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When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty Without Hurting the Poor and Yourself (Book Review)

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Witte's purpose is to explore how the Calvinistic reformation, notwithstanding its original orientation towards religious uniformity, became an early-modern "midwife," ushering in the kind of law-state which supported or opened the way for significant measures of legally recognized religious diversity (Witte 1-5). His intent is to make more explicit the seriously neglected part played by Calvinists, Huguenots, Puritans, and Covenanters in this process (20 ff.). The groundwork is first laid by considering the initial Calvinistic reformation—"the original Genevan experiment" (39 ff.). Of course, in the complexities of historical change, intentions and outcomes are rarely identical. Calvin, like the other early reformers, never advocated what later generations would call "freedom of religion" or "principled pluralism." In the context of the times, Geneva steered a course between Lutheran tendencies toward subordination to the civil authority and the Anabaptist depreciation, avoidance, and even sometimes repudiation thereof (4, 43). Calvin's "two-kingdoms" were not those of either (43-45). Of central significance was Calvin's insistence on the clear distinction between church and the civil authority—"two clear distinct areas of responsibility" (75). This, of course, had the effect of placing such reformed churches in the way of any monarchy (Catholic or Protestant) that presumed to lay down the law to the church in matters intrinsically ecclesiastical.

In the central part of his work, Witte explores how successive generations of reformed advocates and apologists developed arguments doctrinal, legal, and historical in order to gain from princes and jurisdictions the public-legal space necessary to worship and live with a good conscience. He does so with successive discussions of "those figures who stood tallest in times of crisis and challenge" (19). They were Theodore Beza (1519-1605), Johannes Althusius (1563-1638), and John Milton (1608-74) of the Commonwealth of England (81-275). From the English Puritans, Witte transitions to a consideration of the New England Puritan thinking that provided the basis and framework of the reflections of men such as John

Adams (1735-1836) and his associates (277-319). This central portion of the book is rich in detail and lush with insight, especially on Beza and Althusius, providing the Anglophone reader with a depth of discussion not readily available elsewhere. A gem from Beza begs for quotation: "The people are not made for rulers, but rulers for the people" (7, 139). One is tempted to add for the twenty-first century: "People are not made for the market, but markets for the people" (cf. Mark 2: 27).

Witte's expositions are at once adroit and judicious—as in his discussion of Milton's theology (230-34, 271-2). And there is much here that will repay further exploration. For Witte, it was the Saint Bartholomew's Day massacre (1572) that prompted Calvinist jurisprudence to focus on "law and religion, authority and liberty, rights and resistance" (85 ff.). In the writings of George Buchanan (1506-82) and François Hotman (1524-90) we encounter an approach to the legal past (136-7) synchronous with the orientation of the (original) "Society of Antiquaries" founded in England around 1572 and regarded by Herbert Butterfield as central in the establishment of the initial version of the protestant and Whig interpretation of history. Witte's topic, therefore, plays into the history of the interpretation of history, itself a central theme in the history of historiography.

While each book stands alone, both are parts of larger projects. There is more than enough in *A Revolution of the Mind* for us to look forward keenly to the third volume of Israel's *magnum opus* on the radical enlightenment. Although it is not his intention, his work may prove invaluable in identifying and elucidating the problems surrounding Kuyper's characterization of both American and French revolutions in his *Stone Lectures*. Witte certainly feels the pull of Kuyper on his study, but the remarks that he offers here focus on Kuyper's view of the American experience rather than on his presentation of the French Revolution (321-9). However, Witte hints at "a later volume or two" where we might expect Kuyper and his successors to receive fuller treatment (19). The forthcoming work of both scholars will be eagerly anticipated. In differing ways they can be expected to enhance our reading of Kuyper's famous lectures.

Corbett, Steve, and Brian Fikkert. *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty Without Hurting the Poor and Yourself.* Chicago: Moody, 2009. 230 pages. ISBN:978-0-8024-5705-9. Reviewed by Dr. John Visser, Professor of Business Administration, Dordt College.

In their short and easy-to-read paperback book *When Helping Hurts*, Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert leave no doubt about two of their primary beliefs: that Christians need to be more concerned about the poor, and that they need to change many of their well-intentioned but counter-productive methods of helping the poor. Given the credentials and experience of these two Covenant

College professors, the Christian community and especially those who work directly with disadvantaged groups would be well advised to consider their words. Steve Corbett is a Community Development Specialist for the Chalmers Center for Economic Development and the former Regional (Central and South America) Director for Food for the Hungry International. Dordt graduate

Brian Fikkert holds a Ph.D. in Economic Development from Yale University and is the Founder and Executive Director of the Chalmers Center. Both have had extensive contact with the urban and rural poor in North America and in other parts of the world and with individuals and organizations dedicated to helping them.

Without deprecating the many ways that we are called to help the poor (e.g., government, NGO's) the book clearly targets the response of individual Christians and small groups through their local church congregations. Aimed at spurring and changing specific poverty-alleviation efforts, the authors make it very clear up front that they want their readers to engage the post-chapter "reflection questions and exercises," and they provide suggestions and web page links for discussion facilitators and those interested in digging deeper. These additions make *When Helping Hurts* a good choice for a Sunday school class, small group discussion, service or missions team members, or individuals (who have the discipline to appropriately reflect on the questions and exercises).

The book has three parts (each of which includes three chapters) titled "Foundational Concepts for Helping Without Hurting," "General Principles for Helping Without Hurting," and "Practical Strategies for Helping Without Hurting." The authors do an excellent job of convincing readers of the importance of the topic, in part by effectively using Scripture to give readers a balanced perspective on poverty, wealth, human nature, cultural differences and other relevant topics. Two strengths of the book are its many true-story illustrations and its unwillingness to let the non-poor set the agenda. Refreshingly, the authors inform readers by sharing the insights and words of the poor themselves. Refusing to define poverty narrowly or through the biased eyes of helpers, the authors wisely identify poverty as going far beyond material deprivation. They also helpfully elaborate on Nobel Prize winner Amartya Sen's definition of poverty as "the inability to make meaningful choices." They do this largely by recognizing poverty as the result of neglected or broken *relationships*—which effectively lead to multiple poverties of "being," "community," "stewardship" and "spiritual intimacy." The conclusion is that people of all income levels can and do live in poverty and that lasting solutions to poverty can be obtained only when people's worldviews are reoriented with respect to self, others, the material world, and God. But they do not stop at diagnosing problems. They also suggest how shalom might be restored by addressing personal tendencies, the groaning creation, negative peer influences, and broken systems.

When the authors focus more specifically on those in poverty as a result of global hunger and catastrophes, they provide helpful distinctions among relief, rehabilitation, and development. Generally speaking, they see a much more limited role for relief efforts than is usually practiced, and they caution well-intentioned "outside" helpers to recognize that paternalism can be "poisonous" when "relief" continues beyond its useful life. They do this, in part, by explaining how unwarranted help can impede the development of good judgment, self-discipline, and an orientation to the future, all of which better equip the poor to lift themselves out of poverty. Corbett and Fikkert also make the case for how anti-wealth biases hurt the poor. They note that asset ownership is an important part of pulling people out of poverty, since the accumulation of assets like homes, business equipment, or cash may not only be an indicator of responsible savings habits but will also enhance people's earning potential, give them the opportunity to exercise management and stewardship skills, and encourage them to develop these skills. Assets also give the materially poor a cushion for weathering economic uncertainties and catastrophes. Because of these things, "helpers" who favor those who have not accumulated any assets over those who have may inadvertently reward behaviors that keep people in poverty.

The authors also make it much easier for the well-off to identify their own poverty. Once again, by closely listening to the voices of the poor, rather than by accepting the perceptions wealthy people have of the poor, they are able to give particularly useful advice to the large numbers of people who participate in service or missions trips. By recognizing the role that shame and a sense of inferiority play in the lives of the materially poor and identifying the serious poverties of self and relationship that afflict many wealthy people (which includes most North American Christians), the authors deftly illustrate how what they refer to as a "God complex" can easily lead to poverty alleviation efforts that make both rich and poor "poorer." Additionally, when the authors list ways that helpers inadvertently contribute to situations where "locals" seem reluctant to take charge, they provide valuable information for the many North American Christians who engage in "service" or "missions" trips. Corbett and Fikkert also offer many suggestions for improving poverty-alleviation efforts, such as Asset-based Community Development (ABCD) and other strategies for enabling people in poverty to help themselves. The chapter on short-term missions' trips is especially helpful for those who would more effectively structure, recruit, screen, train, and raise funds for these efforts.

If there is a weakness in *When Helping Hurts*, it is that the authors do not adequately deal with biblical texts that have strongly shaped our response to the poor—"Sell everything you have and give to the poor"; "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth" —or that might call into question the authors' line of thinking and that may have influenced people to help in ways that have hurt. Also, even though most of the book flows logically and seems clearly focused on the goals and target audiences set forth in the forward, in the final chapter the authors move into microfinance and "business as mission" (BAM) and seem to gear their comments more toward business, finance,

and development specialists than to individual churches (although as the authors point out, some individual churches have ventured into these areas). Nevertheless, the strengths of this book greatly outstrip the minor areas

that could be improved. And the book is also timely, as weakened North American and global economies make it doubly important for individuals and organizations to be both wise and stewardly as they seek to alleviate poverty.

Hunter, James Davison. *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. 358 pages. ISBN: 978-0-19-973080-3. Reviewed by Daniel Edward Young, Associate Professor of Political Science, Northwestern College (IA).

James Davison Hunter's *To Change the World* is a provocative book that everyone interested in the relationship of Christianity and culture should read. A University of Virginia sociologist of religion with a particular interest in the "culture wars," Hunter has an acute awareness of the decreased cultural power of Christianity; as a Christian, he seeks to rethink Christian cultural activity in a post-Christian culture. Rejecting the dominant Christian view on culture-changing, Hunter contends that "cultures are profoundly resistant to intentional change—period" (45).

The dominant Christian view of culture, Hunter contends, is that *culture* is that which is found in the hearts and minds of individuals—so-called "values": "By this view, a culture is made up of the accumulation of values held by the majority of people and the choices made on the basis of those values" (6). According to this view, changing culture requires changing hearts and minds, or the worldview that shapes those hearts and minds; the choices will then be different. He gives three subsequent beliefs of this view: "First, real change must proceed individually—one by one. …Second, cultural change can be willed into being. …Third, cultural change is democratic—it occurs from the bottom up" (16).

Hunter contends that this view of culture-changing relies on "specious social science and problematic theology" (5) and thus is "almost wholly mistaken" (17) and bound to be ineffective in changing culture (32). His contention is borne out by the fact that "in America today, 86-88 percent of the people adhere to some faith commitments. And yet our culture—business culture, law and government, the academic world, popular entertainment—is intensely materialistic and secular" (19). How can this be true if culture is simply the accumulation of values? In fact, culture often seems quite independent of majority opinion (22). Hunter repeatedly says he does not want to reject evangelism, political action, and social reform movements; these are indeed good things. But, he says that they do not change the culture (18).

Hunter contends that the dominant view goes awry in its assuming that ideas move history and that conflicts over culture are conflicts between worldviews (25). What the predominant view fails to take into account is the complexity of cultural production: culture is embedded in, and is a product of, language, history, and institutions. Culture exists where ideas, individuals, and institutions

interact (34-35); cultural change flows from elite institutions and impersonal forces such as the market, not grassroots political action or individual action, and takes place over a long period of time (42-43, 46). He explains that Christians are largely "absent from the arenas in which the greatest influence in the culture is exerted" (89): the elite universities, the leading publishers, the leading venues of the fine arts, and so forth. In fact, the church's absence from these areas is an indicator of the church's lack of health; it is not exercising itself in all areas of life (95). The dominant view also involves the questionable assumption that we can "know God's specific plans in human history and that one possesses the power to realize those plans in human affairs" (95).

Law and a common culture are sources of social solidarity, and, as Hunter notes, the one increases as the other decreases; the proliferation of legislation and litigation in recent decades is an indicator of the declining commonality of our culture. The state, as promulgator and adjudicator of law, is now seen as the locus of the public weal, its reach touching on every aspect of life. The *public* and the *political* are seen as coterminous (102-105). Hunter worries about the politicization of modern society; that is, all problems are seen as having a political solution, when in fact no such thing is true (171). Hence, Christian cultural engagement winds up being confined solely to political activism with the intent of controlling and deploying the coercive power of the state. Christian activism then becomes functionally Nietzschean: all about the will to power motivated by a *ressentiment* grounded in a perceived victimization (107). Hunter describes three main American Christian approaches to cultural engagement: the Christian Right, the Christian Left, and the neo-Anabaptists, each with their particular "myth and history" of contemporary America. The Right and the Left seek to acquire political power, while the neo-Anabaptists describe the church's witness, using the language of politics. In all three cases, they fall victim to understanding modern society in terms of politicization.

Given that we should reject the dominant and mistaken view of cultural change, how should Christians seek change in the late modern world of consumerism, democracy, and technology? Hunter points out two major challenges of the modern world: "difference" and "dissolution"; these are aspects of modernity that Christians have not