

Incarnational Mission

Being with the World

Samuel Wells



CANTERBURY
PRESS

probing of an emerging theme in theology. The second thing is to set out some convictions about Christian mission that might stimulate and inspire a person entering, or considering what it might mean to take up, a particular kind or sphere of mission. Thus this is a book designed to stimulate renewal of reflective practice in mission, including but not limited to mission that forms an aspect of ordained ministry. The third is to ponder more deeply what constitutes the mission of being with, as distinct from, and perhaps complementary to, more familiar and established portrayals of mission. Thus I hope to offer some descriptions and distinctions of abiding value in understanding what mission means. These three respective purposes shape the three parts of this introduction.

Being With

In *Living without Enemies* and *A Nazareth Manifesto* I explore four models of social engagement: working for, working with, being with, and being for. Here I offer a brief summary.

Working for is where I do things and they make your life better. I do them because thereby I'm financially rewarded, I receive public esteem, I enjoy exercising my skills, I delight to alleviate your need or hardship, I seek your good opinion and gratitude; perhaps all of the above. Working for is the established model of social engagement. It takes for granted that the way to address disadvantage or distress is for those with skills, knowledge, energy, and resources to introduce those capacities to enhance the situation of those who are struggling. It assumes that the advantaged have abundance,

A Nazareth Manifesto: Being with God (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015); and Samuel Wells, *Incarnational Ministry: Being with the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Norwich: Canterbury, 2017).

which defines them, and that they should maximize that surplus through education and training and exercise it through applying their skills as broadly as appropriate. By contrast, the "needy" are defined by their deficit; if they have capacities, these are seldom noticed or harnessed. Working for identifies problems and focuses down on the ones it has the skills and interest to fix. It then moves on to address further such problems, of which the world is never short. It seldom stops to ask why the recipients of such assiduous corrective measures are invariably so ungrateful.

Working with is a different model. Like working for, it gains its energy from problem-solving, identifying targets, overcoming obstacles, and feeding off the bursts of energy that result. But unlike working for, which assumes the concentration of power in the expert and the highly skilled, it locates power in coalitions of interest, initially collectives of the like-minded and similarly socially located, but eventually partnerships across conventional divides of religion and class around common causes. Its stumbling-blocks are not the maladies that working for identifies; they are pessimism, apathy, timidity, lack of confidence, and discouragement. By the forming of networks and the creation of a movement where all stakeholders come together and it's possible for everyone to win, working with establishes momentum and empowers the dispossessed.

Being with begins by largely rejecting the problem-solution axis that dominates both the previous models. Its main concern is the predicament that has no solution, the scenario that can't be fixed. It sees the vast majority of life, and certainly the most significant moments of life, in these terms: love can't be achieved; death can't be fixed; pregnancy and birth aren't a problem needing a solution. When it comes to social engagement, it believes one can seldom solve people's problems—doing so disempowers them and reinforces

their low social standing. Instead, one must accompany them while they find their own methods, answers, approaches—and meanwhile celebrate and enjoy the rest of their identity that's not wrapped up in what you (perhaps ignorantly) judge to be their problem. Like working with, being with starts with people's assets, not their deficits. It seeks never to do for them what they can perfectly well, perhaps with encouragement and support, do for themselves. But most importantly being with seeks to model the goal of all relationships: it sees problem-solving as a means to a perpetually deferred end, and instead tries to live that end—enjoying people for their own sake.

Being for lacks the energy and hopefulness of working with and working for, yet also lacks the crucial with that characterizes being with and working with. It's the philosophy that's more concerned with getting the ideas right, using the right language, having the right attitudes, and ensuring products are sustainably sourced, investments are ethically funded, people are described in positive ways, and accountable public action is firmly distinguished from private consumer choice. Much of which is good; but in its clamor that Something Must Be Done, it invariably becomes apparent that it's for somebody else to do the doing. The alternative to unwise action becomes not engaged presence but cynical withdrawal: multiple causes are advanced, but their untidy details and complexities are often disdained. Full of criticism for working for and working with, apt to highlight the apparent passivity of being with, it lacks a concrete alternative to any of them. And yet in an information-saturated, instantly judging, observer-shaped internet age, it's the default position of perhaps the majority.

Having characterized these four models and recognized the degree of overlap between them, the next step is to locate them theologically. *Living without Enemies* and *A Nazareth*

Manifesto do this by highlighting the shape of Jesus's life, as the Gospels record it. One can see the Old Testament as a study in perceiving the God who is for us—most obviously creating the world, and delivering Israel from Egypt—in creative tension with the God who is with us, represented most significantly by the covenant at Sinai and the sense emerging during the Exile that in Babylon God was present to Israel in a more profound way than simply delivering the people from crisis. Over and again Israel protests there's no use in God being for us; we want to see some evidence, some action—work for us, at least with us.

This is the context into which Jesus emerges: "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!" (Isa. 64:1). Jesus is presented in the Gospels as the savior who works for us not by defeating the Romans but by forgiving sins and opening the gates of everlasting life—achievements concentrated in his passion, death, and resurrection but anticipated in earlier healings and miracles. But this is not all Jesus does: he spends perhaps three years, largely in Galilee, calling, forming, and empowering followers, formulating a message for them to share, building alliances, and confronting hostility. One can see the "saving" as working for, focused on a week in Jerusalem; and the "organizing" as working with, spread over those years of public ministry. But that still leaves perhaps 30 years in Nazareth, give or take a spell as a baby in Egypt. And here's the question: if Jesus was all about working for, how come he spent around 90 percent being with (in Nazareth), 9 percent working with (in Galilee)—and only 1 percent working for (in Jerusalem). Are those percentages significant—and do they provide a template for Christian mission? Surely Jesus knew what he was doing in the way he spent his time; or do we know better?

This is the theological foundation upon which, in *A Nazareth Manifesto*, having sought to dismantle the stranglehold working for has on the Christian imagination, I elucidate

eight dimensions of what being with actually involves. These are my best attempts to describe how the persons of the Trinity are with each other.

- The first is *presence*, which seems obvious until you realize that neither working for nor being for necessarily requires presence: they can often operate from a safe distance. Presence means being in the same physical space as the person with whom you are engaging.
- Next comes *attention*, which turns generality into particularity and transforms “showing up” into focused interaction. Attention requires one to harness concentration, memory, emotion, intellect, gaze, scrutiny, wonder, and alertness here and nowhere else, directly and without mediation.
- Then there is *mystery*. This rests on distinguishing between a problem—which has a generic quality, can be perceived equally well by anybody, can be addressed from the outside, and can be solved using skills acquired elsewhere—and a mystery, which is unique, can’t be fixed or broken down into its constituent parts, is not fully apparent to an outsider, but can only be entered, explored, and appreciated. Treating death, for example, as a problem risks wasting energies pursuing solutions, many of which take one away from a person’s presence and divert attention elsewhere—thereby missing the call to be with someone as he or she enters a great mystery.
- Lest all this seem too solemn and earnest, the fourth dimension is *delight*. This is the recognition of abundance where conventional engagement is inclined only to see deficit. Delight rejects the template of how things should be and opens itself to surprise and humor and subversion and playfulness. Delight is glad to take time where conventional engagement is overshadowed by urgency.

- The next two dimensions are in some ways a pair. *Participation* names the way with is indispensable and un-substitutable. It diverts attention from what is done to ensuring the right balance of who does it. Of the hundred reasons to bypass being with, efficiency is near the top of the list. Participation says there’s no justification for leaving someone behind and queries whether our hurry to get somewhere is rooted in our reluctance truly to engage with the person with whom we are traveling.
- By contrast, *partnership* is more prepared to see how respective gifts can, when appropriately harnessed, together enable a team to reach a common goal. Partnership sees how the gifts of the “needy” person, habitually obscured by the working-for impulse to be helpful on one’s own terms, can make unique contributions to common projects. In this sense it comes within the territory of working with and indicates how closely working with and being with sometimes resemble one another.
- The dimension that encapsulates and epitomizes all the previous ones is *enjoyment*. This rests on Augustine’s distinction between what we use, which runs out, and is a means to some further end, and what we enjoy, which is of value for its own sake, an end in itself. Being with, simply put, is enjoying people whom the world, having no use for, is inclined to discard.
- Finally *glory* names the purpose of all things: the opening words of John’s Gospel (“the Word became flesh . . . and we have seen his glory,” 1:14) demonstrate that the epitome of glory, and the originating purpose and final goal of all things, is God being with us in Christ.

Each of these dimensions is rooted in the life of the Trinity and embodied in the life of Jesus, as chapters 8 and 9 of *A Nazareth Manifesto* describe. My concern there and here is

not to discredit the other three models but to describe vividly and persuasively what being with actually involves.

Mission

I understand the Christian life to come in three parts: discipleship, ministry, and mission. These refer to how one's faith shapes the self, the church, and the world, respectively. My initial reflections on being with, as recorded in *Living without Enemies* and *A Nazareth Manifesto*, largely concerned mission, and mission is again the subject of this book. The subject of the book that accompanies and complements this one, entitled *Incarnational Ministry: Being with the Church*, is discipleship and ministry.

Discipleship is being with God as shaped by being with oneself, one's community of faith, one's close relationships, and the wider creation. Discipleship overlaps with ministry in several ways. Those engaged in ministry never stop being disciples. But they need to distinguish between their own response to God (discipleship) and what's most helpful for the community as a whole (ministry). Ministry means taking up a specific role in order to help build up the church. That role may be formal or informal. Ordained ministry refers to the setting-aside of certain people, usually involving extensive formation, education, and training, to carry out fundamental roles in a Christian community, often including the performance of sacraments, the preaching of the Word, the leading of worship, and the convening of the body's decision-making process. But ministry is not wholly, largely, or most importantly about the activity of the ordained. Ministry is whatever is done among and within the body of believers to build up that body or to enable that body to practice its convictions together.

The third dimension of the Christian life is mission. Whereas ministry seeks to know Christ and make Christ known within the body of believers, mission addresses the world—all that has taken the freedom of God's patience not yet to believe. But mission often describes that world as the kingdom—thus anticipating that it will be the theater of God's epiphanies, the sphere of the Spirit's work beyond the church, where disciples are humbled by acts of charity the church could seldom encompass, surprised by goodwill that puts the church to shame, and challenged by examples of integrity, courage, kindness, and wisdom the church badly needs. The gospel is not something that belongs to the church, and its propagation is not limited to the church's imagination or by the church's shortcomings: the gospel belongs to the Holy Spirit, and the church is as often catching up with it as advancing it, as often humbled to find it already at work wherever missionaries go as it is blessed to bear it into new hearts and homes, as often drawn into mission to find it as to spread it.

The great narrative of the Holy Spirit is the Acts of the Apostles. We could call the Gospels the Acts of Jesus and the book of Acts the Acts of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit makes present the Jesus of the past, born in obscurity and amid hostility, ministering with a close community, a wider circle of the poor, and in the face of antagonism, dying after trial, torture, and agony, rising before many and being taken up to heaven; and the Jesus of the future, who will come again to unite heaven and earth in a new realm of joy and perfect freedom, in an unending relationship with God the Trinity, in which all creation will worship, be God's companions, and share God's banquet. The Holy Spirit makes the Jesus of yesterday and the Jesus of forever present today in regular and surprising ways. The regular ways are those encountered in discipleship and ministry: sacraments, personal and corpo-

rate prayer, reading and proclaiming Scripture, and gestures of mercy and kindness. The surprising ways are the territory of mission: the wisdom or kindness of a stranger, the depth of community that emerges in the face of tragedy, the mistakes that turn into God's opportunities.

Mission is about these surprises. One pastor spent some time serving a church in Ghana. It so happened that the church didn't have enough money to put any glass in the windows. This had the advantage that it let a bit of air in. The only problem was that there was also quite a strong breeze, so they found that when they brought papers into the building the papers blew all over the place. Eventually they decided that having the wind blowing through the church was intolerable, so they got together enough money to put glass in all the windows. The result was simple: the wind blew the roof off. The lesson is that you can't dictate how the Holy Spirit will act. The Holy Spirit is to be received, not grasped. It sets its own agenda. Mission is responding to what the Holy Spirit is doing in the world.

The Mission of Being With

This book comes in two broad parts, with a chapter in the middle that has a foot in both camps. The first part considers individuals in relation to their standing before God—not as judged by a third party but as identified by themselves. Leaving out disciples, who are the concern of ministry, I consider what mission means to those who are not disciples. What is vital is to recognize that people who are not disciples are so for a number of reasons, and perceive the church, and God, with a variety of attitudes. Not able to cover that diversity comprehensively, here I consider five kinds of unbeliever in the first five chapters.

The first kind is the lapsed: those who were once disciples, in many cases happily so, and are no longer. My contention here is that a great many, perhaps the majority, of the lapsed are so not because of their own laziness, or more active form of sin, but because of the church's failure—a failure they have been unable or unwilling to countenance or forgive. Thus I start the book in an attitude of humility that the church in mission has often lacked: that people who don't believe are at least as likely to have been rejected by the church as to have done the rejecting themselves. Before looking out at a field ripe for harvest, the church needs to recognize what it has failed to do with what has already been in the barn.

I then move, more encouragingly, to seekers. Being with the lapsed can be a sobering realization of how much the church has let people down and fallen short of what God calls it to be. Being with seekers is more often a refreshing reminder of the wonder of God, an iridescence that's more than capable of shining through the shortcomings of the church. There is a good deal more glory here. It should be that the experience of becoming a disciple should be one of entering, perhaps for the first time, a culture in which one is enjoyed rather than used. If so, being with has borne fruit in both ministry and mission.

The third kind of unbeliever is perhaps the most subtle: those of no professed faith. Here it's important to hold together two things that sit uneasily beside one another: one, that a disciple frequently has no comprehension of how a person can be a happy unbeliever, for such a state seems, to many Christians, both irrational and unbearable; two, that a great many people are exactly that, and experience no "God-shaped hole," and see nothing in the church to attract or intrigue. Being with these twin truths is the heart of this chapter.

Then I explore the most obvious kind of non-disciples: those of other faiths. Here there is a lot of disentangling of in-

adequate categories and unwise judgments about traditions of faith outside the Christian penumbra. There is also, again, need for a good deal of humility, and of honest acknowledgment of what Christians' motivation is when they are drawn into the company of members of other traditions. Like the other fields, it is a huge subject, but one in which the eight dimensions of being with have a good deal to contribute.

The least subtle kind of unbelievers, at first glance, are the hostile. Here I don't prioritize the person who writes vitriolic condemnation of the church and all its beliefs and works on a blogsite, or even those who make generalized connections between religion and violence and blame Christianity for all the ills of the world—for those are frequently to be numbered among the ranks of the lapsed, their anger a form of hurt and their hostility a retained pursuit of righteousness. Instead I try to establish what resources are needed to be a missionary—or even just a disciple—in adverse circumstances, where those around you wish you harm, and where the Holy Spirit in the form of the gift of the stranger is very hard to discern.

The sixth chapter concerns the neighbor. It's a transition chapter because like the early chapters it concerns individuals, but like the later chapters it's not primarily concerned with the question of faith or unbelief. It is a meditation on the anxiety of being overwhelmed by the needs of others, an anxiety that might make disciples draw back from mission and confine their vision to ministry: but it concludes that being overwhelmed simply comes with the territory of mission or ministry, and that the one who overwhelms us is Jesus. It could also be read as a study in the challenges of engaging with mission as an outworking of discipleship rather than also as an outworking of ministry: for the two key examples are ones in which individuals strive to solve great hardships largely on their own.

In the last four chapters of the book I move from the individual to the corporate, from the question of faith-sharing to a more general notion of witness, from a notion of anyone, anywhere to an assumption of particular context. A group of people gathering together out of common interest is an association. A collection of people, customs, and usually buildings that develops a public identity that transcends time, and is seen by most as constituting a good in itself beyond what goods it produces, is an institution. Everything that fills the gap between the two is an organization. I start by looking at organizations, seeking to break down their mysteries not just to understand them but to make them less alien to the church. This is done so that disciples may not despise or scorn them as somehow godless, inordinately admire them for somehow being more "effective" than churches, or, just as serious, be content to live in two worlds, organization and church, without the two impinging on the other.

I then move in chapter 8 to institutions, a world that generally feels altogether more comfortable to those used to ministry. To do so I relate my own experience of seeking to be with a large institution over several years, how I went about it, what I thought I was doing, and where it met with rewards.

In the next chapter I consider what it means to be with government. This requires wider considerations of politics more generally and the church's relation to the state. But it also involves a sense of the church's own politics and, just as importantly, a congregation's willingness and commitment to foster a politics in its own neighborhood that places the actions of government in proper perspective. While I don't have a chapter on associations, there is plenty of reflection on associational life here. The chapter is a warning for everyone in the church and beyond that if you expect to get more from government than you put in, you have to take responsibility for the results.

Finally I consider the excluded, whom I take to be those who do not hold a strong place in organizations and have not found collective strength in civil society or representation in government to compensate for, address, or rectify their vulnerability and who have been exploited as a result. Again, much of the work at the outset is to clarify and identify different kinds of exclusion, the better to judge what it means to be with people in each context.

The book is not a comprehensive treatment, but it aims to provide breadth in the subjects it covers as well as depth in the methods it proposes. I imagine the reader may miss a treatment of the approaches and aspirations of humanitarian aid in the developing world; this is because such issues were discussed (as perhaps the most obvious clash between working-for and being-with perspectives) in *A Nazareth Manifesto*. The reader may likewise, in the face of the ecological crisis, search in vain here for a discussion of what it means to be with creation; I have chosen to consider being with creation as an aspect of discipleship, rather than a context of mission, and have thus included it in *Incarnational Ministry*. This is because I understand being with creation as inextricable from being with oneself and the church as the context for being with God.

Each chapter has more or less the same shape. In every case I discuss the eight dimensions of being with as elaborated in chapter 8 of *A Nazareth Manifesto* and summarized above. I don't always keep the same order or regard each one in each case as being of equal significance. In many cases I offer an introductory section that explains why I see this theme as vital for mission and breaks the theme down into constituent elements before moving to the eight dimensions of being with. But the intention is to use these dimensions to come to grips with each context, to show just how much vigor they, taken together, offer to even the most troubling

circumstances, to test the categories and highlight places where some are, in some cases, less helpful or pertinent, and to amplify each dimension so that by the end one has a richer notion not just of mission, and of being with, but of each of the dimensions themselves.

I start and end, as I did in *A Nazareth Manifesto* and *Incarnational Ministry*, with a sermon. The way I write theology is uncomfortable with conventional distinctions between theology and doxology. Many of my theological ideas appear first in sermon form, and it is in sermons that God's people are significantly shaped for ministry and mission. Thus this study begins in worship and encounter with the Word, steps into a considered project of meditating upon the mission of being with, and finishes with worship and encounter with the Word.

The book is largely a distillation of insights derived from twenty-five years as a disciple, and a member of the church, in mission: what I'm describing is the person I have wanted to be, the ministry I have sought to embody. I'm the first to recognize I'm a poor example of much that I propound; but I believe it's nonetheless worth propounding. Once, when I shared these ideas at a conference, one of the respondents suggested what I was doing was challenging the distinction between missiology and ethics (just as I have long challenged the distinction between theology and ethics, and doubted the designation "practical theology" because I questioned any theology that supposed it was not practical). I like that interpretation. In many ways this book brings together the arguments and reasonings of my three most substantial books, *Improvisation*, *God's Companions*, and *A Nazareth Manifesto*.³ The

3. Samuel Wells, *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Brazos; London: SPCK, 2004), especially chapters 10 and 11; and *God's Companions: Reimagining Christian Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), especially chapter 5.

INTRODUCTION

connection with the third is obvious: this book, and its companion *Incarnational Ministry*, together form a kind of sequel. Readers of *God's Companions* may feel similarly—that this is a second book in the same spirit—one that sees God giving everything we need to follow faithfully, and one that roots theology in the practices of the local church. Perhaps less obviously, this book also draws significantly on *Improvisation*—most extensively on the ability to overaccept and reincorporate, central to that book, and at the heart of the mission of being with, as this book shows.

But this book seeks to be something beyond offering worked examples of being with, identifying the particular contexts of mission, and drawing together insights from a career as a pastor and a theologian. It seeks to be a meditation on the ways of God; a prayer of a reflective, joyful practitioner, grateful for the opportunity to meet God in such privileged and sometimes surprising settings. Its sentences can be read quickly, so as to grasp some of the dimensions of what being with implies in various contexts that I assume the reader has encountered or soon will. But each sentence is also written so that it may be read slowly, reflectively, and over again, as a prism reflecting on faith, mission, God, and, in several cases, the transfiguration that can come through and beyond setback and suffering. Whether a book can be at the same time a polemic for a different approach to mission, a guide for its conduct, the advancement and amplification of a promising theological motif, and a meditation inviting devotion and more reflective practice is for the judgment of the reader. It will no doubt be different things to different people. But all of these things dwell in its writing; and in the living that preceded and informed it.