
THE
HOLE
IN OUR
GOSPEL

What does God expect of us?
The answer that changed my life
and might just
change the world

RICHARD STEARNS



W PUBLISHING GROUP

AN IMPRINT OF THOMAS NELSON

© 2009, 2010, 2014, 2019, 2025 World Vision, Inc.

All rights reserved. No portion of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, scanning, or other—except for brief quotations in critical reviews or articles, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Published in Nashville, Tennessee, by W Publishing, an imprint of Thomas Nelson.

Author is represented by the literary agency of Alive Communications, Inc., 7680 Goddard Street, Suite 200, Colorado Springs, CO 80920, www.alivecommunications.com.

Thomas Nelson titles may be purchased in bulk for educational, business, fundraising, or sales promotional use. For information, please e-mail SpecialMarkets@ThomasNelson.com.

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com. The “NIV” and “New International Version” are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™

Scriptures marked KJV are from the Holy Bible, King James Version.

Scriptures marked MSG are taken from *The Message* by Eugene H. Peterson. © 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2001, 2002. Used by permission of NavPress Publishing Group. All rights reserved. Represented by Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

Scriptures marked NCV are taken from the New Century Version®. Copyright 2005 by Thomas Nelson. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scriptures marked NIRV are taken from the New International Reader’s Version (NIRV). Copyright © 1995, 1996, 1998, 2014 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com. The “NIRV” and “New International Reader’s Version” are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™

Scriptures marked NKJV are taken from the New King James Version®. © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Italics added to Scripture quotations are the author’s own emphasis.

In some cases, names and locations have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals whose stories are told in these pages.

The websites recommended in this book are intended as resources for the reader. These websites are not intended in any way to be or to imply an endorsement on behalf of Thomas Nelson, nor does the publisher vouch for their content for the life of this book.

At the author’s request, all royalties due to the author will go to World Vision’s work with children in need.

ISBN 978-1-4003-4594-6 (special edition)

ISBN 978-0-8499-2209-1 (SE)

ISBN 978-0-8499-4700-1 (paperback)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Stearns, Richard (Richard E.)

The hole in our Gospel / By Richard Stearns.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p.).

ISBN 978-0-7852-2918-6 (hardcover)

1. Church work with the poor. 2. Christian life. 3. Stearns, Richard (Richard E.) 4. World Vision International. I. Title.

BV639.P6S74 2009

248.4—dc22

2008039768

Printed in the United States of America

\$PrintCode

To Renéé . . .

My precious wife and partner—my faithful source of strength—the anchor of our family, who is the very model of the Proverbs 31 woman. She is the gift God gave me, that I might become the man he desired me to be.

A wife of noble character who can find?

She is worth far more than rubies.

Her husband has full confidence in her
and lacks nothing of value.

She brings him good, not harm,
all the days of her life. . . .

She opens her arms to the poor
and extends her hands to the needy. . . .

She is clothed with strength and dignity;
she can laugh at the days to come.

She speaks with wisdom,
and faithful instruction is on her tongue.

She watches over the affairs of her household
and does not eat the bread of idleness.

Her children arise and call her blessed;
her husband also, and he praises her:

“Many women do noble things,
but you surpass them all.”

Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting;
but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.

Honor her for all that her hands have done
and let her works bring her praise at the city gate. (vv. 10–31)

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	xv
Author's Note	xix
Foreword by Edgar Sandoval Sr.	xxi
Introduction	xxv
Prologue	xxxii

PART ONE: THE HOLE IN MY GOSPEL—AND MAYBE YOURS

Chapter 1: A Hole in the Whole	3
Chapter 2: A Coward for God	13
Chapter 3: You Lack One Thing	23

PART TWO: THE HOLE GETS DEEPER

Chapter 4: The Towering Pillars of Compassion and Justice	41
Chapter 5: The Three Greatest Commandments	52
Chapter 6: A Hole in Me	60
Chapter 7: The Stick in Your Hand	74

PART THREE: A HOLE IN THE WORLD

Chapter 8: The Greatest Challenge of the New Millennium	83
Chapter 9: One Hundred Crashing Airplanes	92
Chapter 10: What's Wrong with This Picture?	100
Chapter 11: Caught in the Web	111
Chapter 12: The Horsemen of the Apocalypse	117
Chapter 13: Spiders, Spiders, and More Spiders, (with 2025 Poverty Update)	136
Chapter 14: Finally, the Good News	147

PART FOUR: A HOLE IN THE CHURCH

Chapter 15: A Tale of Two Churches	157
Chapter 16: The Great Omission	167
Chapter 17: AWOL for the Greatest Humanitarian Crisis of All Time	175
Chapter 18: Putting the American Dream to Death	188
Chapter 19: Two Percent of Two Percent	195
Chapter 20: A Letter to the Church in America	205
Chapter 21: Why We're Not So Popular Anymore	210
Chapter 22: A Tale of Two Real Churches	215

PART FIVE: REPAIRING THE HOLE

Chapter 23: What Are You Going to Do About It?	227
Chapter 24: How Many Loaves Do You Have?	234
Chapter 25: Time, Talent, and Treasure	241
Chapter 26: A Mountain of Mustard Seeds	257

Epilogue	263
Afterword: The Power of Belief	275
Appendix 1: <i>Q&A with Renée Stearns</i>	281
Appendix 2: <i>Take Action</i>	287
Can Poverty Be Defeated?	287
Solving Poverty Is Rocket Science	290
What Are You Going to Do About It?	295
Study Guide	299
Notes	307
Poverty and Justice Concordance	321
Scripture Index	343
General Index	347
About World Vision	357
About the Author	359

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book might not have been written without the encouragement of people who felt I had a message that needed to be heard. Perhaps first to prod me was Dale Hanson Bourke, a World Vision board member at the time and an author herself. Not one year after I was hired, Dale kept asking when I would write my book. I told her that the last thing the world needed was yet another book and that when I had something to say that was important—then I'd write a book. My colleague Joan Mussa, World Vision's senior vice president of mobilization, was another encouraging voice. She saw both the importance of and the opportunity for a book that lifted up what is perhaps God's "greatest cause"—responding to the poorest of the poor with compassion. More importantly, she believed I had such a book in me. Joan enlisted Laurie Delgatto, another World Vision colleague at the time, to read every speech I had given over ten years and to organize them into possible book concepts. Poor Laurie slogged through dozens of scribbled and typed talks, trying to make some sense out of them all. Laurie and Joan brought others in to form a kind of "book support group." Dean Owen, Roger Flessing, Jane Sutton-Redner, and Milana McLead formed the nucleus of the group that cheered me on, helped me brainstorm, shaped my ideas, and read my early manuscripts with a red pen. A book began to take form.

I have the blessing of a wonderful, godly, and visionary board of directors, who saw the importance of this message and granted me a six-month sabbatical so I would be able to complete the project without the endless interruptions of running World Vision US. Larry Probus, another of my senior VPs, stepped up as acting president while I was gone and carried a double burden so that I could write. In fact, the rest of my incredibly talented senior leadership team at that time—Atul Tandon, Mike Veitenhans, Julie Regnier, Kathy Evans, and George Ward—carried on magnificently in my absence.

Many others along the way were there to compensate for my shortcomings by helping with a host of important details. Among them were Steve Hayner, a World Vision board member and former president of InterVarsity, and Steve Haas, World Vision's VP for church partnerships. Both of these friends read the manuscript with a special eye for any theological gaffes I might have made, and they made valuable suggestions to keep me on the right course. Also included were Beth Dotson-Brown and Wendy Chin, who did much of the extensive research; Sally Zamadics on project management; Brian Vasey on contracts; and Hilary Whitman, Arlene Mitsui, and Selena Koosmann on the original cover design. Shelley Liester and Cheryl Plantenberg scheduled my meetings and assembled early copies of the manuscript. Kari Costanza, a World Vision journalist, traveled with me on many occasions and took copious notes about the people we met. Thanks, too, to my agents at Alive Communications for helping a first-time author navigate the world of publishing. Renée Chavez was an amazing copy editor provided to me by Thomas Nelson. She combed the manuscript, catching every error; improved my grammar; and added valuable conceptual perspective at critical places. Let me also thank the W Publishing Group for supporting the 10th anniversary edition—Daisy Hutton, Meaghan Porter, and Megan Dobson—and this 2025 edition—Kyle Olund and Rachel Buller. They join others at Thomas Nelson who have contributed to the reach and value of this book: Matt Baugher, Paula Major, Mary Graham, Joey Paul, Julie Faires Allen, Emily Sweeney, Jennifer McNeil, and Stephanie Newton.

Last of all, let me acknowledge just a few who changed my life so that there could even be a story to tell.

My sister, Karen, instilled in me a love for learning and encouraged me to rise above our family circumstances through education. She has always believed in me.

Merold Stern, my first pastor back in 1974, and his amazing wife, Margaret, laid the foundation in my spiritual life for all that would come later. Merold's wise understanding of Scripture, his amazing preaching, and his godly character have influenced me more than he will ever know.

Rob Stevenson was more than the executive recruiter who brought me to World Vision back in 1998. He was the spiritual guide who challenged me and led me down a path I did not want to take. Without Rob's gentle guidance, I certainly would not have followed God's call.

My friend Bill Bryce has always been able to see in me not what was

but what might be. He first saw in me a heart for the poor and was the first to envision my leaving the corporate world. Bill's discernment and his own commitment to the poor have been a steady influence on my life for more than thirty years.

My dear wife, Renéé, and my five terrific children—Sarah, Andy, Hannah, Pete, and Grace—had to leave their friends and lives behind and accept my frequent absences when we all moved to Seattle to become part of World Vision. They, too, have sacrificed to help the brokenhearted.

Finally, I need to acknowledge the late Lorraine Pierce, the spiritual “birth mother” of World Vision, who, along with her husband and family, sacrificed almost everything to serve the poorest of the poor in obedience to the gospel.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

FOR 2025 EDITION

I'm pleased to provide this updated edition of *The Hole in Our Gospel*. Even in retirement, I continue to encounter people across the country who tell me this book has had an impact on them, inspiring them to live out their faith in dynamic new ways. My hope is that God will use this new edition to reach many more people for his purposes.

The past five years have seen globe-shaking events such as the COVID-19 pandemic and new conflicts in Africa, the Middle East, and Europe, dramatically increasing population displacement and hunger. The compounding effects of these crises have not only slowed progress against extreme poverty, but also imperiled the world's most vulnerable children (read more on page 144–146). Nevertheless, Jesus still calls his Church to care for suffering people and to bring hope and healing to the world's hurting places—refugee camps, hunger hot spots, conflict zones, and anywhere children struggle to survive. In fact, the hope of Jesus is needed now more than ever in our world!

I've invited Edgar Sandoval Sr., the current president and CEO of World Vision US, to contribute to this new edition. From the moment I hired Edgar in 2015 as chief operating officer, I sensed God had great things in store for him. He brings a compelling personal story, a heart fully committed to Christ, and considerable corporate leadership experience to the CEO role. Edgar ably led the organization through the last five turbulent years—and he's just getting started! You can learn more about him in his foreword (page xxi). And in the afterword (page 277), Edgar outlines exciting new strategies for Christians to engage in ending extreme poverty.

Thank you for reading and opening your heart to this book's central question: "What does God expect of us?"

FOREWORD

God's timing is perfect when he brings significant people into our lives. That was true when he connected me with Rich Stearns. Though we're fundamentally very different people, our similarities come into focus in the way the Lord led us to World Vision.

In 2015, a recruiter called me to consider taking the first-ever role of chief operating officer for World Vision. It would be a distinct departure from my twenty-year career in corporate America, not to mention a major move across the country for my family. I found myself wrestling with God over it.

Rich keenly understood my struggle. As this book documents, he resisted leaving the financial security and influence of corporate leadership to serve in nonprofit ministry. We both had survived childhoods tainted by broken marriages, alcoholism, and hardship—leaving us with a stronghold of self-reliance that was tough to break.

The background for Rich's self-reliance is detailed in chapter 6. For me, the need to take control of my life cemented as a teenager. I was born in the US and lived in Venezuela for most of my childhood. It was a great place to grow up, but in my last year of high school, things fell apart. My father lost his job and then lost himself in drinking. My parents separated. Money ran out, so we sold our car and other assets. It wasn't enough. At times, we didn't know where our next meal would come from.

Our dire financial straits dashed my plan to study at Venezuela's best engineering school. The only move that made sense for me was to return to the US. So at eighteen, I traveled alone to New York, carrying everything I owned in my dad's army duffel bag, along with fifty dollars in one pocket and my American passport in the other. Starting all over again in America was tough. I was broke and lonely. I didn't speak English. I felt like an immigrant in my own country.

Like Rich, I knew that education was the best route to a secure future. And like him, I had to put myself through college—Rutgers University—by earning scholarships, taking loans, and working minimum-wage jobs. I had the extra burden of mastering the English language.

Our hard work paid off. Rich and I both earned MBAs at the Wharton School of Business and swiftly ascended the leadership ranks at Fortune 500 companies. We both “married up” to women straight out of Proverbs 31, and we’re family men through and through.

There are even parallels in our testimonies. Rich and I both grew up in families with nominal religious faith and turned away from it when we tried to take control of our destinies. We resisted as others around us shared about following Jesus.

For Rich, everything changed when he fell to his knees in his dorm room and committed his life to Christ. For me, it was bowing and kneeling to Jesus at a Christian men’s conference. A moment of dramatic surrender precipitated our Holy Spirit transformation, which continues today.

Now, I understand that coming to World Vision was God’s plan for me. But wrestling with the call brought up all my insecurities around financial and material success. And it was comforting to know that Rich understood. For three years, he was my boss and trusted adviser. In 2018, I was honored to succeed him as World Vision president.

Rich also had an impact on me through *The Hole in Our Gospel*. In God’s timing, I read it during my early days at World Vision, when my eyes were opening to the grave realities of poverty in our world—far beyond anything I had experienced. As I began traveling with World Vision, I met children forced to flee conflict in South Sudan, including one boy with physical disabilities who had to crawl alone through the jungle. My daughter Andrea was born with a brain injury and uses a wheelchair, so I know how vulnerable kids with disabilities are—and this boy, all on his own in a war zone, was even more vulnerable. Encountering precious children trapped in circumstances beyond their control broke my heart and started to shift my worldview.

The Hole in Our Gospel stirred questions in me about the purpose of a Christian life. Was it more than being a good husband, father, and leader, and doing my best to avoid sin? How could I stand by, content in my own salvation, simply waiting to go to heaven someday, while millions of children go to bed hungry every night or succumb to diseases caused by the lack of clean water? Rich’s book brought into focus that yes, there was a hole in my gospel!

I had been diligently reading the Bible for many years, discovering truth and wisdom for how to live. But suddenly, during those early years at World Vision, I started to notice something . . . an unmistakable thread. Verses about God’s heart for the poor are everywhere. Throughout the Old Testament and the New Testament, from cover to cover—everywhere I look. It was as if those verses had been hiding in plain sight from me!

What is the purpose of the Christian life? In the Bible, the answers are numerous and obvious.

For example, when I wonder, *What is pure and true religion?* the Lord answers in James 1:27: “Edgar, ‘religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress.’”

When I ask him, “How should I fast and humble myself as I draw close to you, Lord?” he replies in Isaiah 58:6–7: “Edgar, ‘is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice . . . to set the oppressed free . . . is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter?’”

As a Christ follower, seeking to know Jesus intimately and follow his example, what can I learn from the start of his earthly ministry—his stated purpose? In Luke 4:18–19, Jesus fulfilled the prophecy of the prophet Isaiah as he proclaimed: “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

And when I wonder how God will judge whether I deserve eternal life with him or eternal punishment in fire, the answer is startlingly clear in Matthew 25: “Edgar, when I was hungry and thirsty, did you give me food and water? Because whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me. And because you did, come now and take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world!” (vv. 31–46, paraphrase).

These verses, and two thousand more, build a compelling and overwhelming case that God cares deeply about those who are poor, marginalized, and vulnerable. And he calls his people to do the same. Through the Scriptures, God pleads with humanity—and, very personally, with me: “Take care of them, Edgar! I love them! Be my instrument in sharing with them my love!”

Caring for those who are poor and oppressed was consistently God’s command to the people of Israel in Old Testament times, just as it is Jesus’

mission for us today. When we embrace this command and align our purpose with what God cares about, we begin to fill “the hole in our gospel,” as Rich outlines in this book.

Though sixteen years have passed since Rich penned *The Hole in Our Gospel*, its themes are still relevant and urgent. Progress against extreme poverty in the past three decades has been disrupted by compounding crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic, rising conflict, and extreme weather events (read more on pages 144–146). In greater numbers, people are suffering physical pain and deprivation as well as the hopelessness of life without Christ.

But as this book makes clear—there’s hope! And that hope has a beautiful name: Jesus Christ. In John 16:33 he promised, “In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.” These words cut right through today’s bad news with the ring of truth. Jesus overcomes! And now, more than ever, we are called to be the bearers of his world-changing hope.

Yes, the Lord’s timing in all things is perfect. We are his people . . . and this is our time!

—Edgar Sandoval Sr., president and CEO,
World Vision US

INTRODUCTION

What does God expect of us? That's what this book is about. It's a simple question, really. But is the answer so simple? What is the Christian faith about? Going to church every Sunday, saying grace before meals, and avoiding the most serious sins—or does God expect more?

I am a Christian—perhaps you are too. But what does that mean exactly? To even *be* Christians, we must first believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. That in itself is no small idea. If it is true, it changes everything because if Christ is God, then all that he said and did is deeply significant to how we live our lives. So we believe. But God expects more.

And so the question, “What does God expect of me?” is a very profound one—not just for me, but for everyone who claims to follow Christ. Jesus had a lot to say about it. Yes, he did give us deep insights into the character of God and our relationship with him as well, but he also spoke at length about God's expectations, our values, and how we are to live in the world. So how are we to live? What kind of relationship are we to have with a holy God? What is God asking for, really, from you and me? Much more than church attendance. More than prayer too. More than belief and even more than self-denial. God asks us for *everything*. He requires a total life commitment from those who would be his followers. In fact, Christ calls us to be his partners in changing our world, just as he called the Twelve to change their world two thousand years ago.

Certainly the twenty-first-century world is in need of change. It is hard to read the headlines each day without a growing sense of alarm. We hear about terrorism, ethnic and religious tensions, wars and conflicts, widespread hunger and poverty, global economic turmoil, brutal dictators, corrupt governments, massive natural disasters, climate change, nuclear intimidations, and even child trafficking and slavery. Our world, especially since the terrorist attacks in the United States in 2001, seems both frightening and

threatening, and the majority of us struggle to understand it, let alone do something about it. The world's problems just seem too big and too hard for most of us; it's so much easier to retreat from them than to take them on. On Sunday morning, safe in our church pews and surrounded by friends, it can be all too easy to leave the world's violence, suffering, and turmoil outside—out of sight, out of mind.

But wait—as Christians, are we really given the option of turning away from the world's problems? Does God permit that?

I write this book from a very biased perspective. I believe that “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). And if Jesus was willing to die for this troubled planet, maybe I need to care about it too. Maybe I should love the people who live on it more. Maybe I have a responsibility to do my part to love the world that Jesus loves so much.

The idea behind *The Hole in Our Gospel* is quite simple. It's basically the belief that being a Christian, or follower of Jesus Christ, requires much more than just having a *personal* and transforming relationship with God. It also entails a *public* and transforming relationship with the world.

If your personal faith in Christ has no positive outward expression, then your faith—and mine—has a hole in it. As Johnny Cash sang, “You're so heavenly minded, you're no earthly good.”¹ The apostle James felt strongly about this type of person. “Show me your faith without deeds,” he challenged, “and I will show you my faith by my deeds” (James 2:18). In other words, *make your faith public*.

Embracing the gospel, or good news, proclaimed by Jesus is so much more than a private transaction between God and us. The gospel itself was born of God's vision of a changed people, challenging and transforming the prevailing values and practices of our world. Jesus called the resulting new world order the “kingdom of God” (Matthew 12:28; 19:24; 21:31, 43; and Mark 1:15, among others) and said that it would become a reality through the lives and deeds of his followers. Jesus asked a great deal of those who followed him. He expected much more from them than just believing he was God's Son. He challenged them to embrace radically different standards, to love their neighbors *and* their enemies, to forgive those who wronged them, to lift up the poor and downtrodden, to share what they had with those who had little, and to live lives of sacrifice. Then he likened their effect on the world around them to that of light on darkness.

Light dispels darkness; it reverses it. Likewise, truth dispels falsehood, and goodness reverses evil.

This is not easy stuff. Anyone who has tried to follow Jesus knows that the journey is fraught with setbacks, challenges, and failures—two steps forward and one step back. Those who choose to follow Christ have struggled since the very beginning to live differently in a world that often rejects their values and mocks their beliefs. The temptation to retreat from it and to keep our faith private has befallen every generation of Christians.

Yet we are the carriers of the gospel—the good news that was meant to *change* the world. Belief is not enough. Worship is not enough. Personal morality is not enough. And Christian community is not enough. God has always demanded *more*. When we committed ourselves to following Christ, we also committed to living our lives in such a way that a watching world would catch a glimpse of God’s character—his love, justice, and mercy—through our words, actions, and behavior. “We are . . . Christ’s ambassadors,” wrote the apostle Paul, “as though God were making his appeal through us” (2 Corinthians 5:20).² God chose us to be his representatives. He called us to go out, to proclaim the good news—to *be* the good news—and to change the world. Living out our faith privately was never meant to be an option.

I write this book unapologetically from the perspective of one who holds a Christian worldview. And because more than two-thirds of all Americans call themselves Christians, it is obviously a worldview held by a large majority. I quote the Old and New Testaments frequently because I believe them to be God’s inspired words to us, and as such, they carry great authority. But if you are not a Christian, I hope you will read this book anyway. You will find it to be both self-critical and judicious of the shortcomings readily found in the Christian community. As a group, we are far from perfect. But Christian or not, you must not read this book dispassionately, as if you are somehow exempt from caring. All of us who live in this world share responsibility for tackling the world’s problems and showing compassion to our fellow human.

I have woven my own story into this book because it is the tale of an ordinary person with whom God has been patient. It is an account like many others—of one person trying to be faithful to God while also trying to make the world a little better by the life he lives. Since the day I committed my life to following Christ, I have struggled to understand what God expects of me. To the best of my ability, though, I have endeavored to live out my faith,

both privately—through prayer, Scripture study, and worship—and publicly, by demonstrating God’s love to others through my actions and words, not just within my small circle of relationships but in the broader community as well. I have tried to appreciate the mystery of the good news we Christians call the “gospel” and its power to change the world by changing the human heart. I have stumbled many times on this journey and do not claim to have figured it all out.

You might imagine the author of a book challenging you to respond to the great needs of the poorest people in our world—an author who, for twenty years, led a large, global humanitarian organization that feeds the hungry, assists disaster victims, and cares for widows and orphans across the planet—to be some kind of spiritual hero or saint. You might even be inclined to think of me as a Mother Teresa in a business suit. But if you have any of those impressions, you are sorely mistaken. Let me clear that up right at the outset. I, too, have had a lifelong battle trying to walk the talk. I am certainly no saint or hero, and I never set out to save the world—I didn’t have that kind of courage or imagination. I was a most reluctant recruit to this cause—in many ways, a coward. But as you read a little more about my story, my hope is that you’ll learn from my mistakes and laugh a little at my failures. That God still chooses to use flawed human beings like me is both astonishing and encouraging. And if he can use me, he can use you.

This book asks the question, what if? What if each of us decided with renewed commitment to truly embrace the good news, the whole gospel, and demonstrate it through our lives—not even in big ways, but in small ones? What if we each said to God, “Use me; I want to change the world”? There are now 2.4 billion people on earth who claim to be Christians. That’s nearly one-third of humanity. Have we changed the world? Certainly, but our critics would be quick to point out that the changes have not always been good. So have we changed the world the way *God* intended? Have we been effective ambassadors for the good news that we call the gospel? The Lord’s Prayer, repeated in churches the world over, contains the phrase “your kingdom come, your will be done, *on earth* as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10). Do we believe what we pray?

The whole gospel is a vision for ushering in God’s kingdom—now, not in some future time, and here, on earth, not in some distant heaven. What if 2.4 billion people embraced this vision of God transforming our

world—through *them*? Imagine it. Indeed, what if even two *thousand* people took their faith to the next level—what might God do? Two thousand years ago, the world was changed forever by just twelve.

It can happen again.

—RICH STEARNS
Bellevue, Washington
December 2008

I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of
God that brings salvation to everyone who believes.

—ROMANS 1:16

Whoever heard me spoke well of me,
and those who saw me commended me,
because I rescued the poor who cried for help,
and the fatherless who had none to assist him.
The one who was dying blessed me;
I made the widow's heart sing.
I put on righteousness as my clothing;
justice was my robe and my turban.
I was eyes to the blind
and feet to the lame.
I was a father to the needy;
I took up the case of the stranger.
I broke the fangs of the wicked
and snatched the victims from their teeth.

—JOB 29:11–17

PROLOGUE

But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people.”

—LUKE 2:10

Rakai, Uganda, August 1998

His name was Richard, the same as mine. I sat inside his meager thatch hut, listening to his story, told through the tears of an orphan whose parents had died of AIDS. At thirteen, Richard was trying to raise his two younger brothers by himself in this small shack with no running water, electricity, or even beds to sleep in. There were no adults in their lives—no one to care for them, feed them, love them, or teach them how to become men. There was no one to hug them either or to tuck them in at night. Other than his siblings, Richard was alone, as no child should be. I try to picture my own children abandoned in this kind of deprivation, fending for themselves without parents to protect them, and I cannot.

I didn't want to be there. I wasn't *supposed* to be there, so far out of my comfort zone—not in that place where orphaned children live by themselves in their agony. There, poverty, disease, and squalor had eyes and faces that stared back, and I had to see and smell and touch the pain of the poor. That particular district, Rakai, is believed to be ground zero for the Ugandan AIDS pandemic. There, the deadly virus has stalked its victims in the dark for decades. Sweat trickled down my face as I sat awkwardly with Richard and his brothers while a film crew captured every tear—mine and theirs.

I much preferred living in my bubble, the one that, until that moment, had safely contained my life, family, and career. It kept difficult things like this out, insulating me from anything too raw or upsetting. When such things intruded, as they rarely did, a channel could be changed, a newspaper page turned, or a check written to keep the poor at a safe distance. But not in Rakai. There, “such things” had faces and names—even my name, Richard.

Not sixty days earlier I had been CEO of Lenox, America's finest tableware company, producing and selling luxury goods to those who could afford them. I lived with my wife and five children in a ten-bedroom house on five acres just outside of Philadelphia. I drove a Jaguar to work every day, and my business travel took me to places such as Paris, Tokyo, London, and Florence. I flew first class and stayed in the best hotels. I was respected in my community, attended a venerable suburban church, and sat on the board of my kids' Christian school. I was one of the good guys—you might say a "poster child" for the successful Christian life. I had never heard of Rakai, the place where my bubble would burst. But in just sixty days, God turned my life inside out, and it would never be the same.

Quite unexpectedly, eight months earlier, I had been contacted by World Vision, the Christian relief and development organization, during their search for a new president. Why me? It wasn't something I had sought after. In fact, you might say I had been minding my own business when the phone rang that day. But it was a phone call that had been twenty-four years in the planning. You see, in 1974, at the age of twenty-three, in my graduate school dormitory, I knelt down beside my bed and dedicated my life to Christ. This was no small decision for me, and it came only after months of reading, studying, conversing with friends, and the important witness of René, the woman who would later become my wife. While at the time I knew very little about the implications of that decision, I knew this: nothing would ever be quite the same again, because I had made a promise to follow Christ—no matter what.

THE MAN WHO WOULDN'T BUY CHINA

Several months after becoming a Christian, I was newly engaged to René. As we were planning our wedding and our life together, she suggested that we go to a department store to register for our china, crystal, and silver. My self-righteous response was an indication of just how my newfound faith was integrating into my life: "As long as there are children starving in the world, we're not going to own fine china, crystal, and silver." Perhaps you can see God's sense of irony in my becoming president of America's premier fine tableware company a couple of decades later. So when I answered that phone call from World Vision in January 1998, I knew that God was on the other end of the line. It was his voice I heard, not the recruiter's: *Rich, do you remember that idealistic young man in 1974 who was so passionate about*

starving children that he would not even fill out a wedding registry? Take a good look at yourself now. Do you see what you've become? But, Rich, if you still care about those children, I have a job I want you to do.

In my prayers over the weeks leading up to my appointment as World Vision's president, I begged God to send someone else to do it, much as Moses had done. Surely this was a mistake. I was no Mother Teresa. I remember praying that God would send me anywhere else, *but, please, God, not to the poor—not into the pain and alienation of poverty and disease, not there.* I didn't want to go there.

Yet here I was, the new president of World Vision, sent by knowing staff to get a “baptism by fire” for my new calling, with a film crew to document every moment.

Bob Pierce, the founder of World Vision, once prayed, “Let my heart be broken with the things that break the heart of God.”¹ But who *really* wants his heart broken? Is this something to ask of God? Don't we pray that God will *not* break our hearts? But as I look at the life of Jesus, I see that he was, as Isaiah described him, “a Man of sorrows . . . acquainted with grief” (53:3 NKJV). Jesus' heart was continually moved to compassion as he encountered the lame, the sick, the widow, and the orphan. I try to picture God's broken heart as he looks today upon the broken world for which he died. Surely Richard's story breaks his heart.

MY DEFINING MOMENT

Two crude piles of stones just outside the door mark the graves of Richard's parents. It disturbs me that he must walk past them every day. He and his brothers must have watched first their father and then their mother die slow and horrible deaths. I wondered if the boys were the ones who fed them and bathed them in their last days. Whatever the case, Richard, a child himself, is now the head of household.

Child-headed household, words never meant to be strung together. I tried to wrap my mind around this new phrase, one that describes not only Richard's plight but that of tens of thousands, even millions more. I was told that there are sixty thousand orphans just in Rakai, with twelve million orphans due to AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa at that time.² How can this be true? Awkwardly I asked Richard what he hoped to be when he grows up, a ridiculous question to ask a child who has lost his childhood. “A doctor,” he said, “so I can help people who have the disease.”

“Do you have a Bible?” I asked. He ran to the other room and returned with his treasured book with gold-gilt pages. “Can you read it?” I asked him.

“I love to read the book of John because it says that Jesus loves the children.”

This overwhelmed me, and my tears started to flow. *Forgive me, Lord, forgive me. I didn't know.* But I did know. I knew about poverty and suffering in the world. I was aware that children die daily from starvation and lack of clean water. I also knew about AIDS and the orphans it leaves behind, but I kept these things outside of my insulating bubble and looked the other way.

Yet this was to be the moment that would ever after define me. Rakai was what God wanted me to see. My sadness that day was replaced by repentance. Despite what the Bible had told me so clearly, I had turned a blind eye to the poor. Now my heart was filled with anger, first at myself, and then toward the world. Why wasn't Richard's story being told? The media overflowed with celebrity dramas, stock market updates, and Bill Clinton's impending impeachment hearings. But where were the headlines and magazine covers about Africa? Almost fifteen million orphans—and no one noticed? But what sickened me most was this question—where was the Church? Indeed, where *were* the followers of Jesus Christ in the midst of perhaps the greatest humanitarian crisis of our time? Surely the Church should have been caring for these “orphans and widows in their distress” (James 1:27). Shouldn't the pulpits across America have flamed with exhortations to rush to the front lines of compassion? Shouldn't they be flaming today? Shouldn't churches be reaching out to care for children in such desperate need? How could the great tragedy of these orphans get drowned out by choruses of praise music in hundreds of thousands of churches across our country? Sitting in a hut in Rakai, I remember thinking, *How have we missed it so tragically, when even rock stars and Hollywood actors seem to understand?*

Today, I know. Something fundamental has been missing in our understanding of the gospel.

The word *gospel* literally means “good news.” Jesus declared that he had come to “proclaim good news to the poor” (Luke 4:18). But what good news, what gospel, did the Church have for Richard and his brothers in Rakai? What good news have God's people brought to the world's three billion poor?³ What gospel have millions of Africa's AIDS orphans seen?⁴ What gospel have most of us embraced in the twenty-first century?

The answer is found in the title of this book: a gospel with a *hole* in it.

PART ONE

THE HOLE IN MY
GOSPEL—AND
MAYBE YOURS

Christ has no body on earth but yours,
no hands but yours,
no feet but yours.

Yours are the eyes through which
Christ's compassion for the world is to look out;
yours are the feet with which He is to go about doing good;
and yours are the hands with which He is to bless us now.

—SAINT TERESA OF AVILA

Kindness has converted more sinners than zeal, eloquence, or learning.

—FREDERICK W. FABER

CHAPTER I

A HOLE IN THE WHOLE

Faith today is treated as something that only should make us different, not that actually does or can make us different. In reality we vainly struggle against the evils of this world, waiting to die and go to heaven. Somehow we've gotten the idea that the essence of faith is entirely a mental and inward thing.

—DALLAS WILLARD

WHERE IS THE HOLE?

So how can our gospel have a hole in it? As I mentioned in the prologue, the *Sword gospel* literally means good news. It is shorthand, meant to convey the coming of the kingdom of God through the Messiah. One dictionary has this definition:

Gospel: glad tidings, esp. concerning salvation and the kingdom of God as announced to the world by Christ.¹

The amazing news of the gospel is that men and women, through Christ's atoning death, can now be reconciled to God. But the good news Jesus proclaimed had a fullness beyond salvation and the forgiveness of sins; it also signified the coming of God's kingdom on earth. This new kingdom, characteristics of which were captured in the Beatitudes, would turn the existing world order upside down.

Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are those who mourn,

for they will be comforted.
 Blessed are the meek,
 for they will inherit the earth.
 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
 for they will be filled.
 Blessed are the merciful,
 for they will be shown mercy.
 Blessed are the pure in heart,
 for they will see God.
 Blessed are the peacemakers,
 for they will be called children of God.
 Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,
 for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:3–10)

The kingdom of which Christ spoke was one in which the poor, the sick, the grieving, cripples, slaves, women, children, widows, orphans, lepers, and aliens—the “least of these” (Matthew 25:40)—were to be lifted up and embraced by God. It was a world order in which justice was to become a reality, first in the hearts and minds of Jesus’ followers, and then to the wider society through their influence. Jesus’ disciples were to be “salt” and “light” to the world (Matthew 5:13–14). They were to be the “yeast” that leavens the whole loaf of bread (Matthew 13:33). His was not intended to be a far-off and distant kingdom to be experienced only in the afterlife; no, Christ’s proclamation of the kingdom of heaven was a call for a redeemed world order populated by redeemed people—*now*. In other words, the perfect kingdom of God that I just described was to begin *on earth*. That was the vision first proclaimed by Jesus, and it was good news for our world. But this does not seem to square with our twenty-first-century view of the gospel. Somehow this grand vision from God has been dimmed and diminished.

THE “BINGO CARD” GOSPEL

Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves,
 others will praise God for the obedience that accompanies
 your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your
 generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else.

—2 CORINTHIANS 9:13

More and more, our view of the gospel has been narrowed to a simple transaction, marked by checking a box on a bingo card at some prayer breakfast, registering a decision for Christ, or coming forward during an altar call. I have to admit that my own view of evangelism, based on the Great Commission, amounted to just that for many years. It was about saving as many people from hell as possible—for the *next* life. It minimized any concern for those same people in *this* life. It wasn't as important that they were poor or hungry or persecuted, or perhaps rich, greedy, and arrogant; we just had to get them to pray the "sinner's prayer," and then we'd move on to the next potential convert. In our evangelistic efforts to make the good news accessible and simple to understand, we seem to have boiled it down to a kind of "fire insurance" that one can buy. Then once the policy is in effect, the sinner can go back to whatever life he was living—of wealth and success, or of poverty and suffering. As long as the policy is in the drawer, the other things don't matter as much. We've got our "ticket" to the next life.

There is a real problem with this limited view of the kingdom of God; it is not the whole gospel. Instead, it's a gospel with a gaping hole. First, focusing almost exclusively on the afterlife reduces the importance of what God expects of us in this life. The kingdom of God, which Christ said is "within you" (Luke 17:21 NKJV), was intended to change and challenge everything in our fallen world in the here and now. It was not meant to be a way to leave the world but rather the means to actually redeem it. Yes, it requires that we repent of our own sinfulness and totally surrender our individual lives to follow Christ, but then we are also commanded to go into the world—to bear fruit by lifting up the poor and the marginalized, challenging injustice wherever we find it, rejecting the worldly values found within every culture, and loving our neighbors as ourselves. While our joining in the coming kingdom of God may begin with a decision, a transaction, it requires so much more than that.

I believe that we have reduced the gospel from a dynamic and beautiful symphony of God's love *for* and *in* the world to a bare and strident monotone. We have taken this amazing good news from God, originally presented in high definition and Dolby Stereo, and reduced it to a grainy, black-and-white, silent movie. In doing so, we have also stripped it of much of its power to change not only the human heart but the world. This is especially reflected in our limited view of evangelism. Jesus commanded his followers to take the good news of reconciliation and forgiveness to the ends of the earth. The dictate is the same today.

Christianity is a faith that was meant to spread—but not through coercion. God’s love was intended to be demonstrated, not dictated. Our job is not to manipulate or induce others to agree with us or to leave their religion and embrace Christianity. Our charge is to both proclaim and embody the gospel so that others can see, hear, and feel God’s love in tangible ways. When we are living out our faith with integrity and compassion in the world, God can use us to give others a glimpse of his love and character. It is God—not us—who works in the hearts of men and women to forgive and redeem. Coercion is not necessary or even particularly helpful. God is responsible for the harvest—but we *must* plant, water, and cultivate the seeds.

Let’s look more closely at this metaphor, used often in the New Testament to describe evangelism (for example, Matthew 9:37–38; Mark 4:1–20, 26–29; Luke 10:1–3; and John 4:35–38). For most of the twentieth century, American evangelists really homed in on this idea of the harvest, believing that the fruit was already ripe and just needed to be picked. This was the essence of Billy Graham’s great global crusades, Campus Crusade’s pamphlet *The Four Spiritual Laws*, *The JESUS Film*, and *Evangelism Explosion*. All these tools and efforts were highly effective at proclaiming the good news that our sins could be forgiven if we committed our lives to Christ. Many millions of people did commit their lives to him. In fact, my own life was influenced by both *The Four Spiritual Laws* and a Billy Graham crusade, so I can personally attest to how successful these techniques are at harvesting fruit that has already ripened.

But what about the fruit that *hasn’t* ripened? For most of us who made our first-time commitments to Christ as adults, our stories were not of instant conversion the first time we ever heard about Jesus. In fact, according to the Barna Research Group, only about 6 percent of people who are not Christians by the age of eighteen will become Christians later in life.² It is rare that a simple recitation of the gospel will cause people to instantly change their minds. It usually takes much more than that. Our own narratives typically involve a journey of discovery marked by relationships with respected friends and loved ones, reading, discussions, learning about the basis for the Christian faith, seeing the difference faith makes in the lives of people we know, and witnessing genuine faith demonstrated through acts of love and kindness toward others. In other words, before we became “ripe” for harvest, a lot of other things had to happen first.

Think about all the things that must happen before there can be a good

harvest of crops. First, someone has to go and prepare the land. This is back-breaking work that involves felling trees, pulling massive stumps out of the ground, extracting rocks and boulders from the field, and moving them aside. But there's no harvest yet. Next the soil has to be broken up. The earth needs to be plowed, fertilizer churned in with the soil, and orderly rows tilled to prepare for the seed. Then the seeds must be carefully planted and covered. But still no harvest. Perhaps a fence needs to be built to protect the plants from animals that might devour them. And always, the seedlings must be carefully watered, nurtured, and fed over the long growing season.

There are sometimes setbacks—bad weather, blights, floods, and insects—that can jeopardize the harvest. But if all the hard work is done faithfully and with perseverance, and if God provides good seed and favorable weather, finally a glorious harvest is the result.

Haven't we heard the stories of faithful missionaries who dedicated their whole lives in another country without seeing even one person embrace Christ as Savior—only to learn that fifty years later there was a tremendous harvest? In our instant-gratification society, we would prefer to go directly to the harvest. Who wants to do all that hard work of stump pulling and boulder moving? But isn't all that "other" work the essence of the coming of the kingdom of God in its fullness? When we become involved in people's lives, work to build relationships, walk with them through their sorrows and their joys, live with generosity toward others, love and care for them unconditionally, stand up for the defenseless, and pay particular attention to the poorest and most vulnerable, we are *showing* Christ's love to those around us, not just talking about it. These are the things that plant the seeds of the gospel in the human heart.

Didn't Jesus always care about the *whole* person—one's health, family, work, values, relationships, behavior toward others—and his or her soul? Jesus' view of the gospel went beyond a bingo card transaction; it embraced a revolutionary new view of the world, an earth transformed by transformed people, his "disciples of all the nations" (Matthew 28:19 NKJV), who would usher in the revolutionary kingdom of God. Those words from the Lord's Prayer, "your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven," were and are a clarion call to Jesus' followers not just to proclaim the good news but to *be* the good news, here and now (Matthew 6:10). This gospel—the *whole* gospel—means much more than the personal salvation of individuals. It means a *social revolution*.

JESUS HAD A MISSION STATEMENT

I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

—JOHN 10:10

The revolution began in Nazareth, where Jesus grew up.

Picture for a moment your neighbor's son being asked to speak at the Sunday service at your church. Can you imagine your shock if he stood up, read the scripture pertaining to the second coming of Christ, and then said, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing"? That is exactly what Jesus did in the synagogue in Nazareth, except he referred to the Messiah's first coming. This happened at the very start of Jesus' public ministry, immediately after his baptism by John the Baptist and the forty days in the wilderness, facing the temptations of Satan. Listen to this remarkable passage:

Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. He was teaching in their synagogues, and everyone praised him.

He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. He began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."
(Luke 4:14–21)

The passage Jesus read was a messianic prophecy that envisioned a future

messiah who would be both a king and a servant. As perhaps Jesus' first public statement of his identity as the Messiah, what he said in Nazareth was a declaration both of who he was and why he had come. It was in essence Jesus' *mission statement*, and it laid out the great promises of God to those who receive the Messiah and his coming kingdom. In this mission statement, we see three main components.

First, we see the *proclamation of the good news* of salvation. Take note that the recipients of this good news were to be, first and foremost, the poor, just as Jesus promised in the Beatitudes. When we talk today about proclaiming the gospel, we typically mean evangelism, a verbal proclamation of the good news of salvation and how it can be received by anyone by asking God's forgiveness and committing his or her life to Christ. But this is not the whole gospel.

Second, we see a reference to "recovery of sight for the blind" (Luke 4:18). In the original text from Isaiah 61, there is also a promise to "bind up the brokenhearted" (v. 1). These references indicate that the good news includes a *compassion for the sick and the sorrowful*—a concern not just for our spiritual condition but for our physical well-being also. We see this same concern time after time in the ministry of Jesus as he healed the diseased and the lame, showed empathy for the poor, fed the hungry, and literally restored sight to the blind. Jesus clearly cared about addressing poverty, disease, and human brokenness in tangible ways.

Third, we see a majestic *commitment to justice*. Jesus came to "proclaim freedom for the prisoners," "to set the oppressed free," and "to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18–19). In the first century, the allusion to prisoners and the oppressed would have certainly meant those living under the occupation of Rome but also, in a broader sense, anyone who had been the victim of injustice, whether political, social, or economic. The proclamation of "the year of the Lord's favor" was a clear reference to the Old Testament Year of Jubilee, when slaves were set free, debts were forgiven, and all land was returned to its original owners. The Year of Jubilee was God's way of protecting against the rich getting too rich and the poor getting too poor.

Proclaiming the whole gospel, then, means much more than evangelism in the hopes that people will hear and respond to the good news of salvation by faith in Christ. It also encompasses tangible compassion for the sick and the poor, as well as biblical justice, efforts to right the wrongs that are so

prevalent in our world. God is concerned about the spiritual, physical, and social dimensions of our being. This *whole* gospel is truly good news for the poor, and it is the foundation for a social revolution that has the power to change the world. And if this was Jesus' mission, it is also the mission of all who claim to follow him. It is my mission, it is your mission, and it is the mission of the Church.

THE POWER OF THE WHOLE

About six months after the terrible earthquake that killed twenty thousand people in Gujarat, India, in 2001,³ I visited there. The region had been flattened; nearly every house and building had collapsed. Several of my colleagues and I were there to dedicate the first of hundreds of new houses built through a partnership between World Vision, Habitat for Humanity, and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The resilient Indian people, with some help from outsiders, were beginning to put their lives back together and move on, even though their human losses had been unimaginable to most of us in the West.

During the dedication proceedings, a group of village elders sat just a few yards behind us, observing everything. They looked like majestic and dignified figures from the pages of *National Geographic* with deeply lined faces; long, white beards and mustaches; and turbaned heads. As the event wore on, they were having quite a lively conversation in their local dialect. They could not have known that one of my colleagues, Atul Tandon,⁴ had grown up in that very region and understood every word they were saying.

After the ceremony Atul shared with me what he had overheard. He said that the men were speculating as to why “these Christians” had traveled thousands of miles across the ocean to help their community rebuild. They wondered what motivated complete strangers to help them. They were experiencing the love of God and the kingdom of God in profound ways through the concrete love and action demonstrated by Christians, acting through the Habitat for Humanity and World Vision organizations.

Saint Francis of Assisi understood the power of faith put into action to change the human heart, for it was he who said, “Preach the gospel always; when necessary use words.” We had not yet spoken a word in their language, but the village elders had already “heard” the gospel.

A BIBLE FULL OF HOLES

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all.

—GALATIANS 1:6–7

We have shrunk Jesus to the size where he can save our soul but now don't believe he can change the world.

—ANONYMOUS

Luke 4 is not the only place in the Bible that speaks to the issues of poverty and justice. God's Word is replete with such passages, from Genesis to Revelation—but do we heed them?

When my friend Jim Wallis⁵ was a seminary student at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School outside of Chicago, he and some of his classmates did a little experiment. They went through all sixty-six books of the Bible and underlined every passage and verse that dealt with poverty, wealth, justice, and oppression. Then one of Jim's fellow students took a pair of scissors and physically cut every one of those verses out of the Bible. The result was a volume in tatters that barely held together. Beginning with the Mosaic books, through the books of history, the Psalms and Proverbs, and the Major and Minor Prophets, to the four Gospels, the book of Acts, the Epistles, and into Revelation, so central were these themes to Scripture that the resulting Bible was in shambles. (According to *The Poverty and Justice Bible*, there are almost two *thousand* verses in Scripture that deal with poverty and justice.⁶) When Jim would speak on these issues, he would hold his ragged book in the air and proclaim, "Brothers and sisters, this is our American Bible; it is full of holes. Each one of us might as well take our Bibles, a pair of scissors, and begin cutting out all the scriptures we pay no attention to, all the biblical texts that we just ignore."⁷ Jim's Bible was literally full of holes.

Hole (hōl) n.—a hollowed place in something solid⁸

The gospel Jesus described in Luke 4 is indeed something solid. If there is a hole in our gospel, in our understanding of the nature of God's call upon us, his followers, it is not because Scripture is unclear about these issues.

Rather, it is because we have chosen, as Jim Wallis suggested, to pay little attention to God's unmistakable message to bring the whole gospel to the whole world. We'll come back to the scriptural basis for a fuller understanding of the whole gospel in the next section. But any *head* analysis of what Jesus expects of those who choose to follow him must be accompanied by the *heart* and the *hands and feet* as well. In my own case, getting what I knew in my head into my heart and out to my hands and feet was the challenge. Walking the walk was a lot harder than talking the talk. Isn't it always that way?