



THE KENAN  
INSTITUTE FOR ETHICS  
at Duke University

# THE NAZARETH MANIFESTO

The Rev. Dr. Sam Wells

April 2008

This paper was presented as part of the Vagt Lecture, delivered at Peakland Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Virginia, on April 27, 2008.

I want to explore with you what it means to share the heart of one's Christian existence with someone who may be a very different kind of Christian, a person of a different faith altogether, or a person of no explicit faith at all. I'm assuming that the "other" person is different not just in the language of faith but in social circumstances – economic conditions certainly, and quite possibly racial heritage also.

## The Context of Engagement

I want to start by mapping the context of engagement. What are we taking for granted when we think together about engaging in ministry, witness, and service? Usually for example a community like yourselves assumes that something is wrong and it has an opportunity, perhaps a unique opportunity, to put that thing right. There is, after all, almost nothing more satisfying than setting things straight. When one looks around a community like this, one frequently feels, "given the experience, technical skill, professional expertise, and financial resources in the room, we should be able to do a whole lot together." But that depends on what's the matter.'

Christians have had two traditional answers to the question of what the matter is. The first answer is, in a word, sin. The story of Adam and Eve eating the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil crystallizes the human capacity for perversity. Humans have the propensity towards extraordinary good – but they also have what seems an irresistible impulse towards destructive, shortsighted, selfish and almost pointless evil. As Augustine puts it, in the Fall humanity retained the capacity to choose, but lost the ability to choose well. So the first answer to the question, "What's the matter?" is, sin.

But this has never been the only answer. The second answer is, in a word, scarcity. Whereas the first answer says, it doesn't matter how much we have, it's all been poisoned by sin, the second answer says, things aren't so bad, only there isn't enough to go around. The poor simply don't have enough – enough food, enough water, enough health care, enough jobs, enough money, enough space, enough security, enough education, enough friends. Now sometimes it's said this is really because the rich have too much. But even the rich generally feel they don't have enough – enough life, enough resources, enough information, enough expertise, enough revelation. Fundamentally this sense of scarcity is traceable back to one source. There doesn't seem to be enough God. Sin puts the blame on us, and says we don't have enough goodness. But scarcity fundamentally puts the blame on God, and says there simply isn't enough God to be and to do all that we want God to be and to do.

And yet many perhaps most Christians have a deep-seated desire to protect God. And so rather than simply plead for more, they tend to become very active in working on God's behalf to alleviate and reduce the scarcity they see all around them. All efforts are spent reducing scarcity of life (death) and scarcity of well being (suffering). It is an exhausting commission, made more so by the fact that the more one succeeds, the greater the expectation becomes. The higher life expectancy and material prosperity go, the higher people want them to go; the one thing that never changes is the perpetual sense of scarcity.

These are noble efforts but I believe they are based on a fundamental theological mistake. It's not true to say there isn't enough God. On the contrary, there's too much God. The problem is, we're finite beings and our imaginations aren't big enough to take in the too-much that God is and the too-much that God gives us. It is not that God does not give us what we need – it is that we do not understand or use the ways God makes the abundance of grace available to us. So we do indeed experience life as scarcity, but because we don't receive all that we have been given, not because we haven't been given it.

If we gather together as a congregation and say "How does our gospel incline us to engage with issues of social inequality?" we can end up feeling pretty miserable, because our gospel feels so small social inequality can feel so big. But the question becomes a different one when we turn it round. "What is God giving our community in the gift

of the people we know who are struggling to hold life together? Where and in what ways do we experience scarcity in our lives and how might God be giving us everything we need by giving us people very different from ourselves?" So, for example, it may be that you know a young person whose ability with her hands was a secret even to her until she worked with on a Habitat house. It may be that you know a person who has the ability to make a party go but never had the budget till she joined a re-entry team sharing and celebrating the journey of an ex-offender back into regular community life. It may be that you know a young man who's always felt his basketball was pretty second rate until he started coaching children at a community center and realized how much he really had to offer. When one person finds a vocation, another person makes a friend across race and class boundaries, and a third walks tall in an area of their life where they had always felt a failure, we could happily use the words "Holy Spirit" – but it would be easy to miss that part of the term Holy Spirit in each of these cases is a person of a very different social location. God gives us everything we need, but God doesn't drop everything we need in our lap. Where would be the fun in that? God wants us to go on an Easter Egg hunt, searching for nuggets of candy and refreshing encounters all over the divine garden. The game God plays with us is that God allows us to think we are doing all these things for others. We might even persuade ourselves we are doing these things for God. But as the examples I've given demonstrate, the real beneficiaries are ourselves, because we have at last found ways to receive the too much that God has to give us, and so the dawn of our salvation has come.

I'm talking about a significant change in our motivation for engaging with issues of social inequality. On the scarcity model, we have two almost opposing factions, whom we could call by their conventional names – "them" and "us." "They" are distinguished by what they don't have – jobs, affluence, stable relationships, a college education, healthcare, faith perhaps. "We" are distinguished by what we do have – mortgages, conventional security benefits, neighbors we can trust, and this lingering sense of guilt. In fact the sense of scarcity on the "we" side is enormous – not enough time, not enough sense of how to make things better, not enough trust that we can make relationships that won't hurt us, not enough money to part with very much. So we match up our outer affluence and our inner scarcity by coming up with elaborate theories to protect us from hurt and failure without challenging our sense of ourselves as benefactors. One ancient and familiar such theory is the distinction between the deserving and the undeserving poor. This enables us to be benefactors to the thrifty and respectful while withholding compassion from the reckless and prodigal. But what needs challenging is our sense of ourselves as the benefactors. The whole point is that if we experience life as scarcity *we* are the needy. And we remain in scarcity so long as we look for salvation in the wrong place. We read the parable of the Good Samaritan and we take for granted that we are the Samaritan. We are not the Samaritan! We are the man beaten and bruised by the side of the road. We lack resources, we lack security, we lack everything we need to get to Jericho. We assume the priest and the Levite will give us whatever we need. They have their place, but they're no use to us on this occasion. The one who offers us salvation is the Samaritan – the stranger, the enemy, the one we assume is out to get us, the one we look down on, the one we wouldn't dream of living next to, the one we've never in our lives eaten a meal with let alone touched, the one who claims to worship the same God but whose religion we despise and whose race we regard as inferior.

This then is the context of engagement. It is not that we're the affluent priest or Levite driving through the dodgy byways of our local downtown. As long as we read the story that way we will continue to find ever more elaborate methods to pass by the strangers who litter our path. The point is that we're the man by the road. We're the needy one who finds God gives us everything we need through the person whom our society, our economy, our culture, and even some of our churches have taught us to patronize, feel guilty about, ignore, or even despise. The gospel is not to scurry around busily making up for the scarcity Jesus so carelessly left behind when making a botched job of the kingdom of God. The gospel is to receive the abundance God has to give us through those the world sees only for what they lack, and thus to allow God to give us everything we need.]

## Styles of Engagement

It's time to move from the "why" of engagement to the "how." If something is wrong, and you are a person who wants to help, there are broadly three ways to do so.

One is *working for*. *Working for* means doing things on behalf of other people. When you see someone leave the grocery store with a huge pile of shopping bags, it's the most natural thing in the world to say "Here, let me get those for you." You're then *working for* that person by carrying their bags to their car. If it's a simple task with a short time-span, there's every chance it'll end with a heartfelt "Thank you!" and a reciprocal "You're welcome: have a great day." This is what we might call the conventional model of engagement. One person has a need, while the other person has skills, availability and willingness to help. The latter person conventionally spends a lot of time working those skills up to a very high standard, and consequently makes those skills available in specific circumstances under very strict rules. This is what we call being a professional. This is what medicine is about, this is what the law is about, this is what dentistry is about. Physicians, attorneys and dentists *do for* us what we can't do for ourselves. It's hard to overestimate the hold this conventional model has on our imaginations. Pretty much the whole of the professional school structure – medicine, law, nursing, engineering, divinity, environment – runs on this model. I wouldn't mind betting that pretty much every undergraduate who comes to university wanting to make the world a better place assumes that's the way it's done. You become very good at what you do, and you spend the rest of your life doing it for people.

It's immensely satisfying to be able to do for someone exactly what they need doing, whether it's fixing a child's toy or showing a novice how to find a website on their computer. We can see an end result, and it affirms us as people of skill and ability. In many cases it makes the recipient's life materially better – and in the case of a physician or firefighter, it may even make the difference between life and death. So why do professional people so often find that their clients don't say thank you? The reason is that *working for* makes the expert feel good and important and useful, but it doesn't necessarily leave the recipient feel that great. The *working for* model sets in stone a relationship where one person is a benefactor and the other is a person in need. It's humiliating if many or most of your relationships are ones in which you need someone to do things *for* you. The *working for* model perpetuates relationships of inequality. Worse still, it's possible to be the recipient of a person's help and still find the benefactor remains a stranger to you. The whole point of the professional infrastructure of divided offices, administrative assistants, appointment times and special uniforms is to remind all parties that this isn't a friendship, with expectations of compassion and tenderness, but the provision of a service with no strings attached outside and beyond that service. The *working for* model dominates contemporary notions of welfare, but it leaves the rich and the poor pretty much where they started off and it keeps them strangers to one another.

Let's go back for a moment to the person emerging from the grocery store with too many shopping bags to carry to the car. It's natural for you to say "Here, let me get those for you," and thus initiate a *working for* relationship. But will the person automatically say "Thanks so much?" No, they won't, for one of two reasons. The first is that they may feel they are being patronized, particularly if there is a sensitive dynamic of gender, age or disability. For some people it is better to struggle on alone than get on the receiving end of any kind of *working for* relationship that simply reinforces their lowly social standing. The other reason why the person might say no is if they think you might be going to run off with their shopping. So these two factors, empowerment and trust, are prior to any *working for* relationship getting off the ground. I'm now going to look at them in turn.

The issue of empowerment is taken up in the second model of engagement which I'm going to call *working with*. One writer describes *working with* like this:

*Working with* the poor is a lot more difficult. This means recognizing that being poor is not just about lacking income, but also being excluded from positions of power. Working with the poor means

waiting for poor people themselves to define what their needs are, and to support them in the action they decide to take to change things. It involves entering into a relationship with poor people, and so surrendering some of one's own autonomy and sense of power in being able to identify what needs to be done and take steps to make a difference. It means offering what one has and is for their use. (Sarah White and Romy Tiongco, *Doing Theology and Development: Meeting the Challenge of Poverty* [Edinburgh: St Andrew Press 1997] 14)

*Working with* means bringing different skills and experience together around a common goal. It can create a wonderful sense of partnership, provided that the agenda is being set by the person in need, rather than the person trying to help. Instead of a professional relationship, where the person in need sees the benefactor entirely on the benefactor's terms and in a relationship dictated by the benefactor's sense of priorities, the working with model depicts a round table where each person present has a different but equally valuable portfolio of experience, skills, interests, networks and commitments. The *working with* model recognizes that the journey is as important as the destination. Just as on a medieval quest or pilgrimage, the conversations and adventures one has on the way matter as much and shape character as significantly as the place one is walking towards. *Working with* is not so much about giving people better material conditions and facilities, it's about making new people, inspired and empowered and finding new skills and confidence through being given responsibility and access to conversations that have wider influence.

To take a familiar example, there are a number of institutions in our major cities where a homeless person can find an evening meal. The conventional model, *working for*, suggests what the homeless person needs is an evening meal. But simply providing an evening meal reinforces the person in their poverty, and leaves them hungry again tomorrow. So the familiar distinction between the deserving and undeserving poor separates the person who needs a help up through a tough time from the person who will keep coming back for meals however often they're available, and the logic often goes on to assume the only way to help the undeserving poor is to punish them until they learn to fend for themselves. The empowerment model, *working with*, is not content until the homeless person not only sets the menu but does the cooking themselves. On this view community kitchens exist not to produce meals but to empower people, and the director of the kitchen should change every few years as a new homeless person comes through the ranks to take over the reins. Before long the question of why people continue to go hungry should bring all kinds of people, business leaders, city managers, and welfare advisers around the table with homeless people to empower homeless people to resolve their own problems at the table of power. Working with is essentially about realizing that a social problem is everyone's problem, and about everyone getting to feel the sense of satisfaction at resolving that problem that in the conventional model only the professional person gets.

But there is a third model. The third model addresses the issue of trust we left unresolved when we were wondering whether we could take those shopping bags back to the overburdened person's car. This model I'm going to call *being with*. The same author I quoted earlier describes being with like this:

Being with the poor is more difficult still. It means experiencing in one's own life something of what it is to be poor and oppressed, to be disempowered. To set aside one's plans and strategies for change, and simply feel with the poor the pain of their situation. It involves seeing the implications poverty and development have for people's sense of themselves and their connections with one another, not only their material well-being. This spells the end to an easy view of poverty as romantic, or the poor as simple and virtuous. It means to see tensions and contradictions within and between the poor and non-poor, and to recognize through this that all of us are part of the problem. Poverty is not just out there, but within us, whoever we are. (White and Tiongco, 14)

*Being with* adds an extra dimension. It means experiencing in one's own body some of the fragility of relationships and self-esteem and general well-being that are at the heart of poverty. It means having the patience not to search around

for the light switch, but to sit side by side for a time in the darkness. Job's comforters are much maligned, but it's often forgotten that when they came to him and did not recognize him, "they sat down on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights with no one speaking a word to him, for they saw that his pain was very great" (Job 2.13).

*Being with* is incomprehensible to an imagination that has been entirely shaped by the conventional working for model. After all, how can one hope to solve anyone's problems if one divests oneself not only of the safety of professional boundaries but of the skills that go with them? As one person who did this in the Philippines relates, "It was not socially acceptable. I lost my privileges, my old contacts, my security. I felt very vulnerable. I used to wake in the night afraid that I would get sick and have no money to pay a doctor." (White and Tiongco, 13). The transition one has to make is that poverty is not fundamentally a problem to be solved. The *working for* model, and some versions of the *working with* model, tend to turn everything into a problem ripe for solving. But some things aren't problems, and some problems can't simply be fixed.

Just imagine *working for* and *working with* have done their stuff, and achieved all they set out to. What then, when there is no world to fix? The American expression is, "We get to hang out." In other words, we enjoy one another. We enjoy the actions and habits of life because they make us realize how good it is to be alive, how good it is to be a person among others, how good it is to be a person in the created world, how good it is to be a child of God. The being with approach says, "Let's not leave those discoveries till after all the solving and fixing is done and we're feeling bored. Let's make those discoveries now." To say to someone "I want to be with you" is to say "When I'm with you I feel in touch with myself, in touch with what it means to be a human being among others, in touch with creation, in touch with God." (That's a lot to say, so in America we put it in code by saying, "Let's hang out.") To say that to a wealthy person may be a way of saying "I value you for who you are as a person, not what you've achieved in your career." But to say that to a poor person is to say something very extraordinary. Yet if you can't say such a thing to someone, there really is no reason in the world why they should trust you. Because if you can't say such a thing to a person, it's clear you're only using them as a means towards some further end.

Take for example the case of a person who has a terminal illness. There's very little *working for* to do. Sure, you can fix up all sorts of gadgets and comforts to make the last days or months less burdensome. But there's no way to solve the problem. As for *working with*, there's certainly a lot to be said for demedicalizing the person's situation, for getting away from drugs and technology as much as possible and turning whatever one can into words and mementos and significant moments. But what's really required is simply *being with* – staying still, listening, being silent, not having the answers, sharing the struggle, praying together, singing songs and hymns, taking time over meals, recalling stories, remembering messages to pass on. What's needed isn't therapy – it's company. What the dying person is saying is "Please don't leave me alone."

Let's get back to the Good Samaritan for a moment. Remember the context for engagement is to see ourselves not as the priest or the Levite, with a variety of methods of working for, and the freedom to pick and choose which is the most suitable. The point is to see ourselves as the man in need, searching each passer-by to see if they have what God promises to give us. If we see ourselves as fundamentally the man in need, it becomes absurd to start with the model of *working for*. It's pretty difficult to see ourselves as *working with*, although it's possible the man taught the Samaritan a thing or two about donkey riding on the way to Jericho. All we can offer is *being with*, and being with precisely as the needy person in the relationship. Only if we start by thinking of ourselves as the needy, vulnerable person in the story can we begin to understand that the stranger, particularly the stranger separated from us by race or class, can be for us the face of God. And so maybe *being with* is therefore where Christian ministry, service and witness begins.

## A Theology of Engagement

I want you to think for a moment about the shape of Jesus' life. We place a huge emphasis on his last week in Jerusalem – his passion, death and resurrection. That's fully justified, because the gospels are balanced the same way – Mark gives the last week 6 chapters out of his 16, while John gets to the passion material in chapter 12 of his 21 chapters. St Paul concentrates almost entirely on Jesus' passion, death and resurrection, and almost leaves Jesus' life out altogether.

Before that last week Jesus spent two, maybe three years moving around Galilee. In Galilee he built a popular movement. He worked with his disciples, teaching and training them to live in the kingdom he told them was breaking in. He worked with the poor, healing them and empowering them to be transformed from burdens on others into carriers of the burdens of others. And he made trouble for the authorities, getting into controversy with those who used their religious and political power for something less than setting God's people free.

And before his ministry in Galilee, we have to assume he spent around 30 years in Nazareth. Doing what, exactly? Leaving aside the incident when Jesus sat down with the teachers in the Temple at the age of 12, we only really have two verses of scripture that answer that question. Luke 2.40 says "the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him"; while Luke 2.53 says similar things: "Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men."

So Jesus spent a week in Jerusalem *working for* us, doing what we can't do, achieving our salvation. If you like, he was the person in the supermarket parking lot who said, "Here, let me carry that burden for you." He spent three years in Galilee *working with* us, calling us to follow him and work alongside him. Thinking again of the supermarket parking lot, he encouraged and empowered the person with the bags, removing the obstacles and reshaping the load, but letting the person themselves determine the direction and claim the credit afterwards. But before he ever got into working with and working for, he spent 30 years in Nazareth *being with* us, setting aside his plans and strategies, and experiencing in his own body not just the exile and oppression of the children of Israel, but also the joy and sorrow of family and community life.

And so the question of how we approach ministry, service and witness in our city is fundamentally a question of how we see ourselves before God. The joy of being a child of God is more than anything else the joy of being with God – not just working for or with God but simply being with God because there is nowhere better to be. We often quote the words of Irenaeus, "The glory of God is a human being fully alive"; but we generally leave out the words that follow, which add "And the human life is the vision of God." If Jesus shows us not only what it means to be God but what it means to be human, we should take his example seriously. For Christian ministry, service and witness, there can be no true working for or working with God or humanity that is not deeply rooted in being with both.

## Towards a Theology of Nazareth

I want to conclude with three invitations to explore what it might mean to embody Nazareth – to minister, serve and witness in the spirit of being with.

The first comes from Augustine. At the start of his book *On Christian Doctrine* he makes a very interesting distinction between what we "use" and what we "enjoy".

There are some things, then, which are to be enjoyed, others which are to be used, others still which enjoy and use. Those things which are objects of enjoyment make us happy. Those things which are objects of use assist, and (so to speak) support us in our efforts after happiness, so that we can attain

the things that make us happy and rest in them. We ourselves, again, who enjoy and use these things, being placed among both kinds of objects, if we set ourselves to enjoy those which we ought to use, are hindered in our course, and sometimes even led away from it; so that, getting entangled in the love of lower gratifications, we lag behind in, or even altogether turn back from, the pursuit of the real and proper objects of enjoyment.

For to enjoy a thing is to rest with satisfaction in it for its own sake. (Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* Book 1 Chapters 3, 4 [Translated by J.F. Shaw, Edinburgh: T&T Clark 1892] 9)

Going back to the beginning of our exploration, we can understand sin as “using” that which should be “enjoyed”. Too much eagerness to “work for” and solve or fix problems leaves one eager to find things one can “use”. Not finding much to use in a neighborhood can lead one to shake the dust off one’s feet and move on elsewhere in search of more useable material. But the gift of *being with* is learning how to enjoy what many predecessors have failed to use. When one says “I’m happy to be with you” one is saying “I am ‘enjoying’ you”, that’s to say (in Augustine’s words) I am resting in satisfaction with you for your own sake. You are not a means to any end. You are an end in yourself. I have no purpose in being in this conversation, in this neighborhood, other than to receive from you all the wonder that God brought about just in making you. Usually we only ever say this to people on their birthday – I am rejoicing simply in the gift God gave us in making you.” Learning to “be with” is learning to treat people as if every day were their birthday. If we are to minister, serve and witness among people in our city in a spirit of *being with*, we must learn to enjoy them for their own sake, not try to use them and, finding them wanting or unresponsive, get cross with them or toss them away.

Perhaps the most significant way in which we can embody the ethos of being with is to share meals with people. I have realized something about sharing food. When I realize I care about someone, and want to get to know them or their household better, I find myself wanting to cook for them. In other words I want to work for them. When I deeply care about someone, I find I want to cook *with* them. Somehow the little negotiations over how they or I roast potatoes or sieve flour and who gets to decide when we disagree become the music to which the words of our conversation are sung. This is my most regular experience of working with. But when I both care about someone very much and know that person very well, the food becomes somehow secondary, and it’s really an excuse simply to sit beside them and listen to their voice and spend time in one another’s company. The food is something we *use*, so that we can *enjoy* one another. I believe eating together is the single simplest and most enjoyable way of embodying what it means to move from working for to working with to being with.

Finally I want to share with you two quotations that have sustained me in my ministry, particularly in the times when I have sought to be with disadvantaged people over long periods and have invariably felt I had little tangible to show for it. The first is from a man called Bill Arlow, who wrote in the context of the Northern Irish Troubles in the 1980s. He said, “It is better to fail in a cause that will finally succeed than to succeed in a cause that will finally fail.” So much of working for is succeeding in causes that will finally fail: delivering programs that produce good statistics but only reinforce inequalities, institutionalize humiliation, and disable genuine relationships. What will finally succeed is years and years of being with, building trust, caring about people for their own sake, coming to them as a needy man to a wandering Samaritan, expecting to see the face of God in them and enjoying them for the wondrous creation that they are. It doesn’t look much, but it’s the way Christ spent most of his incarnate life.

And that brings me to my last quotation, from the mystic Thomas a Kempis, in his work *The Imitation of Christ*. He writes, “That which is done for love (though it be little and contemptible in the sight of the world) becometh wholly fruitful.” Working for may be done for love, or for many other reasons. Working with may be done for love, though it is possible to have other goals in mind. But being with, as far as I can tell, has only one motivation: it is because the other is precious for their own sake, solely to be enjoyed with no thought to use. Being with can only be done for love.



And in that, it imitates the way God loves us. God *is with* us, Emmanuel, for no other reason than that God loves us for our own sake. God enjoys us. That is the mystery of creation and salvation. That is the mystery that all our ministry, service and witness must seek to imitate and emulate. If, and only if, it does, it will become wholly fruitful.