages like James 1:27. We know they are there. We just don’t consider them a priority. I remember one pastor in Myanmar who shared with me that, after the first day of our training, he was a little frustrated because we were teaching basic Christianity—love your neighbor, all are made in the image of God—nothing new. He complained to God, wondering if it was worth his time to come back a second day. It was then that he heard God say, “If it’s all so simple, why don’t you do it?” (He did join the program and became a reformer for girls’ education; his ethnic group had never educated girls before, but, as the result of this pastor’s efforts, it became the norm for girls to attend school in 70 villages.) Most of us feel much like this Burmese pastor—we know those verses, but, too

“The Bible is clear—we are called to serve those who are vulnerable...yet this gets lost in our busy days.”

often, they get lost in our busy days. While we work hard not to miss a quiet time, we don't feel the same level of urgency about serving the vulnerable.

The way we address poverty was broken

Since addressing poverty fell on the secular side of the divide, so did the way that we understand poverty, the way that we look for solutions, and the types of approaches we come up with to address it. We came to believe that poverty is, for the most part, a lack of resources—a material problem. The natural solution was to provide material resources: wells, food supplies, irrigation systems, agricultural training. When trying to work out how to address poverty, we turn to “best practices,” learning from others’ experiences. We don’t tend to look for answers to these problems in the Bible. The problem is, this approach just isn’t working. Billions of dollars and millions of expert hours have been poured into the least-developed countries. While some individuals have been helped in the past 50 years or so, the vast majority of nations have actually gotten poorer.

The first time I went to South Sudan, I was shocked. As I flew over the nation I saw endless green. It was amazingly fertile. Since I had heard that there were areas that had been getting food aid for over 20 years, I actually wondered for a few panicked moments if I got on the wrong plane. It didn’t seem possible that a nation blessed with such great land was getting food aid.

When I arrived and asked about it, my hosts confirmed that South Sudan is super fertile. Experts, in fact, estimate that the nation could grow enough to feed the entire WORLD. Yet every year, more than a billion dollars of aid is poured into South Sudan, and their situation isn't improving. If anything, things in the last few years have become even

more desperate—nearly one in every three people there are now considered “severely food insecure.” It's not a lack of resources that is causing their problems. They have fertile land, water, and plenty of strong labor. If they are missing seeds, I am sure someone in the last 20 years thought to deliver some. But it's not enough.

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Others have identified the challenge of South Sudan as being ethnic violence, and indeed that seems to be the root of many problems. In a nation that is over 70 percent Christian, there is rampant killing. And so there are organizations teaching reconciliation and peacemaking. Others told me it's the extreme poverty that leaves people desperate—soldiers who haven't been paid for six months rent out their guns so people can loot overnight. It's complex, and it's messy. The world's top experts and money just aren't enough. A secular approach isn't working. A whole gospel and God's power is needed to bring healing in that nation.

If we are to see nations move out of poverty, we need to start with the right understanding. Bryant Myers, in his book *Walking with the Poor*, explained that God created us with four

relationships. Our primary relationship is with God. The other three—our relationships with each other, with ourselves, and with the rest of creation—all flow from our relationship with God (or lack thereof). When these relationships are good and in order, we flourish. He goes on to describe poverty as “a result of relationships that do not work, that are not just, that are not for life, that are not harmonious or enjoyable” (page 85).

If we want to address poverty we need to start by addressing these broken relationships. And, as Myers reminds us, they all flow out of the central relationship—our relationship with God. Our only hope for transformation starts with God—His truth and His power—not projects. Yet because of our divided view of life, we’ve misunderstood the problem of poverty and its solutions.

An integrated response

For years I struggled to understand how to integrate physical and spiritual. Early in my career, my understanding of wholistic ministry was that we needed to do both physical and spiritual projects. If we were doing church planting, we needed to add something to address the needs of the poor, like a savings program. And if we were doing an agriculture program, we needed to add a Bible study or some sort of evangelism. However, I always had the feeling that there was something slightly off. The two often didn’t work together well, and it felt like parallel tracks running through the same community. I was always left wondering if I had somehow missed the point. This pseudo-wholism wasn’t causing radical transformation,

and sometimes it was just adding more problems. Pastors caught up in large projects with significant finances attached ended up corrupted by the money. A loan recipient from a church-based savings group who faced a crisis and was unable to repay ended up not only defaulting on the loan, but fleeing from the church as well.

It wasn't until I went back to the lie we are trying to overcome—that some things are sacred and others secular—that the problem started to become clearer. In just making sure we did something spiritual and something physical, we weren't really breaking down the sacred/secular divide. We had come to understand that everything was equally important, but we had still missed the point. The point isn't so much that God cares about all these things equally, although that is true. **The main idea is that all things should be done before the face of God for the glory of God.** Everything we do can and should be an act of worship.

Now if you are anything like me, you can definitely appreciate the sentiment, but you're still left a bit lost. Practically speaking, how do we actually apply that to our efforts to address poverty and injustice?

Endlessly, with my well-developed divided mindset, I would come up with answers like, "We teach truth (sacred) and skills (secular), and we pray a lot (sacred, and also because I know I need help!)" I was confused

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when others would explain, “If the work is truly holistic, you can’t separate the parts.”

It’s taken me years of watching God work, experiencing failures and successes, to come to understand the complete shift needed in how we think about and do ministry. An integrated approach changes our goals, how we communicate to those we are working with, and what we really believe will work. It changes the foundation under everything. At first glance, our programs are not much different than others’—we teach health and agricultural practices. We start with what is already available in the community to address problems. But what lies under the surface is completely different.

A new goal

On my first trip to look at expanding TCT into Africa, we visited a group who was using our materials in their own program. We met people who reported to us how much their lives had improved. They boasted of nicer houses, more money, educated children, better health practices, and many other fantastic results. And while at some level it was possible to celebrate (these are great things), there was this lingering feeling that something had gone terribly wrong. Woven into their stories of improved lives were also boasts of how people now admired them, how they had become “somebody” in their communities. They were proud of the status they had achieved. God was never mentioned. Helping and serving others wasn’t the focus. It was all about them. It wasn’t until later, when I got home, that I realized what had gone wrong.

“Our goal needs to be to bring God glory in every area of life.”

In Asia, where we started the program, every testimony was about what they were doing for others, how God was being glorified, how the church was improving their reputation,

and how those in the community were being helped and coming to Christ. They never talked about themselves. We had started in areas where there were no other development programs, so there was no development mindset. And, since they faced significant persecution, there was an expectation among the people that the Christian life involves sacrifice.

In Africa the program had been presented as a way to help communities move out of poverty, and that became the main goal. God and His glory may have been mentioned, but it was way down on the scale of importance. Things had shifted in a dangerous way. The program had become all about improving themselves and their communities—something they were apparently successful in doing. But the most important thing was lost.

Now let us not misunderstand—I’m certain that God doesn’t want widows to go to bed listening to their hungry children cry. I would go so far as to say that I think He’s horrified that the rest of us are so complacent on the issue. I’m convinced that we are called to address the injustices of the world. I travel over 300 days a year, not because I like airline food, but because I believe so strongly that we have a responsibility to be involved. But I also believe that we need to be careful that we don’t mix things up. It is too easy to confuse our primary goal with its fruit. Our goal needs to be *to bring God glory in*

every area of life. We have seen time and again that the fruit of pursuing that goal includes communities moving out of poverty.

“*This is the reason we were created—to bring praise and glory to our God.*”

However, too often we see physically improved lives as the goal—families having access to water, health care, food, and education. All of us know that more economic prosperity does not solve all of our problems. A quick glance at the West assures us that possessing all these things does not equal flourishing. Development can come at the cost of broken community and family relationships or loss of our faith. By having the wrong goal, we are in danger of helping people trade one set of problems for another.

In China they boast of great development—the number of people living below the poverty line has plummeted. But there are new problems. Now parents leave their children in rural villages with elderly grandparents as they flood to mind-blowingly polluted and overcrowded cities to work in factories that routinely come under scrutiny for human rights violations. Material poverty, in its narrowest definition, has been significantly reduced. However, it's hard to argue that the nation and its people are closer to God's intentions.

Again, the goal of an integrated approach is not physically improved lives; rather, it is to glorify God in everything.

Glorify God

The Bible is clear—we are called to glorify God. If wading through the entire biblical canon to try to discern that feels a little overwhelming, don't worry. Others far more brilliant than myself have done the hard work already. The Westminster Shorter Catechism states that the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. This is the reason we were created—to bring praise and glory to our God. This calling is for all of us, from the poorest widow in DR Congo to the wealthiest CEO in an air-conditioned highrise.

In the TCT program we talk a lot about God's reputation. In the first training, we ask what the reputation of the church is. Would people cry if the church were closed down? What do people think churches do? What is their impression of God? As we look at the answers to these questions, we are forced to struggle with whether we, as the church, are really reflecting God accurately or not. Are we bringing glory to Him? Are people wowed by how amazing our God is?

As churches have sought to reflect God's love to their communities, the reaction has been astonishing. In one village in Burkina Faso, the leaders of the local mosque told us they had given land to the church to build a building because they were so moved by the Christians' love for the community. In a country known to actively oppose Christianity, a few communities had changed so much because of the churches' Acts of Love that the local government leader came to investigate. When the people

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told him that a pastor had given them training, the government leader ended up offering to pay all the costs to have the lessons taught in the non-Christian villages.

Our *In His Image* program helps churches glorify God by serving and honoring those who are disabled. We teach that all people are made in God's image with value and purpose. We also challenge churches to make space for those who have disabilities to serve, since they, like the rest of us, are called to bring glory to God.

Likewise, when we try to end violence against women, we don't do it out of a feminist agenda. Rather, we know that God made all people equally valuable, that He hates violence, and that He has called men to love their wives as Christ loved the Church. We bring glory to God by making His intentions known and doing all we can to see His intentions lived out in our communities.

Build God's Kingdom

One key way we bring glory to God is by seeking to build His kingdom (another fantastic Christian phrase I didn't have a clue as to the meaning of 20 years ago). In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught that we ought to seek first the kingdom of God, and "all these things" will be given to us as well (Matthew 6:33). In context, "all these things" refers to food and clothing—basic necessities. Good news for all of us, especially those in poverty. Later, after His resurrection, Jesus spent 40 days teaching His disciples about the kingdom of God (Acts 1:3). If I knew I only had a few days left on this earth, you can be sure I

would focus on imparting what I felt were the most important ideas. For Jesus, that was the kingdom of God.

If only we could work out what the kingdom of God is. What exactly are we supposed to be seeking?

To keep it super simple, the kingdom of God is anywhere that Jesus is king and His will is done. While that is perfectly true about heaven, we are also seeking to see it become true about life here on earth. In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus teaches us to pray, "Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10). As Christ's body, we are seeking to see His kingdom advance here on earth, both as more people come into a saving relationship with God and as God's will is increasingly done in all areas of life.

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come.”

This understanding of the kingdom of God gives us a new vision to work toward. It’s not an improved village or more comfortable lives, but rather a focus on aligning every part of our lives and our communities to God’s intentions. In the TCT program, as we visit villages, our conversation has changed. We don’t talk to churches about how they can improve their lives. Instead, we ask, “What does God intend for your community? If He was the leader of this community, what do you think He would change first? What would He do about the orphans and the widows among you? How can you respond?” The reframing of the issue is important. It moves us back to helping people understand (and endlessly reminding

ourselves) that it's all about God. It's not about a better life; it's about seeing God's kingdom come, His will being done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Key teachings

Loving and serving

Several years ago, my husband took the leader of a large Christian nonprofit organization to visit the villages where we first worked. The area had graduated about five years earlier, and we hadn't been to visit since. When they arrived they found the village full of half-built concrete houses, but no people. It looked like people had laid down their tools and walked off. The leader and my husband were confused. A few phone calls revealed that the entire community was one kilometer out of town, building a road.

When they made it to the road-building site, the Christian leader who was visiting confessed to not understanding why they were there. He questioned, "Why have you abandoned your half-built houses to work on the road? Why not finish your own house? Didn't you want to live in your own home sooner?"

The villagers, who were Christian, were equally confused. His questions just didn't make sense to them. Finally they responded, "Isn't this what it means to be a Christian? Doesn't a Christian go to love and serve? Doesn't a Christian put others first? Are you a Christian?"

In too much of the world we have taught or been taught—very subtly and usually indirectly—that the purpose of life is self-improvement. We arrive in communities and start a conversation about what they want to see changed. We challenge those in the village to think about what assets they have, not so they can use them to serve, but so they can use them to improve their own lives.

Like all great lies, the belief that the purpose of life is self-improvement is a slight tweak off the truth. While the Bible has promised us abundant life (John 10:10), somehow that has been redefined as a comfortable life—something Paul, the rest of the apostles, and the early Church would have been very confused by. We are called to be content (Philippians 4:11), but also to expect to suffer (1 Peter 4:12-16) and to sacrifice ourselves for others (1 John 3:16). Jesus summarized the whole law and prophets as, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’” (Matthew 22:37-39).

But instead of that biblical truth, we’ve been subtly convinced that the purpose of life, including the Christian life, is to get comfortable. And we have gone around the world communicating just that. If you were to visit the average village doing development projects and ask them why they were doing it, they would answer (while regarding the whole question as super strange), “To improve our lives.”

We’ve made this mistake. Early in our work, we talked a lot about improving our communities. As a result, a whole bunch

of communities improved significantly and declared themselves done. They had reached a new level of comfort—they had sufficient food, health problems had decreased, and their children were going to school. However, they didn't see their actions as a way to show God's love, but rather as a way to improve their community. So when they had improved some, they were done with all the hard work and decided to be finished. Their motivation, which we had indirectly taught them, was self-improvement.

The Bible tells us what our motivation ought to be: serving others and doing good works. We are saved to do good works (Ephesians 2:10). God has created five types of leadership to “equip the saints for works of service” (Ephesians 4:11-13). Our light is displayed through our good works (Matthew 5:14-16) for the purposes of glorifying God. And the reason those who sow generously will reap generously is so they may abound in every good work (2 Corinthians 9:6-8). While we know that salvation is a free gift we receive by grace through faith in Christ's atoning work, our response to that gift is meant to be gratitude that overflows in good works. There's really no getting around it—the Christian life is meant to be about serving others, especially those who are vulnerable.

Our Christian call to love and serve can be a powerful motivator. I remember when we first started TCT, I was surprised that so many areas were building toilets after studying the first module. For years, the government had taught and encouraged people to use toilets, with very little result. Rural people continued to have poor hygiene and continued to suffer sickness because of it. We hadn't yet taught health, so I wasn't sure why building toilets suddenly became so popular. When

I asked, they explained, “You taught us that, as Christians, we are called to love our neighbors. We knew that the rain was washing our waste into the rivers and causing those downstream to have to drink and cook with dirty water. Now, as a way to show God’s love, we wanted to use toilets to protect the health of those neighboring villages.”

God also uses our obedience to love and serve others to help us mature in our relationship with Him. One of our visitors was curious to know why the churches had grown so much spiritually. I thought that was an excellent question. We only provide six days of training a year—hardly enough to see significant change. Especially when huge chunks of it are on topics such

“*The opportunity to know and worship God through serving others is not a burden, but a source of great joy.*”

as “How to care for your children” and “When to wash your hands.” When we asked the churches about it, they explained, “You taught us to love our neighbors. When we went out to do that, we faced all sorts of opposition. We would want to build a road, and those who owned the land wouldn’t allow us to build. Or we would want to build a bridge, but we had no idea how. So we would pray, and God would answer our prayers. And because of the way God answered our prayers, we saw that He loves us so much. And we wanted to learn more about Him, so we started to pay attention in church and read our Bibles more.”

In almost all of the areas we work, sharing with them the idea that we can worship God by loving and serving others has

been a source of great joy. In areas with low literacy, Bible reading or study is extremely hard for most people. By reducing the ways that we can know and worship God to the mostly intellectual, we put up huge barriers to their faith. While many of us who've been to university would rather read a chapter of the Bible than dig a hole, that isn't true of all our brothers and sisters around the world. For some, digging a hole to serve another is a far easier way to worship God. This isn't to say we encourage Christians to give up seeking to learn more about God, any more than we would encourage the Western church to not worry about loving their neighbors. But we also need to recognize that, by giving the rural church of the Majority World back the opportunity to love God through serving others, we are not adding a burden but often setting them free.

Stewardship

As we seek to help people move their lives closer to God's intentions, we also focus a lot on stewardship (another biblical truth that gets very little airing). Here we are not just thinking about how money is used, but recognizing that "The earth is the Lord's and everything in it" (Psalm 24:1). Our land, our houses, our skills, our talents, our bodies, and (if we have some) our money—EVERYTHING belongs to God. We are merely stewards.

Learning that everything belongs to God changes how we treat all of it. Everything needs to be treated as a precious gift and cared for as if God has given it to us to use—because that is exactly what has happened. Furthermore, the parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30) challenges us that, not only should

we use resources wisely, but God is going to call us to account for how we use what He has given us, even those who received little.

This truth has a significant impact on our lives. For example, let's look at the issue of health. If we start with a basic understanding that God created our bodies and intends us to use them for His glory—to care for our family (1 Timothy 5:8), to be involved in the church (Galatians 6:9-10), and to care for the poor (Ephesians 4:28)—then good stewardship of the gift that

God has given us dictates that we do what we can to care for our health.

We want to stay healthy in order to do the things that God intended us to do. If we, through poor hygiene or neglecting healthy practices, are sick all the time, then we are not being good stewards of the bodies God has given us.

“*Learning that everything belongs to God changes how we treat all of it.*”

As we've taught this idea, it has brought dramatic change. No longer did health seem optional for Christians who were busy with far more 'important' things like prayer meetings. Instead they quickly adopted new practices, realizing that protecting the health of the children that God created and entrusted to them is not a matter that can be neglected.

In one area where we worked, the government wanted everyone to be using toilets. The local government had decided to give \$200 to every family who built a toilet. However, even though that is lot of money for the village people, very few took up the offer. A year or two later, the officials were stunned

when they dropped by the village to discover that everyone now had a toilet. When they asked why, the church explained, “Since we now know that God cares about our bodies, we wanted to do what we could to protect our health, so we built toilets.” (The government was so impressed that they ended up giving everyone the money they had promised when the initial campaign hadn’t worked.)

Similarly, this focus on health has impacted the issue of water. Access to water is a huge problem worldwide. There are organizations that dig thousands of wells every year. At the same time, tens of thousands of wells and water systems sit broken and neglected around the world. Communities who have been given a water source feel frustrated when it breaks. They contact those who gave it to them, asking them to come and fix it. For most who are putting in wells, fixing those wells isn’t part of the plan. They raise money to build, not repair, wells. And so these water sources sit broken for years. Unusable. As Christians learn about stewardship and the role of water in staying healthy, they start to take responsibility for these water sources. They work together to get the water source repaired and, in most cases, set up a committee to care for the water source long-term. Only when they learn to steward well what God has given them—both a water source and their health—are they motivated to solve the problem.

Together with helping people understand that we are called to be good stewards, we also teach practical lessons on things like how to look after our health or grow crops. We consider this another aspect of stewardship—helping people to have the skills to use their land and care for their health in a way that brings glory to God.

The power of obedience

Most of us get a little uncomfortable talking about obedience. It feels very Old Testament and a violation of the idea of grace. Yet even Jesus said that if we really love Him, we will obey Him (John 14:15, 21, 28). And Paul certainly didn't leave us with the impression that, as long as you say the sinner's prayer, it really doesn't matter what you do (see Philippians 2:12 and Ephesians 2:10).

While we are familiar with these verses, we're afraid that focusing on obedience will turn our relationship with God into legalistic rule-following. But when we leave obedience out of our Christianity, we miss an important truth: God, the Creator, knows how we work best and how the world works best. His commands are actually for our flourishing. He directs us out of His incredible love for us, because He knows and wants what is best for us. He is not a power-hungry tyrant issuing random directives, but a loving Father committed to seeing us thrive. As we follow His commands, we experience His blessing.

God's word contains a lot of promises that those who walk in obedience will flourish:

If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land. 2 Chronicles 7:14

*Then **the Lord your God will make you most prosperous in all the work of your hands** and in the fruit of your womb, the young of your livestock and the crops of your land.... **if you obey the Lord your God and keep his commands and decrees** that are written in this Book of the Law and turn to the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. Deuteronomy 30:9-10*

Seek first the kingdom of God and all these things will be added to you. Matthew 6:33

Even though our faith was far from perfect, we built the TCT program on these promises. We believed that, as we challenged churches to walk in obedience to God, they would know His blessing and provision. And God has been faithful time and again. As churches have sought to obey God, they've seen Him move in incredible ways.

In one area there was a 32-hectare piece of land that had been in dispute between two families. One family took possession of the land, so the other family had a witch doctor curse it. The land became infertile. No one could grow anything on it; every crop died. For years it was bought and sold at incredibly cheap rates, each person believing that if only they used the right fertilizer it would produce. And yet, every time, the land wouldn't grow, and the buyer, frustrated with the situation, would sell it on to the next person for cheap. One day, the pastor felt like God told him to buy the land, so he did. Those in the church worked together to plant the land, and that year it grew five times as much as any other land in the area.

In another village, the church felt that God had told them to do an Act of Love for a gang leader. They were terrified. He was unpredictably violent, and they feared to approach him. They prayed about it, but felt sure God had told them to love him. One day during harvest season he left town, leaving his wife to do all the work of harvesting their field. The church seized the opportunity and helped his wife get the field harvested. When the gang leader came home, he was surprised to find that his wife had completed all the work and demanded to know how it was possible. The wife eventually admitted that the church had helped. He took off down the road and pounded on the door of the church. The pastor was terrified and called the deacons for back-up. They came and opened the doors to the gang leader, fearing the worst. But he sat down and started to cry, "I have never been loved by anyone in my life. I want to know the God who told you to show me love." He was saved that night and went out the next day to share the gospel with his former gang members. Over the next two months, 27 families came to Christ through his testimony. God blessed the simple (but difficult) obedience of the church.

One of my favorite videos on the RW website is "The Good Steward" (reconciledworld.org/the-good-steward). The video tells the story of how one pastor learned he needed to steward well what God had given him. So he prayed about it and realized he had two acres of land that he had never planted. One day he was at the market and saw a truck filled with papayas. God reminded him, "In one papaya are many seeds." So for the \$1 he had, he bought two papayas. He took them home and planted the seeds. The result was 300 trees, which can each grow 50 papayas. Now, by selling the fruit, he is able to educate his children, feed his family, and serve others. Furthermore,

as his neighbors saw what he had done, they realized that they could also plant their land. So now they are growing all kinds of things, like eggplants and tomatoes. His story is told around the world, and again and again people declare, “I, too, am Papaya Man! I, too, have land I never planted.” And they head home to ask God what they can plant on their land. This pastor’s simple obedience has caused a multitude of blessing to so many.

In every village where the church has sought to be obedient, we have heard stories like the ones above. Often they aren’t even aware of them, or, because they are so normal, they don’t point them out. Sometimes the blessings are miraculous, like the healed land, and other times it’s just a case of God showing them what they already had and how to use it.

Now I don’t want to be naive and imply that if we only obey God then everything will go smoothly. The communities we’ve worked with have had their share of setbacks—typhoons have washed away bridges they built, mudslides have buried homes and schools, they’ve faced persecution and suspicion. And yet, they share stories of how God met them in the midst of these difficulties. On the day disaster struck, I’m sure the churches were discouraged. However, they stayed focused on long-term obedience.

In one area, the church built a bridge to connect their village to the school and market on the other side of the river. A few

“If we want to help people move out of poverty, the Bible tells us what is needed. Not great projects. Obedience.”

years later a hurricane hit, and the bridge washed away. The church rebuilt the bridge. However, just two months later, the area was hit by another devastating hurricane, and the bridge washed away again. The church—incredibly, in my opinion—decided to rebuild the bridge *again*. Each bridge project had taken sacrifice—they hired themselves out as day laborers to get enough money to buy the materials. And they worked long and hard to build them—time they could have spent on their own livelihoods. Yet they had been willing to do it in obedience to God. As they set to work building the third bridge, a TV crew showed up and filmed them. The story showed up on the national news as “the church that loved their community so much they built a bridge three times.” It was the first time that there had ever been a positive story about a church on the national news.

If we want to walk with communities and help them to move out of poverty, we need to remember that God’s word has made it quite clear what it takes to see His blessing. Not projects. Obedience. When we shy away from this piece of the gospel, we miss out on all that God has promised to those who obey.

The whole gospel

Teaching the whole story, not just a narrow gospel, is essential to an integrated approach. If we want to glorify God in all that we do and see His kingdom built, then we need to understand His intentions for all areas of life.

The story of Christ coming to earth, dying on the cross, and rising again to save us from our sins and enable us to go to heaven is an incredible and essential message. The fact that we can continue to develop that relationship with God through prayer, Bible reading, and church attendance is also wonderful news that is needed. However, it only forms part of the whole gospel. Darrow Miller describes this as “chapter ten of the whole story.” There is so much more. The story actually starts in chapter one, with God creating all things and forming humans in His image, and goes all the way through to the second coming of Christ. And yet many Christians around the world only know the piece of the story contained in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

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Without the rest of the story, we take the message of the gospels and put it into our own cultural story. There are Christians from minority-language groups who have never heard the story of Adam and Eve. Their Bible translation didn't include the Old Testament, so, as far as they knew, Jesus came and started a new religion just like Buddha did.

And thus we end up with many of the challenges that were outlined in the beginning of this document. The pastor's wife did not understand that humans are made in the image of God, each individually knitted together in their mother's womb, with incredible value to God. Her cultural story was that children are a mouth to feed—a burden, not a blessing. Thus, aborting them seemed to be an act of service.

In another example, some years back I was teaching a group of pastors a lesson on marriage and family. When I told them that they shouldn't beat their wives, they were very confused. But they wanted to obey God, so they decided to try thanking their wives for their work instead of beating them. They came back a few months later, delighted because their wives were so much easier to control with kindness. Their cultural story was that a wife is the husband's possession. As such, her sole purpose was to serve him and, along with that, she must be controlled. They still didn't really understand that their wives had value simply because they were made in the image of God. These pastors are far from alone. Domestic violence is a norm among pastors in many countries because they haven't been given the whole gospel.

We want to keep presenting the message of Christ—it's essential. But as we do, we need to make sure we present the whole message. We need to go back to the beginning of the story and paint the whole picture. As I teach in many parts of Africa, I ask them why we should work. With astonishing speed they recite 2 Thessalonians 3:10, "If you don't work you don't eat." However, even when pressed they can give few other answers. They have no understanding that God worked and designed us to work; that as we work we become co-creators with God. Without that truth we are left with a command, "If you don't work you don't eat," which leaves us missing the whole beauty of God's great design for work.

As we present the whole gospel the results can be powerful. One of our trainings is on health. I remember asking the facilitators how the trainings had gone at the church. More

than once the answer was, “They were very powerful; we all cried.” When I asked about why they cried, they told me, “We were overwhelmed by the idea that God loves us. That He created our bodies and wants them to be well. He cares about even that.” Through the health training, they came to a deeper understanding of God’s love. Not through the message of God becoming human and dying for them (which can seem a little abstract and hard to grasp for some), but by hearing the whole gospel and how it applies to every area of their life.

Conclusion

If we want to see the lives of vulnerable people flourish, we need to integrate the physical and the spiritual. In some ways the shift is subtle, yet it turns everything upside down. It gives us a whole new lens to understand how we serve vulnerable people. It forces us to start with the Bible and what it teaches rather than the much more comfortable route of relying on best practices. It changes the motivation of the communities we work with from self-improvement to loving and serving, stewardship, and obedience. It gives us back the whole gospel and helps us to know our God, who isn’t weak and irrelevant, but powerful and intimately involved in every area of our lives. It challenges us. Many of us have categorized the world into sacred and secular boxes for so long it’s hard to change. We must continually return to the central truth of an integrated understanding—that all of life is to be lived before the face of God—and to the new goal that gives to our work: God’s glory.

REFLECT AND APPLY

What is your understanding of the Reformation concept of Coram Deo? Do you believe it's true to scripture? Why or why not?

Take a few minutes to reflect on ways in which your relationship with God relates to your work habits, your health, and your possessions. Ask the Lord to show you other areas of life that belong "before the face of God," and list them here.

On page 4, Anna writes, "Around the world so many have only heard a narrow gospel message. They know they are to repent and believe, attend church, pray, and read their Bibles. But they have rarely heard how the Christian message impacts the way we work, parent, or care for others." Think about your church or organization's international ministries over the past 5–10 years. Would you say this is an accurate description of the people you've encountered? Why or why not?

The section “Our vision became small” challenges a commonly accepted interpretation of the Great Commission. Do you believe it’s possible that Jesus intended us to disciple entire nations, bringing every aspect of society into alignment with His will? Try reading Matthew 28:16-20 in several translations through this new lens, asking God to reveal anything He wants you to understand in a new way.

If the Great Commission does, indeed, command us to bring societies into alignment with God’s will, how might that impact your international ministries? What about your local engagement strategies?

The section “We lost the importance of loving the vulnerable” relates how the evangelical church historically embraced a divided theology and became focused only on “spiritual” things. Over the past 10–20 years, in the West, there seems to be a pendulum swing back toward caring for vulnerable people in physical ways, especially in overseas ministries. How do you perceive this shift? What has the Church done well? What has been lost? What are the dangers or pitfalls facing believers seeking to serve vulnerable people?

On page 15, Anna admits that her early attempts to integrate physical and spiritual felt more like parallel tracks of ministry that often didn’t work well together. Reflecting on your own international ministry, have you had similar experiences? Knowing what you know now, what would you do differently?

In the section “A New Goal”, we shift our motivation from the worldly goal of improved lives to the biblical goal of *bringing glory to God*, especially through seeing *God’s kingdom built* (page 21). We define the kingdom of God as anywhere that God is king and His will is done. Do you think this goal is universal—that it would be the right goal for any ministry? Why or why not?

Consider a community that your ministry has worked in. Spend a few minutes envisioning what daily life there would be like if the Lord was physically ruling as king (or mayor) there.

If the ministries you’re part of were to lay aside all other goals besides glorifying God and seeing His kingdom built, what do you think would change about your work?

The key teachings of an integrated approach are:

- Scripture's command to love and serve
- The biblical principle of stewardship
- The importance of obedience
- Sharing the whole gospel story, from creation to Christ's second coming

What stood out to you most in the descriptions of these teachings? Are these teachings already part of your international ministry? If not, what would it look like for your church or organization to incorporate them?

Spend some time in prayer. Thank and praise God for His concern about every area of life and for His power and authority over all things. Ask God to do the work of breaking down the sacred/secular divide in your mind and heart. Ask Him to show you some steps you can take to move forward in integrating physical and spiritual in your personal life, in your church or organization, and in your efforts to serve vulnerable people.



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