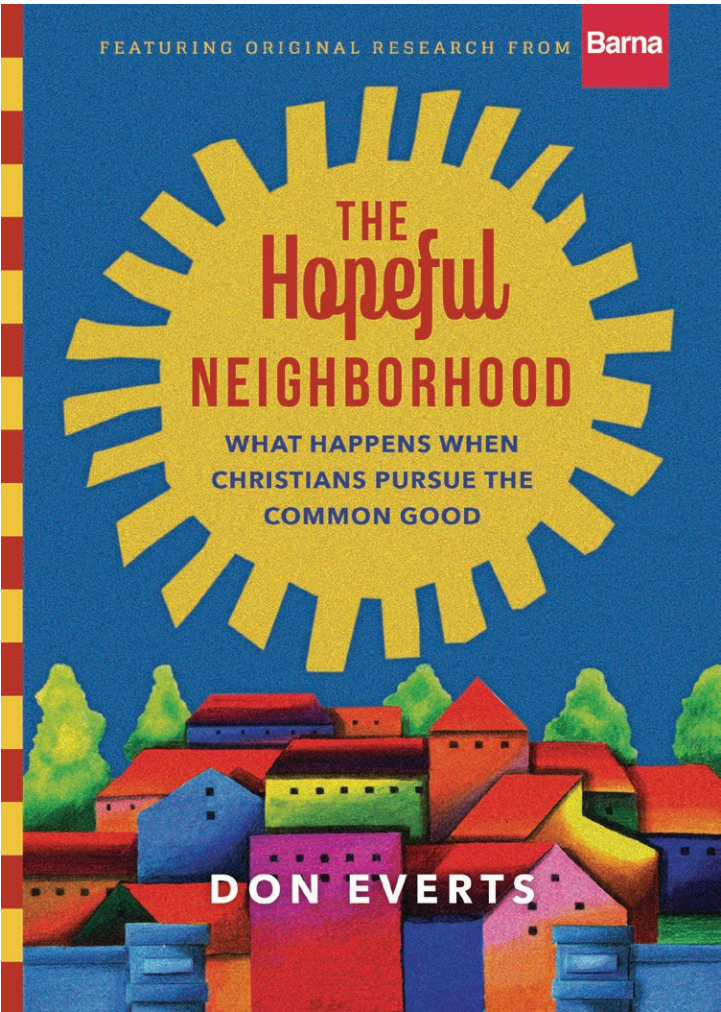


FEATURING ORIGINAL RESEARCH FROM

Barna



THE
Hopeful
NEIGHBORHOOD

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN
CHRISTIANS PURSUE THE
COMMON GOOD

DON EVERTS



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Pursue the Common Good

THE SHARED WORK OF ALL HUMANS

The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it.

GENESIS 2:15

I was living in an apartment complex on the outskirts of Knoxville, Tennessee, when I first felt the weight of our common humanity. I was in first grade and the events of a single month in our apartment complex confronted my young heart with both the joys and horrors of our shared humanity.

First grade was a time of important firsts for me: I was introduced to Fruit Stripe gum and Star Wars action figures and the ins and outs of papier-mâché. But the whole common humanity realization (at least the joyful part) was triggered by an invitation from my teacher, Mrs. Love. She knew that one of the girls in my class lived in the same apartment complex that I did. She also

knew (I realize in retrospect) that I was struggling to make friends in class and that my classmate was struggling with her reading. And so, the invitation: Would we spend an hour reading together when we got home from school each day?

And that's exactly what we did. It felt as right as rain to sit together after school and take turns reading out loud from the same book. My older brother and sister sometimes lingered in the living room to hear the stories too. And not only did I enjoy reading and making a friend, but after a few weeks of this we got an unforgettable reminder of how important this kind of partnership was.

I remember Mrs. Love got everyone's attention in class for "an important lesson," having us all sit crisscross applesauce on the large classroom rug. The gist of her lesson: *we are all in this together*. Mrs. Love told us that we first graders were here to have fun and learn *as a class*. We were like a team. We were partners. And then she told everyone about my new friend's and my afterschool reading partnership, and then (I could hardly believe what was happening) she invited my neighbor and me to visit the Treasure Box!

Mrs. Love kept a Treasure Box behind her desk, which was filled with all manner of toys and treats and delights. That Treasure Box occupied a special place in our first-grade minds. And that morning Mrs. Love underscored the joy of partnering together by inviting my new friend and me to each choose one item from the famed Treasure Box. This was my first visit to the

Treasure Box, and the lesson was indelibly marked on my young heart: *we're all in this together*. And that is something worth celebrating.

But then the horror part came. A couple of weeks later the news flew through the apartment complex: a young girl's body had been found in one of the dumpsters in the parking lot. It was *not* my reading buddy. But it was unmistakably *one of us*—another student, surely someone's classmate and partner.

I was so confused. I thought we were all in this together? Why would someone put *one of us* in the dumpster? I'm not sure I completely understood the death part of the situation (let alone the implications about murder) because I remember empathizing with the young girl, wondering what it must have felt like to be thrown away. How uncomfortable it must have been to lie with all the garbage in one of those stinky dumpsters in the parking lot. I was devastated.

This lesson, too, was indelibly marked on my young heart: *we're all in this together*. And sometimes that is a weighty thing. Both the joy and the horror taught me, even in first grade, that I was a part of the human classroom, the partnership of humanity. I learned we were all in this together, and in both joyful and horrible ways that just felt right.

Of course, as I grew older I would feel the temptation to treat people like *others* and feel the small rush and petty elevation that came from treating other people like trash. But when I eventually got around to studying what the Bible has to say

about the making of the human classroom, I discovered that Mrs. Love had been right back in first grade. We humans are all in this together, created as partners in a shared work.

BEAUTIFULLY CREATED TO PURSUE THE COMMON GOOD

The opening chapters of the Bible, which are all about the creation of earth and humanity and all that is, are unambiguous: all humans are created by God. God is the source of all life on earth, including all humans. There is only one Creator, and therefore all humans are fellow creations.

This much is commonly known. But when you spend unhurried time hanging out in the first pages of the Bible, you are likely to stumble upon a surprising fact of life in the Garden of Eden that has always been staring us in the face: humans were given work to do. As we read in Genesis: “The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it” (Genesis 2:15).

The wording here implies that the land needed someone to cultivate it for it to be useful and habitable.¹ “Gardens cannot look after themselves; they are not self-perpetuating.”² Rather, they need someone to *work* them and *keep* them. These are interesting words used to characterize our shared human work.

First, God placed humans here on earth to work the land where we are standing. The Hebrew here literally means to “serve” the land, implying that we humans are designed to serve

the place where we live, not be served by it.³ Second, humans are created to “keep” the place around us. This Hebrew word is rich in meaning, signifying “to take care of something” or even “to exercise great care” over something.⁴

Humans, the Bible tells us, are placed here on earth to serve and care for the place around us. This is humanity’s creation mandate.⁵ This mandate included caring for the land itself but also all the creatures residing within that land. Not to mention the other people around us! In other words, we humans were designed to stand shoulder to shoulder and put our hands to the same shared work: pursuing the common good.

Common good = “the flourishing or well-being of the sum total of communal life in a given place.”⁶

The *common good* of a place is similar to Wendell Berry’s concept of “the membership”—it includes everything about the place and people around you. Pursuing the collective good of the land and animals and structures and people and relationships around us affirms “the sense of community solidarity that binds all in a common destiny” and seems to be the task for which humans were placed on earth.⁷ God placed humanity on earth for this shared work: “managing all of its creatures and resources for *good* purposes: to allow their beauty to flourish, to use them wisely and kindly, and to promote well-being for all.”⁸

This creation mandate shows us the great dignity and value imbued in humans: we aren't mere creatures. We are entrusted with an important, beautiful calling: to create and shape "an environment where creatures can flourish."⁹ This shared human pursuit isn't limited to the making of good names and good crops and good people (as we see explicitly in the Genesis text) but would also include the making of *any good, true, and beautiful thing* that promotes the common good, including, eventually, a good meal, a good house, a good conversation, a good song, a good analysis, even a good organization or department or meeting.

It bears noting that this isn't just work for Christians, of course. Every human being is dignified and empowered with this creation mandate to work and keep the place around them, to pursue the common good. This creation mandate to pursue the common good is universal and is the most distinctive thing we humans do.¹⁰ As I learned in first grade, we humans are all in this together.

Paradigm Shift

FROM NEIGHBORS TO CONSUMERS

There has been a paradigm shift going on in neighborhoods in the United States since the end of WWII. For decades before the 1940s, neighborhoods were places where people were known and were active. Whether a rural community, a suburban street, an urban block, or an apartment complex, neighbors commonly saw themselves as having

a shared life in their neighborhood that naturally involved celebrating together, helping each other, and looking after the neighborhood.

But that's been changing. The evidence suggests that "America's dramatic economic growth during the post-WWII era has been accompanied by substantial increases in individualism and materialism."^a We may be experiencing unprecedented levels of prosperity, but our social fabric is falling apart.^b While our GNP (Gross National Product) has been doing quite well, our GNH (Gross National Happiness) has not. The GNH is an index of seventy-two indicators that seek to measure well-being and flourishing, and our country's GNH has been dropping steadily.^c Research shows we have lower self-reported happiness, poorer interpersonal relationships, higher levels of anxiety and depression, and greater antisocial behavior.^d As we focus more on material things and less on relationship,^e chronic loneliness has become more common in our neighborhoods.^f And because we are more isolated from our neighbors, we have turned to purchasing the care we once received from neighbors.^g The net result: neighborhoods are no longer places where we are known and active.

Given what we read in Genesis 1 about our shared work of pursuing the common good, it would seem obvious that this is a paradigm shift that we Christians should evaluate and even actively resist. Regardless of the flow of culture around us, we know that we and all our neighbors were not placed

on earth to be isolated consumers but rather to put our hands, with dignity and purpose, to the shared work of pursuing the common good of the place and people around us.

What if we resisted this trend going on around us? What if we started to get to know our neighborhoods (and neighbors) again so that we could be about our shared human task of working and keeping the place right around us?

1. Research indicates that our country is doing better financially but worse socially. What evidence have you seen in your own life or neighborhood that confirms or contradicts these findings?
2. On a scale of 1 to 10, how lonely would you say you are? How lonely would you say your nearest neighbors are?
3. In what ways have you and your neighbors celebrated together, helped each other, or looked after your neighbor together during the last year?

^aBrian Fikkert and Kelly M. Kopic, *Becoming Whole: Why the Opposite of Poverty Isn't the American Dream* (Chicago: Moody, 2019), 85.

^bFikkert and Kopic, *Becoming Whole*, 71.

^cFikkert and Kopic, *Becoming Whole*, 83-84.

^dFikkert and Kopic, *Becoming Whole*, 85.

^eFikkert and Kopic, *Becoming Whole*, 85

^fBen Sasse, *Them: Why We Hate Each Other—and How to Heal* (New York: St. Martin's Press: 2018), 24.

^gConsider that between 1940 and 2010 the US population grew by 134 percent, but the "number of service and therapeutic professionals fulfilling basic life needs rose by 3,206 percent" (Jake Meador, *In Search of the Common Good* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2019], 43).

EXPLICITLY CALLED TO PURSUE THE COMMON GOOD

After humanity's fall into sin, humans lost sight of the shared work God had entrusted to them and their fellow humans. And so, after the fall, God had to explicitly call people to this shared work. The Bible tells us that although Adam was kicked out of the Garden, his mandate to work and keep the land was sent with him: "Therefore the LORD God sent him out from the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken" (Gen 3:23).

Working and keeping the land may have been made more difficult by the curse, but "there is no indication that human dominion over the creation has been rescinded" outside the Garden.¹¹ Instead, God had to get more explicit in calling humans to this shared task of pursuing the common good. Consider the law God gave his people. In the law there are specific instructions to exercise great care over "the membership" of a place—the land, the people, and all that was in the land.

God's law is explicit about caring for *the land*: for example, there are specifics about maintaining fruit trees (Leviticus 19:23-25), letting the land and fields "rest and lie fallow" every seven years to help the land flourish (Exodus 23:11), and the disposal of human waste (Deuteronomy 23:13-15). God's law was also explicit about caring for *the people* in the land. For example, there are many specifics about not hurting each other but also details about watching out for widows and travelers

and orphans in generous ways. God's law also got specific about caring for the *creatures* within the land: addressing resting animals (Deuteronomy 5:14), yoking animals appropriately (Deuteronomy 22:10), avoiding cruelty to animals (Deuteronomy 25:4), and even taking care of your enemy's animals if you see them in need (Exodus 23:4-5).

While we tend to pay more attention (perhaps rightly) to the redemptive elements of the law that deal with humanity's sin and need of reconciliation with God, it is noteworthy that God is still explicit that people are to stand shoulder to shoulder in their original shared work of pursuing the well-being of the place and people around them.

We see this echoed in Jesus' teachings as well. Jesus, who died as an atoning sacrifice for humanity's sins, who made reconciliation with God possible by grace through faith, taught his followers how to then live their everyday lives rooted in this grace they had received. And in his teachings, not only did Jesus call his followers to love their neighbors (Matthew 22:39) and serve the people around them (Matthew 23:11), he also celebrated grace-filled lives that were spent pursuing the common good. As we read in his seminal teaching in the Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God" (Matthew 5:9 NIV).

Reading an English translation of this blessing may give the impression that Jesus is simply celebrating the practice of non-violence or the habit of helping others get along and reconcile.

While those activities are included here, this call itself is at once wider and deeper and older than that. You see, it's an interesting word that we read in Jesus' great Sermon on the Mount: *peacemakers*. It's a compound word made up of a word for peace (*eirēnē*) and a word for making (*poieō*).

First, *peace*. The word *peace* means something quite specific—and exciting—coming from the mouth of Jesus. *Eirēnē* is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word *shalom*. Jesus would have understood *shalom* as all Israelites did: as a comprehensive, joyful state of well-being. *Shalom* is not just the absence of violence (as our English word *peace* tends to connote) but is the presence of all that people need for well-being: safety and security, love and relationships, good work and housing, physical and spiritual health—all of it. God created the world like a fabric of interdependent, knitted, webbed relationships, and this is what the Bible calls *shalom*.¹² That's the kind of peace Jesus is talking about.

Next, *making*. This word for making is a term that Jesus, as a carpenter, would have been very familiar with. The original word is *poieō*, and it meant to create, make, fashion, or construct. And so this compound word, *peacemakers*, is a description of those people who are engaged with their original shared human task: crafting human flourishing.

What does Jesus have to say about people who do this? They are *blessed* and will be easily recognized as children of God. Jesus is calling his followers to be peacemakers, a call that taps into our ancient, original, shared human work.¹³ The latest research

conducted by the Barna Group and Lutheran Hour Ministries hints at this *blessedness* that Jesus spoke of.

Researchers isolated a group of people they called “participants”—practicing Christians who had voluntarily gathered

Personal Outcomes in Successful Groups

Base: practicing Christian community participants



I am / was happy as part of the group



I feel / felt inspired as part of the group



I am becoming / became closer to God as part of the group*



I changed my mind about something because of what I learned in the group



n=205 U.S. practicing Christian adults who were part of a group, July 25–August 15, 2019. When answering this question, participants were asked to think about the most successful group they’d been a part of. *For this response, the scale was: strongly agree, somewhat agree, neither agree nor disagree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree.

FIGURE 1.1

with a group of others to make a difference in the world around them, specifically seeking to make a local impact in the area where they live.¹⁴ These participants were asked to reflect on the various outcomes of any of those groups they considered to be successful.

As you can see in figure 1.1, most of these participants experienced happiness and inspiration and became closer to God because of their involvement in pursuing the common good

Overlapping Outcomes

I am happy, and also...

- 74% I made new friends
- 82% I feel inspired
- 71% We trust one another
- 70% We help each other become better
- 61% I have become closer to God

I have become closer to God, and also...

- 84% I feel happy
- 81% I made new friends
- 83% I feel inspired
- 76% We trust one another
- 83% We help each other become better

FIGURE 1.2

with others. In fact, researchers noted these positive gains “tend to hang together,” one benefit begetting others.¹⁵

For example, “people who say their involvement in a successful group added to their personal happiness are more likely than the average to report every other good outcome.”¹⁶ The same synergy of blessings shows up for those who report feeling closer to God, as you can see in figure 1.2. Those who are pursuing the common good really are blessed.

1. When have you felt happier, more inspired, or closer to God after spending time and energy trying to serve someone else?
2. What might account for the way one blessing tends to lead to others?
3. What are the different costs that can be associated with pursuing the common good of others? How do the potential costs and potential blessings compare?

The earliest Christian leaders repeated Jesus’ call to be crafters of peace. For example, Paul issued a call to “pursue what makes for peace” (Romans 14:19) and the author of Hebrews encouraged Christians to “strive for peace” (Hebrews 12:14). James celebrated this same shalom-crafting posture when he wrote that “a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace” (James 3:18).

As it turns out, this is exactly what the first generations of Christians did.

Pursuing the Common Good Throughout History

Pursuing the common good has been a strong marker of the Christian church from the very beginning.

The early church had many habits that they became known for, of course—including meeting frequently, eating together, and memorizing texts. But they also became known for their relentless pursuit of the common good of their local communities: visiting the poor, the sick, and the imprisoned; receiving and feeding travelers; generously contributing to common funds that went toward caring for the poor, replenishing stocks of food and clothing, and feeding needy people.^a Christians in the early church busied themselves pursuing the common good of their communities.

Throughout the centuries the church kept talking about this core calling. In *The Epistle of Barnabas*, an early Christian writing from the end of the first century, we read these words: “Do not live entirely isolated, having retreated into yourselves, as if you were already [fully] justified, but gather instead to seek together the common good.”^b

John Chrysostom, the famed preacher in Constantinople, preached about the common good in the early 400s:

“This is the rule of the most perfect Christianity, its most exact definition, its highest point, namely, the seeking of the common good . . . for nothing can so make a person an imitator of Christ as caring for his neighbors.”^c

From Augustine to Aquinas, from Catholics to Protestants, Christians across the ages and denominations have repeated this call to pursue the common good. As a result, Christians throughout the centuries have stood shoulder to shoulder with the rest of humanity, leaving an enduring positive mark on their world.^d Any objective historian investigating the effects of Christians throughout history will be overwhelmed with this enduring legacy of shared work throughout society: in the arts, literacy, education, human rights, health care, literature, science, justice, rule of law, and more.^e

1. Which of the habits of the early church are you most familiar with? Which habits do today’s Christians usually focus on?
2. What specific examples of Christians’ “enduring legacy” can you think of?
3. How often do you hear Christians today talking about this historically significant Christian habit of “pursuing the common good”?

^aAlan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: The Improbable Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016), 122-23.

^bEpistle of Barnabas 4.10, as cited in Michael Lamb and Brian A. Williams, eds., *Everyday Ethics: Moral Theology and the Practices of Ordinary Life* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2019), 145.

^c John Chrysostom quoted in Jim Wallis, *The (Un)Common Good: How the Gospel Brings Hope to a World Divided* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2013), 3.

^d James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 4.

^e Jonathan Hill, *What Has Christianity Ever Done for Us? How It Shaped the Modern World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 6-7.

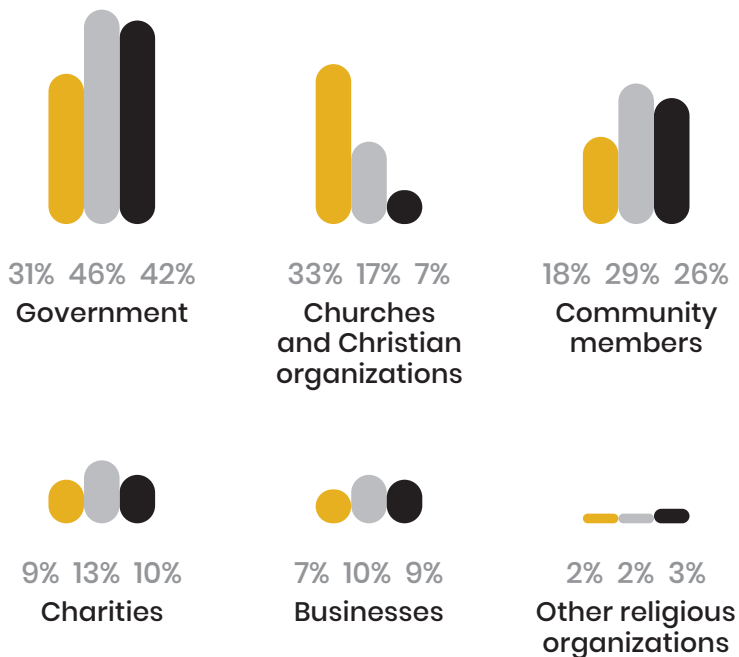
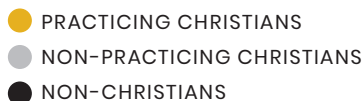
While it is true that Christians throughout history have pursued the common good, this shared human work has not always remained at the forefront of the Christian experience. For example, the latest research shows us that people today don't associate Christians with the common good. As can be seen in figure 1.3, when researchers asked people who is best suited to solve problems within their communities only 33 percent of practicing Christians put "churches and Christian organizations" as their top answer to this question, while a mere 7 percent of non-Christians did the same. It is noteworthy that non-Christians see the government and community members as more suited to pursue the common good in their community than groups or organizations of Christians.

1. How would you rank the six options given if you were asked who is best suited to solve problems in your neighborhood? How do your answers compare with the averages?

2. Given the long tradition of Christians pursuing the common good, why do you think the church's reputation relative to the common good is what it is?

Who Is Best Suited to Solve Community Problems?

% ranked this option #1



n=2,500 U.S. adults, July 25–August 15, 2019.

FIGURE 1.3

3. What do you think the church and Christians are most known for if not for pursuing the common good?

Our current reputation would suggest that somewhere along the line we Christians have forgotten that we are created and called to pursue the common good. It turns out this is not new. From time to time God's people need to be reminded of their call to pursue the common good. And God, in his mercy, does just that.

GRACIOUSLY REMINDED TO PURSUE THE COMMON GOOD

Let's consider a real-life example from early on in the life of the church: the Christians living in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey) in the AD 60s. These Christians needed to be reminded to pursue the common good, and so God led Peter to write them a letter that did just that.

Why exactly did they need this reminder? These Christians faced a growing hostility from their neighbors stemming from Emperor Nero's increasingly negative view of Christians. Some of these Christians were tempted to fight back against their neighbors; some were tempted to withdraw from their neighbors; others were probably tempted to hide their faith and blend in with their neighbors. And all these temptations, while understandable, had the potential to pull their attention

away from standing shoulder to shoulder with their neighbors to pursue the common good.

And so God led Peter to write them a letter that, among other things, reminded them of their call to pursue the common good. Consider this powerful line from Peter's letter: "Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good?" (1 Peter 3:13 NIV).

This call to be "eager to do good" is a strong reminder to return to their God-given call to pursue the common good. Literally, Peter's words here remind the Christians in Asia Minor to "become zealous for making good things." The implication: they had, somewhere along the line, lost their zeal to do this.

Peter was clear that there was nothing new about this call, quoting from Psalm 34, a familiar psalm that called the Israelites to "do good" and "seek and pursue" shalom. In this way Peter graciously reminds the Christians in Asia Minor to not lose sight of what they are created for and called to do. While this reminder makes complete sense in light of Scripture, it could not have been simple or easy to hear in the midst of the increasing hostility they were experiencing. Given the fact that we may face our own tough seasons, let's try to imagine how this reminder might have landed on the ears of the original recipients of the letter. What might it have been like to be enduring persecution and then be reminded to pursue the common good?

Pursuing the Common Good in Asia Minor

I am Tabitha and this is my city, the great hilltop city of Ancyra. We sit at the crossroads of the world, at the

intersection of the flowing Ancyra Cayi and two well-used Roman highways. This is my home. But I've been daydreaming of gathering my household and leaving this place.

It's not that I don't love Ancyra. I do. How many mornings have I watched the sun rise in the east over my Galatian homeland? As the sun rises, I'm thankful for the God of Israel. I'm thankful for the gift of life. I am thankful for the comforts and traditions of our synagogue, for the health of all five of my children, and their children after them.

But these days my morning gaze looks not east at the rising sun but south at the rim of Cankaya—that distant hill to the south where the wealthy retreat in the heat of the summer. I long to go to Cankaya not to escape the heat of the summer but to escape the tension my family has felt ever since news of the Messiah came to Galatia.

The Pharisee Paul of Tarsus came into Galatia with the news of the Messiah. This news seemed to me to be straight from the mouth of the God of Israel. Paul's words rose over



ANCYRA,
GALATIA
SPRING, AD 62

me like the rising sun in the east, with a weight and authority surpassing anything I have heard in the synagogue.

Over time a strong, freeing faith in the Messiah grew within me and all my family. This change in us Christians—both Jews and, yes, even pagans—brings glory to God.

But this also brings shunning from the synagogue leaders, from all those in Ancyra who reject this humble Messiah. They look at our family differently now. This is because we sit with pagans at prayer and at table. We are seen as unclean. I never would have guessed my own children and their children after them would ever be looked at as unclean.

It makes me want to gather them all and fly away to Cankaya.

But this is not all that is in my heart. My daydreams have been interrupted by apostle Peter's letter. The letter arrived from Pontus only a few days ago. There is much in the letter to hold onto and remember, but one sentence in particular has made its way into my heart: "Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good?"

Apostle Peter's meaning is simple enough: become zealous for shalom. However, the implications are anything but simple. The rabbis at the synagogue have taught us all about shalom: a flourishing of the people, peace at the border, good work in the market, kindness in the streets, food within houses.

But to become zealous for that? To pursue the welfare of Ancyra means staying here in Ancyra. It means standing

with my neighbors contemplating the well-being of our borders and markets and streets and homes, not contemplating a flight to distant Cankaya.

Peter's words have invaded my daydreams and my heart, you see. Without even trying, I find my daydreams gravitating toward this hilltop under my feet, not distant, safe Cankaya. I wonder how we could help widow Aliah deal with her grief and adjust to life without her husband. I wonder how we can ease the burdens of the many travelers who use our roads. I wonder who could help repair the roof of the synagogue after the last storm.

Peter's words have done this to me; they have shifted my daydreams. I am left intrigued, confused, uncertain, excited. As I watch the sun rise in the east, I am thankful for the God of Israel and his humble Messiah. I watch the sun rise and its rays fill every street and corner and marketplace and house in Ancyra with God's warmth and light, and I think of Peter's words.

I feel the rising sun on my face and wonder, Can God bring true shalom to this hilltop?

- 1.** If you were facing growing hostility from your neighbors, would you be more tempted to fight back, withdraw from them, or try to blend in with them?
- 2.** Peter's reminder to be zealous to do good makes Tabitha feel "intrigued, confused, uncertain, excited." Which of these emotions makes the most sense to you? Which makes the least sense?

3. Have you ever found yourself daydreaming hopeful dreams about the common good of your neighborhood? What might help our thoughts go in that direction more naturally?

While we can only imagine what it would be like to be one of the original recipients of Peter's letter, we *can* unpack his clear reminder: even Christians living through a hostile season are called to stand with their neighbors and *become zealous for the common good*.

Peter put it in an interesting way in the original Greek: *to become zealous*. Zeal is a particular thing—it is the state of having such a strong emotion that we are compelled to action. This clarifies that Peter was not calling suffering Christians like Tabitha to *dutifully* partner with their neighbors. That would simply be a matter of the will. Peter is calling them to *become zealous* about this ancient shared human work.

This is pretty much the same call God gave the Israelites when they were brought to exile in Babylon. Recall that once in exile the Israelites were tempted to dream only of a quick escape. And so God had Jeremiah write them a letter (not unlike Peter's) to remind them of their call to pursue the common good right where they were. Jeremiah wrote, "Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare" (Jeremiah 29:7).

The word Jeremiah uses that is here translated “welfare” is *shalom*. The Israelites needed to be reminded to pursue the common good of the place God had brought them rather than dream of escaping that place. And history tells us that they did just that.

PURSUING THE COMMON GOOD TODAY

And for us today? Whether we’re in touch with the peacemaker wiring inside us or are more tempted to fight or flight or blend in, God’s Word is alive today reminding us of our shared human work, inviting us to intertwine our hearts in the well-being of our community.

This is what the original concept of a *church parish* is all about. A parish is the local community surrounding the church and everyone and everything in it: Christians, non-Christians, stores, organizations, schools, trees, parks, farms, and so on. Similar to Berry’s concept of “the membership,” *parish* is a word that “recalls a geography large enough to live life together (live, work, play, etc.) and small enough to be known as a character within it.”¹⁷ This concept has helped Christians understand how interconnected all the pieces within a community are and the importance of pursuing the common good there.¹⁸

Jesus’ call to be peacemakers, along with Peter and Jeremiah’s letters, reminds us today that we too are to seek the welfare of the *parish* God has sent us into, expressing our faith in public through surprising (and maybe even sacrificial) acts of *shalom*.¹⁹

This is exactly what we see with Greg Russinger and his friends.

Laundry Love

In 2003 Greg and some of his friends from church were zealous to pursue the common good of their community, Ventura,



California. Instead of coming up with their own ideas of how to do this, they started by listening to their neighbors. One day they were talking to a neighbor who happened to be homeless and asked him, “What would it look like for us to come alongside your life?”

The man’s response was simple and honest, “If I had clean clothes, I think people would treat me as a human being.”

That comment sparked the peacemaker instinct inside Greg and his friends. *We can help our neighbor clean his clothes*, they thought. They knew that even clean clothes are a part of shalom. So they got some detergent and some quarters and helped their neighbor clean his clothes. Word got out, and they began helping other people clean their clothes too.

Their initial efforts at simple peacemaking sparked the peacemaker instincts inside other people and thus Laundry Love was born. Today the Laundry Love movement has spread to hundreds of locations across the country.

What's it all about? "Laundry Love washes the clothes and bedding of low/no income families and person(s) across the US. We brighten the lives of thousands of people through love, dignity, and detergent by partnering with diverse groups and laundromats nationwide."^a

Greg and his friends (and now hundreds of people across the United States) are simply doing what Jeremiah and Peter remind us we are created and called to do: to pursue the common good of the place and people around us. They are making peace in their neighborhood.

1. Greg and his friends started by listening to lots of people in their community. What are the potential costs and benefits of such an approach?
2. In what different ways can helping clean clothes promote the common good of a neighborhood?
3. Why do you think Laundry Love has spread so quickly across the United States?

^aHome page of Laundry Love, www.laundrylove.org.

Clearly, God nurtured within Greg and his friends real zeal for their community, Ventura. The latest research confirms that there is something important about having a zeal or passion for the well-being of those around us. When researchers asked people who were participants in a community of action why they were pursuing the common good, they discovered a wide variety of motivations: some more internal (focused on potential

benefits to themselves and their group) and some more external (focused on potential benefits to the community).

And while internal motivations are more common on average,²⁰ researchers found that external motivations correspond to deeper engagement and more positive outcomes on the whole (see fig. 1.4.) Apparently, there is indeed something significant about what Peter called *becoming zealous* for the common good.

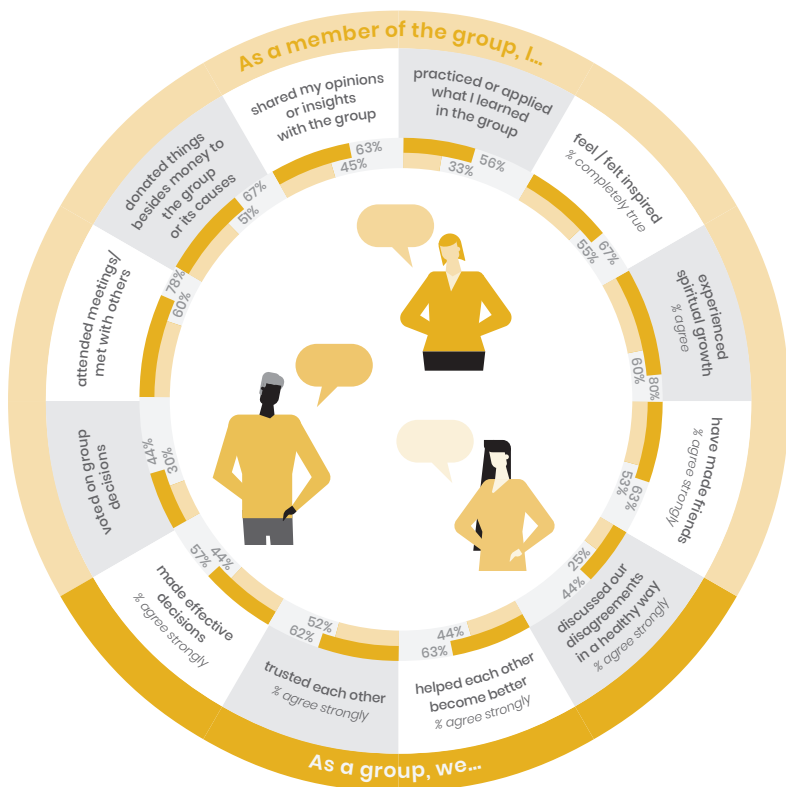
1. Why do you think internal motivations are, on average, more common than external ones?
2. What are some possible reasons that external motivations are stronger than internal ones?
3. In reflecting on past times you have given time to making a difference, would you say your main motivations were external or internal?

These findings remind us of the good news we started with: all humans have been created to pursue the common good. It's what we're made for—whether it's accomplished through a good lunch, a warm greeting, an apt name, a welcoming household, a moment of forgiveness, a new business, a good day's work, a clean load of laundry, or reading books after school with a girl from the next apartment over. My first-grade teacher, Mrs. Love, was right: *we're all in this together*.

The Power of Passion

62% of practicing Christians who participated in a community group shared a strong passion for the cause with their fellow group members. In several dimensions, this mutual enthusiasm correlates with deeper engagement and positive outcomes.

- COMMUNITY PARTICIPANTS IN GROUPS THAT SHARE A PASSION
- COMMUNITY PARTICIPANTS IN GROUPS THAT DO NOT SHARE A PASSION



n=392 U.S. practicing Christians who were part of a group, July 25–August 19, 2019. Participants were asked to think about the most successful group they'd been a part of.

FIGURE 1.4

This shared work is not simple, of course. We need to be realistic: neighborhoods (and neighbors) are notoriously complex things in this fallen world, as I learned in a tragic way back in first grade. In this fallen world, it turns out, pursuing the common good is not for the faint of heart.

Today there are hints that the time is ripe for us to revisit and reclaim this powerful shared work. What a perfect time in our history to return to this ancient path.

But is that even possible? How exactly do we pursue the common good in our neighborhood? God's Word suggests a simple but revolutionary approach, and that's what we turn our thoughts to next.

Before we do, can you imagine it? Can you picture what it would look like if Christians everywhere shook off whatever temptations most distracted their thoughts and started daydreaming shalom for their neighborhoods? Just imagine . . .

What if we went against the flow of culture around us (fighting off the temptation to isolate and consume) and instead reconnected with our neighborhoods?

- Start right now by walking (or driving) around your neighborhood and reacquaint yourself with everything involved in "the membership" right around you.
- If you don't know any of your neighbors, try to meet a few of them this week.

- If you do know some neighbors, try to reconnect with them this week.

What if our current daydreams (of escape, of recreation, of vacation, of politics) became invaded by thoughts and visions and imagination of human flourishing?

- Get a map and draw a circle around what you would consider your neighborhood (some people suggest a quarter-mile to one-mile radius).
- Do some research about your neighborhood either at your library, online, or by asking some long-term residents of the neighborhood.
- Start a shalom journal, recording eight different dreams for your neighborhood.

What if the wideness and beauty and challenge of a big shalom vision got under our skin?

- Add a neighborhood section to whatever prayer rhythm you have—interceding for your neighborhood with all the other items you pray for.
- When you pray the Lord's Prayer, say (or think) your neighborhood's name when you pray "your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." For example, I could pray "your will be done in Pierremont as it is in heaven." If you aren't in the habit of praying the Lord's Prayer—try starting this practice. (See Matthew 6:5-15.)

- Write “Pierremont Shalom” on a couple of sticky notes (inserting your own neighborhood, of course) and leave them in a couple of places where you are sure to see them during your day. See the difference it makes to have your thoughts triggered—even for a moment—back to what you wrote in your journal.

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