

PROLOGUE

But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be 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.¹ 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, conversations with friends, and the important witness of Reneé, 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 Reneé. 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 by the things that break the heart of God.” 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.

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

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—a prayer by Bob
Pierce, founder of
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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'm told that there are sixty thousand orphans just in Rakai, twelve million orphans due to AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa.² How can this be true? Awkwardly I asked Richard what he hopes 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 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? Twelve 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?*

Ten years later 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 "preach 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.