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Faith Lived Out in Love for Community: A Review of *In Search of Common Good*

Abstract

"Meador's book is about the possibility of common life amid contemporary fragmentation."

Posting about the book *In Search of Common Good* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

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Comments

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in things

September 5, 2019

Faith Lived Out in Love for Community: *A Review of In Search of Common Good*

Justin Bailey

Title: *In Search of Common Good: Christian Fidelity in a Fractured World*

Author: Jake Meador

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A few years ago, our family moved from the West Coast (Los Angeles) to the Midwest (northwest Iowa). A friend questioned whether I would find a satisfying intellectual life in my new home: “Do you think you’ll be able to ask the questions that you want to ask? And do you think you’ll get good answers?” The implication was not that Midwesterners are stupid, but that the setting is homogenous. My research has centered on how forces of secularity and hypermodernity shape culture and form faith. A culturally and religiously diverse city-center, my friend argued, would be the preferable situation for my academic explorations.

He had a vested interest, but he also might be right. Yet, I have found that people in the Middle West are asking many of the same questions, with a different well of resources from which to draw. City-dwellers tend to be transient; in the heartland roots run deep. Individuals are woven into family and community like threads in a many-layered

tapestry. It can be a beautiful and lifegiving mosaic of meaning. It also means that fractures are more deeply felt.

Jake Meador's *In Search of Common Good* is the latest in a parade of books wrestling with the new conditions for faith in contemporary culture. What makes Meador's book unique is its midwestern sensibility, its Tolkien-esque "love of small things, fidelity to small places" (21). Rooted in Meador's home in Lincoln, Nebraska, the book at times reads like a love letter to the slower rhythms of Midwestern life.

Like many in the Midwest, Meador grew up in a Christian home. It is also because of the kind of home in which he grew up that he is *still* a Christian: "Both in my parents' home and the home of my maternal grandmother, who lived a few blocks away, I found an irresistibly compelling faith. It was devout, joyful, serious, simply, and given to the life of humble, largely invisible service the Scriptures call God's people to" (13). It is this vision of faith lived out in community that Meador wants to reclaim.

It is precisely community—the interdependence that comes from neighbors knowing each other and caring for each other—that is being unwound. We are becoming a nation of strangers. Our withdrawal from public institutions, from participation in voluntary organizations, and from household formation has depleted our social capital, leading to economic disparity and relational barrenness. These crises have provoked renascent socialism, blood and soil populism, and an ever-widening abyss threatening to swallow those who wish to live somewhere between the two.

Meador's book is about the possibility of common life amid contemporary fragmentation. Parts one and two are diagnostic, describing the "breakdown of community" and the triple loss (of meaning, wonder, and good work) that lies beneath the surface. Parts three and four are prescriptive, laying a foundation of practices and postures to rebuild our life together.

Meador weaves social theory together with contemporary examples, showing how the modern conception of freedom has led to fragmentation. Freedom, we are told, is what makes America so great. But the problem is that to the degree that we are free from others, we are also alienated from others. In our quest to achieve freedom *from*, we have lost freedom *for*, the kind of freedom that has roots, a story that can bestow a wider horizon of meaning. As Meador writes: "If there is no common good that all people are unified around and wish to pursue collectively, then there is no shared thing that people are trying to take hold of and enjoy together. There is only a bundle of competing private goods each individual wants for themselves." (101)

Meador's diagnosis is incisive, but those looking for specific policy proposals will be disappointed. For Meador, our fixation on policy is part of the problem. We should rather begin with doctrine, some shared vision of reality about what it means to be human, then move towards virtue formation, and only then start talking about policy.

Accordingly, Meador's penultimate chapter on politics lays out three important doctrines for our political life: *solidarity*, *sphere sovereignty*, and *subsidiarity*. By *solidarity* he means a "sense of shared membership," the recognition that human beings do not exist primarily alone but in community. Solidarity (the good of others to whom I am bound) must displace sovereignty (my right to maximize myself) as the chief political good. By *sphere sovereignty*, he means the Kuyperian idea that society is composed of various spheres with unique callings (family, church, marketplace, etc.) which all must work together to promote the common good. In order for each to do its part well, each sphere must be given its own dignity and authority to operate within its limits and should not attempt to rule all the other spheres. By *subsidiarity*, he means a delegation of responsibility according to scale: "when a social problem arises, the body that should adopt it is the smallest, most local body possible. If the problem can be solved by a household, it should. If a household can't but a neighborhood can, then the neighborhood should. The progression simply continues on upward until you get to the largest social institution, which is usually the state." (166)

These three doctrines are helpful so far as they go. But, they are also in profound tension. The reality is that there are many social issues that should have been addressed at more local levels long ago. They were not, and now the scale has ballooned to a level that only massive policy changes at the federal level, it seems, could solve them. Addressing these humanitarian crises calls for something like emergency action, overreaching the normal limits of sphere sovereignty. There are many who care deeply about these crises but who also are loath to give such wide-reaching power to the state, fearing that emergency action will become business as usual, permanently eclipsing the space of other spheres.

If our tendency is to seek "one sphere to rule them all," Meador is a hobbit, convinced that the fidelity of commitment to a place and to people is the most difficult and meaningful work we can do. He writes, "The most basic and proper work of Christian citizenship is to cultivate the virtues of humility and wisdom in order to make oneself a gifted public servant in whatever venue God has called one to." (174)

To many, this will seem quietist, even quaint. But, Meador's hope for renewal ultimately lies beyond the walls of this world. I found this deeply challenging, like a good sermon. I was caught up in the problem, captivated by the possibilities of living in a new way, but

ultimately consoled by the promise of a kingdom that is coming. The final chapter brought tears to my eyes, and I will close with the passage that I found so moving:

There are things we experience in this world, physical earthly things, that are beautiful and tell us something about the world to come... a good family meal where the only thing more pleasant than the food is the conversation, the pleasure taken in making something beautiful that we mean to share with someone else, whether that is a painting or a cake or a story.

The good news of the Christian faith is that these things will not fail and that the delight we derive from them today, delight that God smiles upon since he is the giver of the gift, will continue on into eternity, world without end. Christ's promise to his people to come to our rescue and renew both us and the world will not fail, even when the church has been compromised and assailed by enemies both within and without. These things will not fail when the world itself seems to be failing. (185)