

Less of More

PURSUING SPIRITUAL ABUNDANCE
IN A WORLD OF NEVER ENOUGH

Chris Nye



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To my grandparents,
Gary and Norma Poppinga

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We can stand anything God and nature can throw at us
save only plenty. If I wanted to destroy a nation, I would give
it too much, and I would have it on its knees, miserable,
greedy, sick.

JOHN STEINBECK, to Adlai Stevenson

PART 1

You Probably Thought There Would Be More



Infinite, Unlimited, and Other Lies

At the bottom of the American soul was always a dark
suspense.

D. H. LAWRENCE, “The Spirit of Place”

This is a book about how we can obtain a lot of things and still lose everything. It’s about how we can expand businesses, flourish economically, advance politically, win converts, change schools, grow churches, and still not have the things we ultimately desire to possess. It’s about how social justice can be disappointing, how making money can feel empty, and how a “packed house” can leave the soul vacant. It’s about how our economy has grown, but so have our suicide rates. This is a book about people coming to admire you while you lose respect for yourself, and about

how a nation can hold the world in the palm of its hand while losing the grip on its soul. It's also about escalators. And drugs. And taquerias. And college. And Britney Spears. And there's also some consideration given to bees.

But let's first talk about the pope.

Jorge Mario Bergoglio, or Pope Francis as he is called now, published a little book titled *Laudato Si'*, which literally means "Praise be to you" in medieval central Italian. The title does not help much in understanding its central subject. Thankfully, as is the case for most books, the subtitle is more clarifying: *On Care for Our Common Home*. Yes, the leader of the world's largest church wrote a book about caring for the environment.

Laudato Si' is surprisingly theological and thoroughly prophetic. Reviewing it for the *New York Review of Books*, climate expert Bill McKibben praised Francis's book, saying, "*Laudato Si'* stands as one of the most influential documents of recent times. . . . It turns out to be nothing less than a sweeping, radical, and highly persuasive critique of how we inhabit this planet—an ecological critique, yes, but also a moral, social, economic, and spiritual commentary."¹

He's right.

And yet: What does the earth have to do with theology? Why talk about our "spirituality" when talking about glaciers? And why is a pope, of all people, writing about what we do with our trees? I can hear the Twitter eggs now: *Stick to the church, Francis*.

But many who have read *Laudato Si'* would tell you what I will: Francis's argument is incredibly convincing. You leave that book understanding the *spiritual* weight of the deci-

1. McKibben, "The Pope and the Planet."

sions we usually deem “economic” or “political” or “environmental.” These issues have more gravitas than our usual categories tell us. Pope Francis brings together data, policy, Scripture, and practical wisdom to convince readers we’re not just losing the earth, we’re losing ourselves.

“A certain way of understanding human life and activity has gone awry, to the serious detriment of the world around us,” Francis argues. “There is a tendency to believe that every increase in power means ‘an increase of “progress” itself,’ . . . as if reality, goodness and truth automatically flow from technological and economic power as such.”²

After reading *Laudato Si’*, several questions came to my mind: Just because we advance in technological and economic power, are we really “progressing” as a society? Should there come a time when businesses should just *stop growing*? Or governments should *stop building*? And militaries *stop arming*? Are we going to keep growing larger just for the sake of growing larger? Does bigger always mean better? Is growth always a good thing?

The pope writes about how human beings and material objects like clothes, phones, and computers no longer hold hands nicely. Due to international labor abuses and consumer expectations of cheap clothing, these material relationships have “become confrontational.” And in the twenty-first century, it is now “easy to accept the idea of infinite or unlimited growth, which proves so attractive to economists, financiers and experts in technology. It is based on the lie that there is an infinite supply of the earth’s goods, and this leads to the planet being squeezed dry beyond every limit.”³

2. Francis, *Laudato Si’*, §§101, 105.

3. Francis, *Laudato Si’*, §106.

Infinite or unlimited growth.

Does this sound familiar? Surely you could recognize this phrase in the rhetoric of our CEOs and politicians, but haven't you also heard something like this in church? Or maybe even a university or your workplace? Hasn't Facebook or LinkedIn suggested you "expand your network"?

My wife and I live in the Silicon Valley, eight miles from Stanford University. In 2016, Stanford's endowment was \$22 billion. No, that's not a typo. Stanford has the fourth-largest endowment in the United States and stands as one of the most influential and affluent universities in the world. Twenty-two *billion* dollars.⁴

In a 2016 episode of his podcast, *Revisionist History*, Malcolm Gladwell interviewed Stanford's then-president, John Hennessy, regarding this outrageous number and, in a polite way, asked him if there would ever be a time Stanford would just call it good and *not* accept any donations. After all, they're quite literally sitting on billions of dollars in assets and investments. "How much is enough?" Gladwell asks.

"How much is enough?" Hennessy repeats. He fumbles for a bit, and then continues: "If our ambitions don't grow, then I think you do reach a point where you do have enough money. . . . I would hope, then . . . that our ambitions do grow." Gladwell presses Hennessy over and over with bizarre possibilities: Would you accept a \$10 billion gift? Would there ever be a time where you would tell a massive donor that their money would be better used in the public college system, which educates two hundred thousand students in the state of California compared to Stanford's sixteen

4. Stanford University, "2016 Results."

thousand students? Hennessy doesn't really answer, but ends up settling on a kind of "no." Gladwell translates: "In other words, there really isn't such a thing as too much money at an institution like Stanford."⁵

As Pope Francis put it: "*Infinite and unlimited growth.*" This is what we think we know: if we had more, we could be better, do more; if we could get more money, we could do more good. Yuval Noah Harari, in his landmark book *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*, puts it more flatly and accurately: "From its belief in the supreme value of growth, capitalism deduces its number one commandment: thou shalt invest thy profits in increasing growth. . . . We will never reach a moment when capitalism says: 'That's it. Enough growth. We can now take it easy.'"⁶ Capitalism is

5. Gladwell, "My Little Hundred Million."

6. Harari, *Homo Deus*, 245. Harari believes that we have made what he calls "the Modern Covenant," which "offers us power, on condition that we renounce our belief in a great cosmic plan that gives meaning to life" (245). We have taken this deal in order to service our greed and love for unlimited economic growth. Our latest and greatest religion is essentially a growing, capitalistic society. He's right. This deal "demands that we loosen family bonds, encourage people to live away from their parents, and import carers from the other side of the world" (245). His book goes on to suggest that through this deal, human beings have basically "snuck in" meaning alongside capitalism by inventing humanism, Harari's great hope for the next century or two. He unfortunately neglects the nuances of the religious underpinnings of beliefs that he thinks, apparently, came out of thin air. He cleanly divides the world into unfortunately brash binaries when it serves his arguments. This is only one reason to not fully trust him (the other reason is his daft neglect of the Oxford comma). I would love for him to consider how the history of thought is much more tied together than he presents, and that Christian theology and philosophy—along with those of Islam and Judaism, for that matter—should be and must be credited with much of what he tosses up to "science" or "humanism" or, most laughably, "progress." He would do well to read the work of Marilynne Robinson, Luc Ferry, and Terry Eagleton. Still, all Christian leaders—especially pastors in the Silicon Valley—should read Harari's work, as it will help us understand where modern thought is going and should push us to develop a more serious Christian anthropology, something that is much needed. He is, in the end, a gift.

wonderful when it serves us, but somewhere along the line, we began to serve it, and the fallout has been enormous. Our economic model is now our guide for life; it has become our liturgy, our creed: we firmly believe that if we just had more students, or a larger congregation, or a bigger budget, or a larger staff, or more power, we could accomplish so much more. Many of our decisions come from this heresy.

I suppose this book desires to ask two questions in light of this belief: First, is this true? And second, if it is true, what does that say about us? We can put these questions another way: Is it accurate to believe we could *do* more if we *had* more? And does this belief—that real, abundant life comes from the accumulation, or faster growth, of people, resources, money, and power—actually reveal a kind of emptiness in our churches, businesses, nations, families, and schools instead of a fullness? If we work to gain the world, can we also get our soul included in the deal? Or, as we continue to accumulate more and more, do we completely lose it?

I'm sure the last conference you went to included a list of speakers who sold more books, led bigger organizations, had more connections and friends, and had a larger social media platform than most of the people who were *not* on the stage. They're also probably better looking than the average mug. This is because we believe people like that are "successful." But is there nothing for us to learn from those in the audience who have failed? Can we not learn from the guy who ran his church into the ground or the woman who runs a small business with her family? Or what about wisdom from just . . . normal people? Is the wisdom of a poor, single mom beneficial to business leaders? Does the pastor

of the small, rural church know *less* about God’s kingdom than the megachurch pastor with a CrossFit ministry? Does the teacher who burned out not have anything valuable to say to the teacher who still enjoys helping kindergarten students put on their jackets before recess?

The American Story and the Counter-Narrative

I’m writing this book in order to craft a counter-narrative—a new story—for Christians in the twenty-first century. In order to do that, I will trace the story as it is told now, which I will call “The American Story of More,” but alongside that story, I will offer the counter-narrative of how we should live according to Scripture. As clearly as possible, here are the two stories:

The American Story of More

growth → isolation → fame → power → wealth

The Biblical Counter-Narrative

pace → community → obscurity → vulnerability → generosity

The American story begins with the worship of growth: we believe that very few things get worse as they get bigger. As things have grown in our country, however, we have not become more of a community, but less of one. We have become “hyper-individualists” within our churches and economies as they have ballooned.⁷ The more we grow, the more we isolate ourselves. Isolation has led to an “Every man for himself” mantra, and with the help of social media, every

7. McKibben, *Deep Economy*, 96.

person is a brand and a product. We're all celebrities now, or so we think. We desire to be known and celebrated for the things we've accomplished. And from there, the route of the hyper-individualist, who is isolated and self-celebrated, is toward a twofold goal: power and money. We want it all, and we want to have made it alone.

The Bible offers something else, a counter-narrative for faithful people under which we can live. It begins with pace, which is often called "humility." Pace and humility mean we live within our means and capacities. As we do this, we realize we actually cannot "do it alone," that "Every man for himself" is a lie. We adhere to a community and are responsible for one another because we understand our limits. When we live in a community, there are no celebrities; rather, we all live in beautiful obscurity. The story is not about a single individual but about a collective family. In maintaining such a community, power seeking and money grabbing are deadly. Instead, the biblical counter-narrative community is one of vulnerability and generosity. We don't grab power; we lay it down. We do not cling to our money; we share it freely because our foundation is built on a man who had it all and freely laid it all down.

The Common Denominator of a Great Life

When you were a child, you wanted great things. You desired to be someone or do something, with very little understanding of the disciplines or natural skill involved in such pursuits. You dribbled a basketball in your yard after watching Michael Jordan. You danced in your room after you saw a Madonna video. You practiced speeches in front of your

mirror and wrote songs when no one was home. You stared at screens, videos, and pictures of the kinds of people you desired to become. You had grand ideas about your life once. And then you went to high school.

One difference between a child and an adult is the realization of limits. As Dirty Harry said at the end of his highly unrealistic and surprisingly poetic address to the man he was about to kill, “A man’s got to know his limitations.”⁸ In many ways, this is what growing up is like and why it sucks. We can’t all be powerful, famous, and rich. And we apparently need to be OK with it.

But can we all be happy? Can all of us live a kind of life that is satisfactory and full? And is this life dependent on our childhood dreams of what a good life really is? Put another way: Is it possible to never accomplish anything we set out to do, or be less of a parent/student/person than we desired originally, and still be satisfied with our life? Is the abundant, full life possible when scarcity has been a predominant factor in our life? Is there a way to be rich without having much money? Is there a way to be powerful and influential without any authority or a prestigious job title? Can you lead a large organization with great impact while at the same time having few or no staff and a small budget? Can you live a “successful” life if you’ve never had a career, a house, or a savings account?

Most of the people I have ministered to as a pastor over the last ten years do not have many of the things we think we need to have an abundant life. Most do not lead businesses or churches. Most don’t own homes or have “assets” (whatever

8. *Magnum Force* (1973).

that means). Many are in debt and have little money to spend. A lot of them are low on organizational charts or aren't even on one to begin with. A great many of them were born without privileges of any kind. In fact, I would venture to say that most of you reading this fit these descriptions or something like them. We can't all be powerful, famous, and rich. But even if you are a leader, a boss, someone rich or influential or even famous—does this automatically mean your life is abundant? The overwhelming evidence within just our own experience would cause us to answer that question emphatically: *of course not*.

Business owners, entrepreneurs, and titans of industry are all certainly in our churches, and I have been pleased to interact with some of them. The ones who were filled with an abundant life had something else going on. There was another project—a side hustle of the soul—something in their life that had nothing to do with the kingdom they had set up themselves, and it was incredibly attractive. The path to a truly rich and abundant life has nothing to do with how much money you have and how much you have achieved. And that's mostly what I want to explore.

We all want a great life—the kind of life that could last forever. This is why Jesus came saying, “I came to give you life and life abundant” (cf. John 10:10). His message was (and is) not primarily for the rich, powerful, and influential. His message is available for *all*. There is no life too broken, too lost, too disassembled, too immoral, or too selfish for God to miraculously reclaim. Jesus proclaimed captives free and poor people blessed. He told those who are meek that the whole earth would one day be theirs. He was constantly giving people good news. And the early church carried out the

same gospel: sight to the blind, the wanderer coming home, and the sick made well. And the primary facet of this gospel message that made it absurd and astounding was that all of these things were *for everyone*. The gates to this kind of abundant life were wide open. The places and spaces where God would give such a good life were not limited to poor people or rich people, or to the Jewish people or the Roman citizens. The Christian Scriptures put this right in front of our faces: *everyone's invited*.

I believe a good life—a truly abundant, thick, and rich kind of life—is available for every person on this earth. I just think it looks confusing and upside down when we first put it up against the common messages in American life. But what if these messages are wrong? What if the Great American Experiment of Living a Good Life is actually a failed one? That, my friends, would be good to know.

This is not some elongated Twitter rant or internet digression; rather, it is the attempt to recapture a vision we have lost—a biblical vision. The new (old) story—the counter-narrative—is against so much of our America-trained minds. But we need a new outlook, a kind of outlook on life that is surprising, terrifying, and yet still remarkably abundant and full. I will spend the next two chapters trying to give you as big of a “flyover” of the story as possible. We will look at how our society has both “gained the world” and “lost its soul.” From there, we will begin to weave both narratives together, seeking a new alternative. Wisdom seems to be calling to us from Scripture. It may be backward from all we’ve been taught as Western people, but I wonder, can we listen again to this story?