

BOOK REVIEW

Redemptive Service: Loving Our Neighbors Well

by Lisa P. Stephenson and Ruthie Wienk
Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2024, 216 pages

Redemptive Service: Loving Our Neighbors Well by Lisa Stephenson and Ruthie Wienk, couldn't come at a better time. Earlier this summer some of my Canadian neighbors who are sociologists declined to attend our annual Christian sociology conference for fear of less than neighborly treatment at the border. Many US churches advocate for persecuted Christians in faraway countries, but remain silent or turn their hand against their own immigrant neighbors—many of them Christians—who are being systematically and forcibly removed from the cities, towns, and neighborhoods surrounding their congregations. The YouTube star, Ms. Rachel (Rachel Griffin Accurso), who produces highly regarded children's content including catchy original songs, faced over-the-top backlash for singing "Hop Little Bunnies" with Rahaf, a 3-year-old Palestinian girl who lost both her legs in an airstrike. She was accused of anti-Semitism, ignoring the suffering of Israeli children, and of being paid by Hamas, none of which were true.

As I write, President Trump has declared his intent to use military force to remove homeless encampments from D. C. parks and other places in and around the city. And this is not the half of it. If Jesus returned today, would he find much neighborliness on the earth? Would his justice be displayed in our justice? Would followers of Christ be leading the charge to "pour out," to sacrifice for neighbors, and to display the deep countercultural love of Jesus toward friends and enemies alike? Or would they be living behind fortified walls—both material and ideological—carefully designed to keep out the sort of people Jesus calls his friends? Clearly, issues like immigration and homelessness are complex, multilayered, and impossibly difficult to address. Current attempts by the US government to round up and deport immigrants and homeless people using the inhumane tactics of ICE agents largely ignore the issues driving immigration and homelessness. As such, they are short-term and ineffective solutions. And, the current treatment of so many denigrated to "outgroup" status shows neither "Christian" concern nor neighborliness. Clearly, we need a lesson in neighborliness—you do, I do, we do—and in *Redemptive Service*, Stephenson and Wienk offer the fresh, prophetic voices we sorely need to reignite our collective imaginations and help us get about the real business of being the people of God *for the world*.

Colleagues at Lee University in Cleveland, Tennessee, Stephenson teaches systematic theology and Wienk teaches sociology and community development. *Redemptive Service* stands in testimony that theologians and sociologists should collaborate more often. Their theological and sociological contributions are balanced and equally weighted such that the book is not a theological text with sociological accents, or vice versa. The 216-page volume begins with a reflexive introduction detailing each author's journey to redemptive service. This dovetails nicely with later chapters that ask the reader to ponder their own experiences, gifts, and sense of God's calling to neighbors in need. The introduction also contains an overview of the book, which is organized into two main parts, theological then sociological, a structure they explain is intended to address *why* before *how*. Part 1 offers five chapters from Stephenson; Part 2 five from Wienk. The book concludes with a co-written chapter that walks the reader through an elaborated discussion of various dimensions of "calling," and spurs them on to new engagement with the hurting and broken ones to whom God has called us all. At the end of each chapter there are 4-6 discussion questions that would be helpful for applications of the book in college classrooms, Sunday Schools, or book clubs.

In the introduction, Stephenson and Wienk explain that "Redemptive service is ultimately about connecting our missional calling to the needs of the world and finding ways to use the unique gifts and talents God has given us to make the world a better place" (p. 7). This focus on calling is one of the strengths of the book. Redemptive service is not simply something one plugs into once in a while, but a mode of being that should be at the center of a person's energies and purpose. Later, the authors elaborate what is meant by "calling," explaining its relationship to vocation and then analytically distinguishing three types of calling which are interrelated: general calling (what God calls all people to do), missional calling (the direction toward which you aim your time, gifts, and energies), and direct calling (a specific task that God instructs an individual to do). They offer five signposts to look for in the process of discerning one's missional calling. In recent years, in colleges and churches, I've seen an emphasis on calling yield to the related concept of "career" (consider the focus on career in so much Christian college admissions material). Career has a more secular "in service of self" connotation that easily takes priority in our lives. Stephenson and Wienk provide a helpful corrective, and reminder that redemptive service flows out of calling and covenant, not career.

The authors promote the idea that "seeing" is prior to "doing." Accordingly, we must refine and deepen how we see our neighbors. At the college where I teach, I am fond of saying that sociology is about learning to see old things in new ways. And the scriptures offer no shortage of imaginative new ways of seeing our neighbors and broadening who we include as neighbor. Stephenson and Wienk offer a wide variety of frameworks and examples, both theological and sociological (which to me are "of a piece") that help the reader reframe the

“others” in their worlds, and push us to see strangers as neighbors, and our enemies in broader context.

Stephenson’s “theological” chapters (1-5) emit echoes of the recently deceased Walter Brueggemann, calling us to a more holistic reading of scripture. Starting with Genesis 1-2, Stephenson explores what it means that humans are created in God’s image and likeness—the *imago Dei*. She observes a consensus among contemporary scholars that the text ultimately points to a functional understanding of the image. The emphasis is on what we *do* as those made in God’s image, not just what we are. In effect, God’s image bearers should act like God does. God is merciful; we must be merciful. God forgives the debts of the poor; we must forgive the debts of the poor. From this functional understanding of *imago Dei*, Stephenson walks the reader through what it means to read and understand the Bible as story and to locate ourselves in this story. Later she will write that Israel’s narrative is the backstory to Jesus. Failing to grasp the Biblical narrative in its entirety, and especially the connection between the people of Israel and Jesus, leads us to individualize the gospel, seeing it as simply something “for me,” and to read the Bible devotionally without grasping its full significance for who we are and especially *what we do* as the people of God.

The Exodus experience establishes the people of Israel as a faith community rooted in covenant relationship with God. The Old Testament law codes, Stephenson explains, are not arbitrary or capricious, but represent covenant obligations. These myriad laws outline how God’s covenant people are to behave, they direct the character of the community of faith, and they frequently elaborate how fulfilling covenant obligations leads to blessing, while ignoring them leads to judgment. The law codes address a broad range of both civil and religious topics. “Moreover, a substantial number of the biblical laws have humanitarian concerns, including generosity, justice, and equality among the Israelites, with special attention for the poor, widows, orphans, and sojourners. These particular groups are at the bottom of Israelite society. Because of their social location, they are vulnerable, and the laws seek to provide for them and protect them from abuses” (p. 40). Stephenson also notes that the poor, widows, orphans, and sojourners—all strangers—are sometimes explicitly listed as beneficiaries of particular laws, while other times their inclusion is simply implied. The point, she states, is that they are some of the most at-risk persons in the community. She identifies three central themes in the law codes. First, redemption/salvation is holistic, which is why the law codes contain both religious and civil laws. Second, God’s character is shown in God’s actions, and God’s people are to do for others what God has done for them. And third, humans are to partner with God and to serve as the means by which God’s redemptive plan comes to fruition.

Stephenson concludes that the Old Testament codes are designed to benefit the weak. Many if not most of the laws reveal God’s concern with the disparity between those at the top and those at the bottom of society—something as relevant today as in Old and New Testament

times. God's people should display God's character in just lawsuits, shared harvests, generous loans, fair trade, and equality in cultic (religious) practice. In short, no one in the covenant community should be left behind; to neglect the vulnerable ones is to depart from the ways of God.

Stephenson's explanation of the Old Testament law codes provides a helpful template for navigating the Old Testament. My sense is that many people aren't sure what to do with the scores of rules and laws that permeate the Old Testament. As a result, they get ignored, misused, or appropriated in inappropriate ways. Understanding how these codes fit into the narrative of scripture, and the role they play in the covenant community, from Old Testament through New Testament, can revolutionize how people understand the Bible, and thus, how they live in response. Contemporary examples of the misuse of scripture abound—from equating the modern nation-state of Israel with the Israelites in the Old Testament, to current American government officials referencing 1 Corinthians 5:18 as a way of sacralizing the passage of their “Big Beautiful Bill” which favored the wealthy and reduced benefits to the poor. For those who wish to promote “Christian” principles in America (or anywhere else), understanding the relationship of the OT law codes to God's character, the covenant community of God's people, and the justice concerns so clearly evidenced in the life and work of Jesus is essential. That relationship might best be summarized as share generously and leave no one behind. As Stephenson writes, “We are to be icons of Christ, imaging his justice in our justice” (p. 90). I came away thinking that those pushing to display the Ten Commandments in public would do well to remember that they radically upend our world of wealth disparity, conspicuous consumption, relentless acquisition, and disregard of the vulnerable ones on the margins.

The concept of *counternarration* would provide a helpful bridge between Stephenson's emphasis on the “why” of story and Wienk's sociological tools for “how.” Like Stephenson, American theologian Bryan Stone (2007) suggests that God's people are part of a particular story. Our story should promote life, peace, goodness, compassion, humility, nonviolence, and love of neighbor. Accordingly, *everything* we *do* testifies to our story, as what we practice either confirms or contradicts what we say we believe. Stone suggests that God's people are called to “counternarrate” the worlds we inhabit. Something like evangelism, for example, is an offer to others living out rival story lines, to switch stories. Redemptive service is a compelling way to demonstrate that we—the people of God for the world—are committed to living out the “justice arc” of the biblical story. Our redemptive service can offer a compelling counternarration of the world(s) we live in. Of course, those who identify as Christians are by no means unified with respect to what the biblical story means, or what a world conformed to it should look like. But redemptive service holds great potential for those who identify as God's people to position themselves against the spiritual and social forces that relentlessly

marginalize the “other.” As we will see in the second part of *Redemptive Service*, sociology offers the tools and knowledge for translating the “why” of our story into the concrete action of redemptive service.

In Part 2, Wienk offers frameworks from sociology and community development for working out the “how” part of the book’s message. As a sociologist, it was familiar territory to me. And although I am well-acquainted with most of the concepts and theories Wienk develops, I frequently found myself mouthing the words “great example” as I read. As noted earlier, the theological/sociological pairing of the book is rare in my experience. The well-intentioned person who has a basic grasp of the theology of redemptive service Stephenson presents would be ill-equipped to translate their zeal into positive change without the sociological tools offered in the second half of the book. They would run into, as the late Columbia University sociologist Robert K. Merton (1936) put it, “The Unanticipated Consequences of Purposive Social Action.” Likewise, a sociological approach to service, uninformed by a coherent theology, runs the risk of equating progress in the “kingdom of man” with progress in the “Kingdom of God” (Ellul 1967).

Wienk begins with the story of the *Good Samaritan* as a way of introducing the reader to several sociological concepts she will develop. She points out that the various actors in the parable hold different social statuses, which affect how and what they see when they encounter a wounded man. Some, like the priest and the Levite, hold a high status, while others, like the (presumably Jewish) wounded man and the Samaritan are socially marginalized. The priest and the Levite, glance at their wounded compatriot, then avert their eyes, then abandon him. What we see and how we see matters. The Samaritan, by contrast, despite occupying an out-group status in their ethnic stratification system, looks, approaches, sees, and helps. This is reminiscent of the Bruce Cockburn (1992) lyric, “It depends on what you look at, obviously, but even more it depends on the way that you see.”

With a few sociological concepts like status, stratification, social structure, and systems, Wienk draws the reader into a discussion of poverty, social isolation, the ideology of meritocracy, and the “victim-blaming” dangers of offering “personal” explanations for poverty. She explains that beliefs about phenomena such as poverty or homelessness tend to justify either action or inaction. In an interesting example, she explains that when some churches contemplate homelessness in the abstract (as a social problem), the result tends to be compassion. However, when churches consider homelessness through the lens of specific people, dedicating various resources to them is frequently seen as a waste of time and money. But clearly, redemptive service must avoid a we/they mentality. “Loving our neighbor as ourselves requires us to listen to others and think deeply about their situations while maintaining a perspective rooted in dignity and kinship with them” (p. 129).

Wienk's "sociological" chapters explain how there is no "one size fits all" redemptive service. Drawing on the maxim of "give a person a fish and feed them for a day. Teach a person to fish and feed them for a lifetime," she walks the reader through the differences between short-term and long-term interventions, and notes that the proverb disparages the short-term approach. But is short-term aid always inferior? What if a person is starving, or has no fishing gear, or can't realistically drive out to a lake? And so on. Sometimes there must be a short-term intervention before long-term approaches have any possibility of being effective. Additionally, when churches organize to distribute aid to the needy, Wienk advises tapping into existing systems that are better equipped to access hidden populations. Churches, for example, can join with the Salvation Army to distribute coats to needy populations.

In Chapter 10, Wienk explains how the concept of social location can help us see those in need through a more complex lens. Gender, race, wealth, housing, education, citizenship, age, health, language skills, and a host of other attributes combine to advantage some and disadvantage others. Understanding how various combinations of ascribed and achieved statuses can produce inclusion for some but exclude others can help us identify who is most vulnerable among us. She offers Ruth as a Biblical example of vulnerability via social location. Ruth was female, widowed, impoverished, and Moabite (a foreigner in Israel). While we can understand Ruth's situation through these identities, they do not alone fully explain the depth of her vulnerability. Wienk writes, "She was a woman in a patriarchal society that did not give her many options to make money and feed herself. The context that limited her choices is as important as her identity as a woman. She was also a foreigner in a context of long-standing enmity between the people of Moab and the people of Israel. Ruth was a childless widow in a society that did not have systems to care for women such as her" (p. 189). Wienk advises that we should take care not to limit people to just one identity. Statuses and context combine in myriad ways to exacerbate intersectional vulnerability, and while this vulnerability is frequently invisible, with practice and the right sociological tools, we can learn to identify it.

Power is an important feature of redemptive service that is frequently overlooked, and one that sociology is well-equipped to identify and address. When Wienk writes, "When performed well, development is not something done *to* people. Rather, it is done *with* people" (p. 145-146), or "A participatory approach is development done *with* a community rather than *for* a community" (p.151), she is drawing attention to the ways that power can aid or distort redemptive service. We all have biases, ideological leanings, and self-serving attitudes. Those wishing to engage in redemptive service must learn to identify and dispense with self-serving biases, and eliminate any attempts to derive personal benefit from their service. Power separates people via systems of stratification. Wienk briefly outlines ideas from sociologist Herbert Gans who explained that poverty has not been eliminated because it continues to benefit dominant groups. Some of the "positive" functions of poverty include the creation and

maintenance of the human service industry, which provides many jobs for those who are not in poverty. As she explains, “According to Gans’ critique, any development organization whose goal is not autonomy for those being served is ultimately feeding itself and its own interests” (p. 153). Rather than the powerful using the poor to serve themselves, a fundamental aim of redemptive service is to cultivate and affirm the autonomy of those being served. This reminds me of 1 Corinthians 12:12-31 in which Paul describes the functional church as having a variety of people with different gifts and talents, where the strong serve the weak, and concern with status is eliminated through the priority of an in-Christ bond. In such a bond, power is transformed into service, and concern with self becomes concern for the other. This is the upside-down world of Jesus and the Kingdom of God.

I have only a few small criticisms of *Redemptive Service*. For one, I think that the word “community” could be more specifically defined and developed, along with its meaning for the world we live in today. I found myself wondering what qualifies as a community. Does a community necessarily have relational ties? Do communities share a geographic location? Are communities defined by socioeconomic indicators? We use the word community in so many ways—the Black community, college community, church community, gated communities, Christian school community, online communities, and so on—that the word has ceased to have specific meaning.

Second, while the authors discuss the disparity between the rich and poor, making the point that many of the OT law codes aim to address this disparity, there is no specific mention of just how much this gulf has grown in recent decades. I think that a brief discussion of the enormity of the rich/poor disparity in the US and other countries drawing on current statistics from sociologists and demographers could have aided the reader in understanding the enormity and trajectory of the wealth gap problem.

Third, I think that a few more examples drawn from contemporary Western (especially American) culture could make the authors’ critique more pointed and concrete. We live in a time where the poor are so thoroughly disparaged at every turn. As I write, immigrants to the US are being deported, denied due process, and treated inhumanely by the very same people who wish to install the Ten Commandments in public schools. However, an entry for “immigrants” is not found in the index of *Redemptive Service*. This book could identify and advocate for immigrants and other marginal and vulnerable people in our society today, further exhorting our churches to take the plight of the poor, the marginal, and the stranger more seriously, and to stand against the powerful ones in government, industry, and commerce who subvert redemptive service, and in doing so, pervert justice and oppose the God of the Old and New Testaments.

This is a book to be read and re-read. It challenged and inspired me, and primed my socio-theological imagination. It deserves wide readership. I came away convinced that theologians and sociologists should work together more often.

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