

GET OFF YOUR DONKEY!

Help Somebody and Help Yourself

REGGIE McNEAL



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To Henry, Melanie, Chandler, Hannah,
Mark, Pam, Leah, and Cathy

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I don't know how it is for other authors, but I always find the acknowledgments section one of the most difficult sections of the book to write. Not because I am not grateful or because no one comes to mind as a major contributor to the project. Just the opposite is true. So *many* people come to mind, it's hard to settle on just whom to single out.

After all, where does a book idea come from? I can claim and honestly think that I came up with it all by myself. But how many conversations with how many people did it take to form a coherent “plot” for the book's content? Countless. And they all mattered, though I can't pick out one that by itself gave birth or shape to the book (just like I can't remember what I've had for dinner every night of my life, but I am alive and portly to prove that I showed up to eat routinely—and enthusiastically).

Let me just acknowledge all those who contributed to the content of this book as the unnamed heroes—the people I have met and continue to meet who inspire me with their service to their neighbors and their communities. They refuse

to accept the status quo, choosing instead to believe and to deliver help and hope. They show us all the way.

While the lives and examples of these unnamed heroes provide the soul and seedling of this book, there are some people I can name who have provided their expertise to bring this volume to market.

Mark Sweeney not only believed in this project, he sold it! As my literary agent, he delivers the right combination of honest feedback and encouragement to keep me going. He is the kind of friend everyone needs working for them!

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No man could have a better personal cheerleader and consultant on everything than I have had for over three decades now—all wrapped up in one person who also happens to be my wife. Thanks, Cate! You make the trip so much fun.

Lastly, I am grateful to all those in our communities who are working this moment to turn the tide. I hope others will join you soon!

INTRODUCTION

I was speaking to a group of church and community leaders about Jesus's parable of the Good Samaritan. I pointed out that loving our neighbors is apparently a big deal to Jesus, since in the story the command to serve others ranks right up there with the instruction to love God. I commented that with his tale, Jesus gigged religious people for missing the point. The hero of the story—with suspect spiritual credentials for the church crowd—is the only person who reflects God's heart for the person in need.

“The moral of the story,” I quipped, “is that you have to get off your donkey to help somebody.” The few people who giggled in the audience made me realize what I had just said.

A few months later I was asked to speak at a denomination's annual tribal gathering. I decided again to speak on the Good Samaritan story, and remembering the earlier episode, I responded with a tongue-in-cheek reply to an email requesting the title of my talk. “Get Off Your Donkey!” was what I sent in, thinking I would get some sort of fun exchange going. I never heard back. Weeks later I learned that the program had been printed with the title, the production team apparently

oblivious to the joke. Maybe if I had substituted King James language for *donkey*, they would have gotten it! The import of the title was not lost on the crowd, however. We had great fun together as I prodded them to take action.

As a conference speaker, I travel a lot. “What kind of business are you in?” is a frequent question I get asked by airplane seatmates strapped alongside me for the ride.

“I work in leadership development,” I usually say. That response typically generates a follow-up question.

“Who do you work with?” they ask with interest.

“Mostly with church leaders,” I reply.

“Uh-huh,” they typically respond, returning to their smartphones or laptops, their enthusiasm level noticeably dampened.

Then I say, “I’m trying to help them get out of the church business and into the people business.” This comment generally provokes interest and sometimes fascinating conversation. In case they don’t know Jesus, even if they attend church, I want them to know that he actually *is* in the people business.

What does this discussion of airplane chatter have to do with getting off donkeys? Simply this: I don’t know what business you are in (education, the social sector, for-profit enterprise, health care), but ultimately you want to be in the people business. Why do I say this? Because helping people is the best part of life! If you don’t discover this truth and act on it, not only will your neighbors’ needs go unmet, but *you* will never be whole. And if that’s not reason enough to motivate you to love your neighbor, know that the further consequences of your inaction will guarantee a diminished future not just for them and for you but also for our whole society.

The toll of institutional failure in American government, education, finances, and health care—and yes, even the church—is resulting in catastrophic loss for millions. The cost is not only devastating in individual terms; the future of our country is at stake. The Great Recession and its aftermath

have raised a specter of a “new normal” that signals the possible twilight of American civilization. The creativity and resiliency that have been hallmarks of our culture are eroding away to a mind-set colored by a lack of confidence and pessimism that is sapping our resolve and threatening our capacity to meet these challenges.

This does not have to be twilight in America. Not if we take personal responsibility for loving our neighbors as ourselves, for meeting needs as we are able. It is time for all of us to get up off whatever we’re sitting on and help somebody!

This book is a call to action. Maybe you can’t change the world, but you can change your street. You may not be able to change your community’s overall graduation rates, but you can mentor a kid out

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of becoming a high school dropout. Wiping out hunger might be too daunting a task, but packing food into schoolkids’ backpacks so they can eat over the weekend is doable. If enough of us get off our donkeys—determined to be a part of the solution to address others’ problems—we can arrest the downhill slide for many people, maybe even our communities and our country.

I am writing this book for anyone and everyone who wants to stem the darkness, but I anticipate that a bunch of readers will be church people. Here’s a heads-up for you. I take square aim at an unbiblical churchianity that has resulted in a church-centric religion that fails to reflect the heart of God for people. Not only have our communities been underserved with this misplaced emphasis, but those practicing churchianity report anemic spiritual lives for all their institutional religious involvement. The result has been a church that passes by on the other side of the road when we should be the ones showing the way.

Rising poverty is not solely the result of failed government programs; it is happening also because the church has refused to be the church Jesus imagined. If kids are not graduating from our schools because they lack the ability to read, it is not just a failure of our educational system; it is also a failure of the church, because our congregations are full of people who can read! The examples of social ills could go on and on, and I would offer in each case the same challenge to the church.

The church should be calling the party in every community—a party convened to solve our biggest problems. I am not talking about a church takeover of other society sectors. I am calling on the church to offer its best resources to the community and to galvanize the efforts of the community to tackle the issues that threaten the welfare of its people. This kind of service leadership provides the only way for the church to regain favor in America. The leadership by pontification and moral snootiness of the last few decades resembles the Pharisee religion that Jesus detested. We might as well try it his way!

Unfortunately, I run into people every week who are unwittingly (and sometimes wittingly) caught in the web of religious activity as a sad substitution for spiritual vitality. The good news is that when I call them back to what it really means to be God's people, it is like I am announcing a jailbreak. People are ready! Ready to quit meaningless institutional religion. Ready to make a difference in other people's lives. Ready to live for something that is worth living for. Ready to get off their donkeys and help somebody.

There is also a second theme in this book. It is the connection between serving others and the improved quality of our own life. In the process of helping others, we help ourselves. I'm not just inviting you to a life *of* service; I maintain that you'll get a life *through* service. I am not suggesting that we love our neighbors for selfish reasons. But service to others

carries its own life-enriching rewards for the ones doing the serving.

The best strategy for experiencing the abundant life that Jesus talked about is through loving our neighbors. Taking this approach to life guarantees our own self-development. On the flip side, our self-development increases our capacity for service to others. This is a wonderful synergy that we will explore for most of these pages.

Let me say who I hope will read this book and take its message to the streets. First, I want to help followers of Jesus who are ready to *be* church right where they are already deployed seven days a week, in their neighborhoods, workplaces, schools, homes—wherever they live their lives. If this is you, I'd like to help you recalibrate your spiritual efforts for greater life rewards—in others and in you. I want to give you permission and validation for expressing your faith in everyday life rhythms, not just involvement in institutional churchianity.

The second group I have in mind is the growing number of courageous church leaders who are not just willing but determined to change their ministry scorecards, both personally for themselves and corporately for those in their leadership constellation of influence. Acutely aware of the impotence of the institutional church to deliver spiritual growth for its participants, they are even more horrified by its failure to demonstrate the character of Jesus to the world. These leaders are making radical shifts in how they live and lead. They encourage me to believe that the church's best days are ahead as followers of Jesus demonstrate incarnational love. I want to give these leaders a resource they can use with those they lead that will help create greater kingdom engagement.

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service.*

The third readership hopefully includes people who do not consider themselves followers of Jesus but who want to contribute to other people's needs and to their communities. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, the hero fits into this category. Everyone who does good has joined God's kingdom agenda, because the kingdom is about people and about life. I want to celebrate their efforts. I want to escalate the altruism of people who instinctively know that their better self is one given to helping others. This book hopefully can create synergy between and among all Americans who want their lives to make a positive contribution to their communities and to the people around them.

I hope that this book prompts a conversation within you as well. Throughout the discussion, I will ask you some questions designed to help you capture your thoughts along the way. I've included some space for reflection where you can write down your responses to the questions. (If you're reading this on an e-reading device, it might be worthwhile to pick up a journal or notebook so you'll be able to record your reflections and keep them in place for reference later.) Not every question will resonate with you, but hopefully enough of them will prompt a response. Eventually you might simply flip back through your answers and thoughts for insights into what you want to do with the rest of your life.

A lot is at stake. I am writing to move you to action. We all have to get off our donkeys. Nothing less than the fate of America, your community, your neighbor—even you—depends on it!

1

A CHOICE TO MAKE

I blew it. And I knew it. I had missed the chance. All the way home on the plane I rehearsed the missed opportunity. Earlier that day thousands of church leaders attending a leadership conference had heard me passionately address the need for the church to reimagine itself and its mission in the world. I had gotten carried away, talked too long about unimportant things, and found myself suddenly out of time. I concluded with a lame ending that failed to do the one thing I had intended to do: call those leaders to action!

Instead, I settled for persuasion, for an interesting presentation. But no call to *do* something.

Late that night, finally alone with God back home, I apologized to him. I told him if he would give me another chance, I would not fail to challenge people to step up and step out to serve those in the community around them.

This book is part of the way I am following through with my apologetic commitment to God. I don't think you will miss the point I'm making. It's time for you and me to *do* something!

America is struggling for its life. Your gut is telling you that the future outcome of our country is being decided right now. You are right! Either we are headed into a death spiral, or we are going to find our way forward and out of this mess. The outcome is up to you. A clear choice is involved. You must decide whether or not you will improve the lives of people around you.

Unfortunately, a bunch of people are giving in to despair, believing that our future inevitably is going to be worse than our past, that our best days are behind us, that we've somehow lost something we can't recover and we are entering the twilight of America. This attitude isn't going to get us anywhere except somewhere we don't want to go!

Assigning blame will not cure the situation either. Without question, there is plenty of it to go around. And people should be held accountable for their actions. Our institutions have failed us. Our political system has become too political. The financial system is bankrupt. Health care is caught somewhere between the emergency room and hospice care. Our educational system has a failing grade heading into finals. We trusted these institutions to deliver, but they have dropped the ball and seem incapable of recovering their own fumble.

Maybe we need to be reminded that our institutions do not hold exclusive rights to the future of our country. You and I have a lot to say about it.

Recently in my local paper, there was a story commemorating the death of a woman who was known as the "dime lady." Some years ago she began collecting dimes to give to the local food bank. Her church joined in by setting up receptacles where people could toss in their loose change. Over time, the woman gave tens of thousands of dollars to fight hunger in our region, all from a simple behavior she adopted. Even though the woman had no personal wealth to speak of, she was able to make a big contribution to the cause that had captured her heart. The "dime lady" refused

to accept an unacceptable situation or succumb to an “I can’t do anything about it” mentality.

Each of us holds the same key that unlocks a better future—for us and for our communities and nation. It is the choice to do good to others, especially to those in need around us. If enough of us exercise the option to use this key, to insert it into the door to the future, we can unlock a better future than the one that looms ahead of us now. We can arrest the downward slide of our country.

A Story-in-the-Book Beginning

The idea for this book’s title came to me as I reflected on one of Jesus’s best-known stories. He told the story to answer a question raised by a religious expert. The questioner wanted to know how to secure life in the hereafter. Jesus’s response moved the focus into the here and now.

Here is the entire exchange, including the background conversation. We know this episode by its central story: we call it the parable of the Good Samaritan.

On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

“What is written in the Law?” he replied. “How do you read it?”

He answered, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind”; and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

“You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live.”

But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

In reply Jesus said: “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half

dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’

“Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?”

The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.”

Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.” (Luke 10:25–37)

Two things in this story jump out at me. First, the Samaritan had to get off his donkey to help the victim. As opposed to others in the tale, he stopped what he was doing to become engaged with the plight of the robbed-and-beat-up person. He then gave up his own seat to the injured man, letting him ride on his donkey to an inn where he could recuperate.

Second, Jesus ended the episode with a clear instruction: “Go and *do* likewise” (emphasis added). He didn’t say “go and *agree with my teaching* likewise” or “go and *debate your own course of action* likewise” or “go and *lament the course of things* likewise.” He said “go and *do* likewise.”

While there are lots of applications for us from this well-known story (which we will get to shortly), the bottom line is you and I have to get off our donkeys if we want to make a difference. Now!

As I have said, there is no shortage of voices telling us how bad things are. A friend of mine emailed me recently to say that after listening to a news story on the economic crisis in

Europe (it was Greek week), he was “scared to death about what’s going to happen to me, my children, America, the whole dang world.” He is not alone. A culture of 24-7 news coverage of wars, weather calamities, stock market fluctuations, and artificial reality shows can’t help but instill in its viewers and listeners constant and heightened anxiety.

During a recent morning commute, I counted the number of “crises” the radio served up to me. The drive took only twenty minutes. Yet the list of impending disasters that were brought to my attention numbered over a dozen in that small amount of time. One thirty-second blurb urged me to buy a precious metal as a hedge against economic meltdown. Another warned me of the dangers of cell phone radiation. Still another suggested that while I was driving in my car, the phone lines were being cut to my alarm system at home. Global warming got in there somehow, along with hair loss. I was depressed by 7:47 a.m., and the day hadn’t even served up its real challenges!

We can't afford to let all this negative vibe paralyze us into inactivity while people are bleeding out all around us.

I am not writing this book to join the chorus of conspirators and anxiety peddlers. What I *am* attempting to convey is that we can’t afford to let this negative vibe paralyze us into inactivity while people are bleeding out all around us.

I’m weary of listening to all the angry people on radio and cable shows telling me I need to be fed up with this or that. *They* are what I’m fed up with. I’m mad as heck with people telling me they are mad as hell! All that negative energy is siphoning off the precious energy we need to help somebody.

There is hope! But that hope is not just going to materialize before you. You are going to have to work for it. As you and I and millions of others get off our donkeys, we can deal

with our most vexing problems and the people chewed up by them. As we deliver help and hope to those who need it, we will gain renewed conviction that we can be part of making our communities and our country better.

I am no Pollyanna. There is plenty in me that likes to point out what's wrong with things (after all, I'm a consultant!). I am under no illusions that we will build a utopia or eradicate all the negative forces in our country. It's just that I'm not going down without a fight! I want to push back darkness where I can. I don't accept as inevitable our national decline. Besides, when my "better angels" come out to play and I actually do something to improve other people's lives, I find energy and meaning. I become more of the person that I too want to be.

Lessons from the Good Samaritan Story

Some themes emerge in the story lines of the parable of the Good Samaritan that we can apply to our current day.

- *People all around us are half dead or down-and-out. All kinds of thieves have bushwhacked our fellow citizens.* Institutional poverty, loss of jobs, health crises, emotional hardships, and usually a combination of the above afflict many people in our communities. When our fellow citizens suffer, so does our country. Every person who goes to bed hungry at night gnaws at our nation's well-being. Every job lost in our community subtracts from our bottom lines. Every kid not learning to read signals a failing grade for us. We are all in this boat together. Need calls for a neighbor!
- *We can choose to pass by on the other side of the road.* Two out of three people in the story did not stop to help the victim. Lots of forces conspire to favor this option. I

will identify these forces in the next chapter—so we can kick them to the curb! You and I have no excuse not to be helpful. We’ve got to dismount.

- *We have to be more than empathetic. We have to actually be helpful!* The Good Samaritan addressed the man’s wounds with wine and oil. People in the first century had no germ theory; they just knew that wine and oil helped to fight infection and stimulate healing. Our helper in the story did everything he knew to do. Similarly, we all have competencies and skills to offer those in need. We have to pony up. I will help you identify where you can be helpful and how, just what it is you bring to the table, and how you can further develop your contribution.

Jesus made it plain that loving our neighbor means engaging with people who need our help.

- *Jesus expanded the idea of “neighbor” from the people next door or down the street to a broader category: people in need.* These might be people who are or who are not like us, people we don’t normally hang out with, or people who don’t live near us. Referring to the cast of characters in his tale, Jesus asked, “Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” The answer exploded the idea of neighbor as a relationship defined by a street address. The helper and the helpee in the story probably didn’t even live in the same town. Their social circle was not the same for sure. Jesus made it plain that loving our neighbor means engaging with people who need our help. We pass these people every day—not just people broken down on the road (although they certainly qualify), but all those who have been beaten and robbed. The thieves can be drugs,

illiteracy, joblessness, crime—whatever robs people of life.

- *The helper in the story knew when he needed to partner with others for a full recovery.* He tag-teamed with the innkeeper to ensure the injured man would get what he needed. Sometimes you may choose to help someone as a solo effort. Maybe you don't want anyone else to know about what you're doing. Or maybe you have all that's needed for a solution to a problem. However, many of the issues that plague our neighbors and communities are going to require a bunch of us to pitch in together. You may find yourself forming collaborative partnerships with others in your community to work for the alleviation of certain problems. And some of you already prefer to work with people around you, so your natural inclination will be to involve others in what you do.

Reflection: Do any of these “lessons” give you any new insights or inspire other thoughts about serving or being a good neighbor?

Kingdom Come

As I have mentioned, the Good Samaritan story is an example of Jesus's focus on life in the here and now as the arena for demonstrating the kingdom of God. Jesus was obsessed with the kingdom. It was not just an idea to hope for; it was his operating reality, his message, his very mission. All four Gospels make this plain.

Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the *good news of the kingdom* and healing every disease and sickness. (Matt. 9:35, emphasis added)

Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. “The time has come,” he said. “The *kingdom of God* has come near.” (Mark 1:14–15, emphasis added)

He said, “I must proclaim the *good news of the kingdom of God* to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent.” (Luke 4:43, emphasis added)

“You are a king, then!” said Pilate.

Jesus answered, “You say that *I am a king*.” (John 18:37, emphasis added)

You can find dozens of other references to the kingdom of heaven or kingdom of God connected to Jesus throughout the Gospels. Also, the book of Acts, narrating the post-resurrection, preascension chapter of Jesus’s time on earth with his disciples, says that he “spoke about the kingdom of God” (Acts 1:3). He apparently wanted to leave his followers thinking about what he had encouraged them to do earlier when he said, “Seek first his [God’s] kingdom” (Matt. 6:33).

During Jesus’s public ministry, his teaching on the kingdom of *heaven* was accompanied by *earthly* miracles of healing. This created quite a stir about him, landing him on the front page in every town he visited. While Jesus admitted his kingdom was not of this world, he taught his disciples to pray for this heavenly kingdom to come to earth (see Matt. 6:10). It is supposed to show up here, now, every day, in tangible ways.

Jesus chose to explain himself to his own hometown crowd in kingdom terms. He characterized his mission like this,

borrowing the language of Isaiah 61:1–2: “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” (Luke 4:18–19). Jesus obviously viewed his kingdom assignment in a concrete, demonstrable way.

John the Baptist sent his disciples to Jesus with the question, “Are you the one?” (Matt. 11:3). Jesus’s reply pointed John to the kingdom: “Go back and report to John what

you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor” (Matt. 11:4–5). Again, these were the hoped-for results and signs of the outbreak of the kingdom of God. Maybe this kingdom perspective—grounded in heaven but showing up on earth—is why Jesus said, “I have come that they

may have life, and have it *to the full*” (John 10:10, emphasis added). What if Jesus was telling the truth? What if he really intended to make life good for people? And what if he intends to do so through us?

When Jesus talked about loving our neighbors in terms of alleviating pain and suffering, he was reflecting his kingdom perspective. What that means to you and me is that when we do good to others, we are in cahoots with God!

The truth is that anyone working to better people’s lives is reflecting the heart of God. Jesus illustrated this point in the story by making the hero a Samaritan. For his listeners, that choice had to be quite a stretch. Samaritans were suspect in their religion, actually considered outsiders in

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.....

faith terms. They were viewed as ethnically inferior by the pure-blooded Jews, since they were the offspring of marriages between Jews and other people groups. In other words, religious and racial prejudices colored every aspect of Jewish-Samaritan relationships. So when Jesus made a Samaritan the hero of a story, it really challenged his audience.

But this approach was not uncharacteristic of Jesus. He had a habit of yukking it up with outsiders, the marginalized, the outcasts. He would hang out with just anybody, it seemed, from lowlife traitors like Zacchaeus to social and religious snobs like Simon the Pharisee, but he seemed to favor more common people. He chose fishermen and women to be in his circle, a very unusual choice of followers. The religious elite constantly pointed out his choice of associates as a major reason they didn't think he was qualified to be a bona fide spiritual leader. Even Jesus's hometown synagogue message managed to tick off the audience, because all the illustrations Jesus used of God's miraculous interventions focused on episodes involving foreigners, even enemies of Israel. Jesus made it plain to the people of Nazareth that God's work extended to groups and individuals not considered to be God's people. (You can read the whole story of that experience in Luke 4:16–30.)

What all this means is that a bunch of people on the planet are engaged in kingdom activity—even if they are unaware of it. It also means that those of us who claim to be followers of Jesus reflect his heart only if we are joining in these kingdom efforts. We might be involved in a bunch of religious church activity (like the priest and Levite in the parable), but that doesn't automatically connect us with God's agenda. The first hearers of Jesus's story didn't miss this. Jesus went out of his way to make the point. Church people in the story didn't come out looking too good, but a Samaritan did.

Reflection: Where and how do you see the kingdom of God breaking in around you?

Church and Kingdom

As I said in the introduction to this book, I am not writing exclusively to church people. However, I anticipate that a number of Jesus-followers will read this and that many of them are part of a local congregation. So, since I have introduced the kingdom of God into this discussion, I think I need to make a few comments about the relationship between the church and the kingdom. My reason for doing so is to make the case that helping others is what aligns us with God's primary mission on earth. Unfortunately for many, this truth has been obscured by an improper understanding of where and how the church fits into God's mission and the kingdom. I want to clear up some confusion here in order to both give permission to and challenge church people to come out and play!

Jesus made it plain that God's primary mission has to do with building and extending his kingdom. The church is *not* his major agenda. Nor does the church own the kingdom or the mission of God. God's mission involves the redemptive restoration of everything that sin has tarnished and broken.

This mission predates the church. God's mission was under way in the Garden of Eden, centuries before he created a special people in his covenant with Abraham. And the mission will outlast the church. In the book of Revelation, there is no church in the eternal city. So we begin and end the Bible with no church. The church has a creation point, and it has

a terminus. The kingdom, on the other hand, is forever—a truth rehearsed every time we utter the Lord’s Prayer! The church is not our ultimate destination; the kingdom is.

I am hoping to get God’s people more engaged in kingdom affairs and less preoccupied with church stuff. In fact, I think the scorecard of the church needs to be recalibrated to focus more on helping people. This change will require the reallocation of church resources (including the time, talent, and treasure of church people) to support a more kingdom-centric and less church-centric approach to expressing what it means to be the people of God.

By *church-centric*, I mean an agenda that focuses and funnels our resources into building the church, with the idea that advancing the church is the primary expression of the kingdom. The assumption that goes along with this perspective is that if we build great churches, we automatically will see better communities. This line of thinking has led to an increasingly self-absorbed and consumerist church culture that has become more *of* the world and less *in* it—the exact opposite of the sentiments Jesus expressed in his prayer in Gethsemane on the eve of his crucifixion (see John 17). When it is consumed with its own programming and projects, the church has forsaken its appropriate place in the kingdom.

I don’t make these statements because I don’t like the church. Just the opposite. I love the church! I just want it to come to its biblical senses, to its real identity and role. When the people of God recover what it really means to be the people of God, we will have a chance at changing the current negative narrative for both the church and our country.

The good news is that increasingly, church leaders and congregations are embracing a more kingdom-centric engagement with their communities. Just today a book arrived in the mail detailing one congregation’s involvement with everything from street ministry to the homeless to providing medical care through free clinics to mobile food delivery. This array

of services is becoming more typical in every city across all denominations. It is a renewal of the church through ministry *outside* the church. All of these initiatives are signs that the church is getting the point of what it means to *be* the church.

God created the church to be a people partnering with him in his redemptive mission in the world. Let's break that down.

- *The people of God.* Genesis 12:1–2 records God's creation of a special people who are to live in covenant with him. The call of Abraham begins a metanarrative that runs throughout the whole Bible. The church entered this story when believers were made heirs to the covenant through the sacrificial work of Jesus on the cross. This covenantal relationship was memorialized by Jesus at the Last Supper and is celebrated every time the Lord's Supper is observed by his

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followers. The church is a people; it's not an institution or organization, though it has institutional and organizational features and functions. Said another way, the church is a *who*, not a *what*. It is a relationship between God and a chosen people.

- *Partnering with God.* The point of being chosen is not so we can focus on being chosen. Belonging to him is not the point of being chosen either. During the Exodus experience, God reminded Israel of the point of being chosen: "Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the *whole earth* is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exod. 19:5–6, emphasis added). The specialness of being the people of God resides solely in the covenant: "If you obey me fully and keep my covenant" (v. 5). The covenant means

we have a role to perform, a special assignment. This assignment is to partner with God in his mission. That's the point of what it means to be chosen.

When God called Abraham, his mission had been under way for centuries. But God gave Abraham a special assignment. This assignment, now belonging to the church, spells out our specific partnership role in the mission. Our job is to bless the world. When we do, people are turned toward God. Being the people of God means being people of blessing. No one else on earth has this privilege. No one else on earth has this responsibility. When we act as people of blessing, when you and I get off our donkeys and help people, we are keeping the covenant of what it means to be the people of God.

- *In his redemptive mission.* God is redeeming everything damaged and tainted by the entrance of sin into the world. Sin's devastation resulted in the alienation of people from God, from each other, from the rest of God's creation, even from themselves. Salvation is the reversal of this dilemma and the restoration of God's creation to its intended design. This mission is God's, not ours, because he is the only one with the power and ability to pull it off. Part of his strategy was the creation of the church. His mission gave birth to the church, not the other way around. Said another way, the church doesn't have a mission; the mission has a church.

When we act as people of blessing, when you and I get off our donkeys and help people, we are keeping the covenant of what it means to be the people of God.

Kingdom enterprise is not a subset of church activity. Church activity is a subset of God's kingdom efforts.

Anything the church does that does not contribute to the kingdom is off mission. The Good Samaritan story highlights this distortion. A wrong focus by the priest and Levite caused them to pass by on the other side of the road instead of helping a needy person. It was the wrong side of the road!

- *In the world.* The world is where the mission of God plays out. “All the world’s a stage” (to borrow a line from an “obscure” English author). It is the stage where God shows up and shows off. In his meeting with Nicodemus, Jesus said, “For God so loved the *world* that he gave his one and only Son” (John 3:16, emphasis added). Notice he did not say, “For God so loved the *church*.” The church is not God’s main focus; the world is. The world is on God’s heart. This means that our spiritual journey as Jesus-followers should not lead us into more and more isolation from the world, cloistered away from its concerns. Being followers of Jesus means that we follow Jesus! When we do so, he leads us out into the streets. He expects to see us tracking with him as he engages people in the world to deliver life and hope.

Reflection: What three people will you bless this week?

Doing Good to Others Is Good for You

We don’t help others in order to save ourselves—that would be a selfish motive. But the truth is, one of the best things we can do for ourselves is to help somebody else. There is a

direct connection between our helping others and our experiencing abundant life.

Remember, the backdrop to the Good Samaritan parable was the question, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Luke 10:25). Jesus affirmed this personal concern by dealing with the man’s quest very seriously. He said that the man was right in his understanding that loving God and loving our neighbors *as ourselves* is the ticket. “You have answered correctly. . . . Do this and you will live” (v. 28). Notice that Jesus pulled the man’s search for eternal life into the present. The man considered eternal life as something that began after this life. Jesus took out the word *eternal* with his reply, simply declaring that if the man would follow his understanding, he would live. Life is today, right now.

As we move out of self-centeredness, self-consciousness, and self-absorption, we actually discover what we are seeking—to be truly alive!

The key to experiencing life, according to Jesus in this exchange, is to love God and serve those who are needy. As we become givers of life, we receive life. As we lose ourselves, we find ourselves. As we move out of self-centeredness, self-consciousness, and self-absorption, we actually discover what we are seeking—to be truly alive! And in the process, the self we discover will be one we were created by God to be.

Reflection: How is the “love your neighbor” dynamic playing out in your life right now?



By now you have figured out we are all in this story of the Good Samaritan. All of us are down and out in some way or another. Our needs can be physical, emotional, spiritual, or financial—and usually wind up being a combination of these. The needs of some Americans are more pronounced these days. In communities all across our country, people face huge challenges right now.

Let's be honest. We are also the people in the story who pass by on the other side of the road. We have all made that choice at one time or another. It reflects our need for salvation. We are captured by our own selfish interests to the point that we fail to respond to others' predicaments by helping them out.

Then I have one friend who jokes that he is probably the donkey in the story! (Maybe you have friends like that.)

But seriously and truthfully, there is a chance for all of us to be the hero in the story. If we reflect the heart of God, take action, and help people who need it, we become kingdom agents. It all starts by getting off our donkeys!

We have a choice to make. We are all on this road together. Which side are you on?