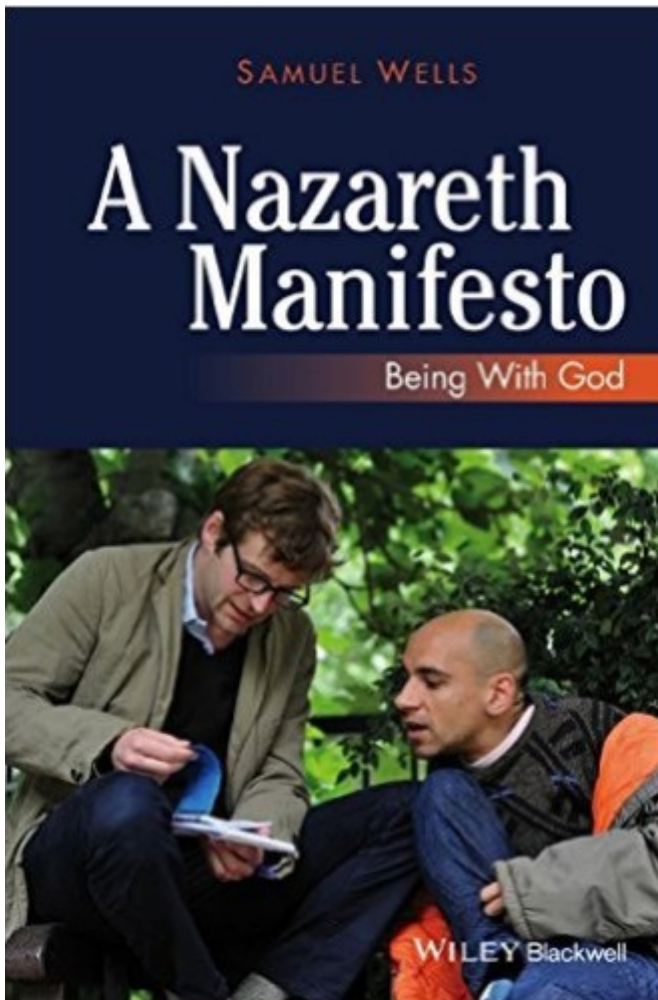


Immanuel is the agenda

by [James C. Howell](#) in the [February 17, 2016](#) issue

In Review



A Nazareth Manifesto

By Samuel Wells

Wiley

"Perhaps nothing 'ud be a lesson to us if it didn't come too late." The bleak wisdom of Adam Bede in George Eliot's novel makes me either chuckle or shudder as I get older.

I was mostly done raising my children before I stumbled upon Martin Marty's *The Mystery of the Child*, where he claims a child isn't a project or a problem to be solved but a wonder to treasure. That drove me back to Jean Vanier's suggestion that love isn't doing things for other people (you can crush them that way); it's revealing to people their beauty, the light shining in them. The wisdom came too late. I had done thousands of things for my children, and taken tender pride in doing so.

I was into the fourth quarter of my career as a pastor when I came upon Eugene Peterson's account of ministry, and I was chastened by his critique of churches—like mine—that are beehives of activity and so may miss the heart of why people bother with church. "I was dealing with my congregation as problems to be fixed rather than as members of the household of God to be led in the worship and service of God. In dealing with my parishioners as problems, I more or less knew what I was doing. In dealing with them as a pastor, I was involved in mysteries, mostly having to do with God, that were far beyond my understanding and control." I wish he had learned his mistake (and mine) years earlier. Too late again.

Now there's Samuel Wells's withering yet hopeful critique of the kind of church missions I've championed and at which my church has excelled. We've tutored and launched mentoring teams, invested millions in outreach programs and facilities, collected items for those in need, sheltered the homeless, provided dental care, created and supported clinics, schools, and libraries. The list of activities is impressive. My professional life in the parish and beyond, just like my personal life, has been an energetic and admirable doing for others. Could Wells be right, that all this doing for others is not only frustrating in insidious ways, but counterproductive, maybe harmful, and even theologically skewed and misguided?

A Nazareth Manifesto is one of those once-in-a-generation books that must be read by anyone serious about the church's mission. He rigorously analyzes how Christians feel and what churches do in response to the troubles of the world. How do churches approach a homeless person, for example? Is the person viewed as a personal tragedy, a victim, a failure of public policy, or an unwise chooser? If poverty is viewed as a deficit, is it a desert, a defeat, a dragnet? A dislocation, a dungeon, a disease, or a desolation? In making subtle assessments of this kind, Wells is not playing an intellectual game. The complex ways we perceive and are motivated to help others need exposing.

Wells exposes them in order to cure us of our very American urge to fix, to work for the needy, or even to work with them (which sounds a bit more noble), or even to be for them (which sounds even nobler). God calls us to be *with* others.

The trouble with working for others is that we then define the have-nots by what they lack. We, the haves, will solve their problems for them, because they are, in our (usually unarticulated) view, incapable. Every encounter then reinforces their humiliation.

Wells points to secular studies that show how professionalized service systems and government service providers say to their clients, repeatedly over generations: you are deficient, you are a problem, you are not the answer. The impact is debilitating.

We can and must trust the oppressed to become agents in their own liberation. The seeds of a community's redemption lie within the community itself. Rescue operations actually heighten the isolation and ruin whatever chance there might be for robust transformation. I found myself reminded of Jürgen Moltmann's clever formulation: "The opposite of poverty isn't property; the opposite of both poverty and property is community." In that light, churches have no choice but to reconceive their mission and way of being in the world.

Wells's ideas weren't entirely new to me, and my congregations have been cognizant of some of the issues he raises. We've studied Robert Lupton's diagnosis of misguided aid in *Toxic Charity*, and we've heard Kenda Creasy Dean on the limits of youth mission trips. We've done a pretty fair job of befriending those with whom we work, or for whom we work, and for whom we invest our time, funding, talent, and prayers. As banks, malls, and schools have started collecting food and coats and enlisting people in service projects, we have scrambled to redefine our niche: we do what we do for Jesus, and we do it *to* Jesus, in the style of Mother Teresa.

But Wells is pushing us even further. Consider these sound bites: "Altruism is not the goal." "Our purpose, our calling is to be with God and with one another." "There is no goal beyond restored relationship; being with is not a means to an end." "We do not sit and have coffee with a homeless person because we are trying to solve their problem." "Continue to see the face of Jesus in the despised and rejected of the world. You are not their benefactor. You are not the answer to their prayer. They are the answer to yours. You are searching for a salvation that only they can bring."

When he was dean of Duke University Chapel, Wells helped lead some exemplary ministries of this kind. Instead of trying to save the poor “over there” in Durham, folks from Duke Chapel lived with their neighbors. They broke bread, chatted on the porch and at the bus stop as neighbors, and discovered the good that was already being done in the neighborhood that they got to be a part of. I’ve got to figure out how to mimic this where I live in the few years I have left before retirement.

Wells’s radical reimagining of church emerges out of his theology, which makes up the most compelling, thrilling sections of *A Nazareth Manifesto*. His premise is that *with* is the most important word in theology and that the task of theology is to describe the “with.” The task of theological ethics, accordingly, is “to inhabit and imitate it.”

Now that Wells has called attention to it, we notice how ubiquitous in scripture is the notion that the very nature of God is to be with us. From the call of Moses through the eloquence of Second Isaiah to the exiles in the fiery furnace, God is with Israel. In fact, it is during the exile, when God is doing no evident work for the people, that Israel discovers the wonder and even joy of God’s surprising yet nonrescuing presence. And “with” defines the Gospel story. From the birth of Immanuel to his parting words at the ascension, Christ’s mission is to be with us.

The reference to Nazareth in the book’s title springs from Wells’s reminder that most of Jesus’ life was spent in Nazareth, where he was simply living with people. The Gospels focus on the few months of Jesus’ life after he left Nazareth, when he was doing things for people, but before that were all those years when Jesus was just with people.

I feel myself drawn to how far Wells takes this: “Jesus is Immanuel before he is Savior. By overcoming our isolation, Jesus saves us: his death is the cost of that. . . . Both the devil and the mockers goad Jesus with his apparent inactivity. . . . He outlasted humanity’s hatred, cruelty and enmity.”

Wells goes on: “We want the Jesus that comes down from the cross, the Jesus that rights wrongs, ends pain, corrects injustice. . . . We want solutions, we want our problems fixed.” But, on closer inspection, “what humankind needs is a love that sticks around, a love that stays put, a love that hangs on. That’s what the cross is. A love that hangs on.” And this is the God we are called to imitate.

Wells writes wonderfully, although this business of saying someone writes well implies there is some mystical craft of wordsmithing to be mastered and then deployed. Writing well, in theology at least, is nothing more than seeing and hearing well, a clarity of vision.

I've asked my children for mercy on me for doing so much for them. And I would ask for mercy from anyone who would fault a church for heroically doing for others. My parishioners seem to find ways to love me even though I've treated them as problems to be fixed, and for my tendency to overprogram the church. Our doing-for hasn't all been toxic or counterproductive, I'd argue. We've changed the world a bit for the good. Lives have been aided and sometimes transformed. I love the way, in our working-for, many friends have emerged quite by accident—which in a way is lovelier than going in and saying, "We are going to be with you!" (At least where I live, we who are Caucasian find that African Americans are more than a little weary of being asked, "Why can't we be friends?")

I agree that altruism isn't the goal, but altruism can be a step toward a higher goal. As Clarence Jordan saucily put it, "What the poor need is not charity, but capital, not caseworkers but coworkers. And what the rich need is a wise, honorable, and just way of divesting themselves of their overabundance." The building in which I am typing this review, the one in which Wells works as a pastor, and the hospital I see in the distance, are all bases for mission made possible by altruism. The rich desperately need much more divestment, and if we can glue it snugly to being with people, God will be glorified.

Wells wouldn't disagree that the lines between working for, working with, being for, and being with are blurry. The categories are a heuristic device, part of a prophetic plea for a shift in emphasis. For years I've been engaged in advocacy work for people I've never met. And yet in some mystical way, perhaps we truly are with one another because of it.

The degree of difficulty in what Wells is posing is high, maybe too high. At the outset he anticipates two protests to his line of argument: "One is that it is too soft—that it does not stand up to evil, or make the world a better place. The other is that it is too hard—it asks too much of people, it is too difficult." Wryly, Wells adds that the same two complaints have been made against Jesus.

As for the softness, Wells points out that crusaders for justice often wind up dissatisfied, even when they win. “Church is where Christians find there is something beyond freedom and that is friendship, there is something beyond dignity and that is celebration, there is something beyond guaranteeing a person’s security and that is laying down one’s life for their flourishing, there is something beyond vindication and that is forgiveness.”

As for the hardness, one wonders if a broken church in a fallen world can pull off the arduous life of “being with.” I have heard from people who have tried to do this—humble, holy people who moved into another neighborhood and made their life about living in community. Quite often they report experiencing intense frustration and exhaustion.

But Wells has test-driven this model, first in a parish in Norwich, England, and in Durham, and he shares stories from those experiments. Maybe if his book stirs up more partners, the lonely fatigue of “being with” will lessen and the joy will increase.

I cannot imagine a more important lesson than the one Wells offers. I wish I had learned it 30 years ago. But lessons are never really too late. God is with the church, and God is sticking around, so there’s time.