

Nine Reasons Christians Fail to Love Their Neighbors

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I think that we would all agree that when it comes to understanding God's mission, God's people and even Godself, context matters. If we agree with this assertion, then it follows that we can (and should?) ask: how does our context affect our understanding and responses to other theological reflections and praxis?

I thought about this when recently (and repeatedly) I was asked: *Why don't* we love our neighbors? Good question.

What in our current context has muted this calling and responsibility? What characteristics of Gospel, church and world today might contribute to our lack of engagement in the keeping of the greatest commandment? I came up with nine:

[Why don't we love our neighbors? Good question. Click To Tweet](#)

Gospel Issues

We're believers but not followers.

Many churches are full of 'believers' who have 'said the prayer' and feel assured of their salvation and yet, do not appear to be seeking to be—let alone helping others seek to be—more and more like Jesus. If being a Christian is simply a matter of what we believe than whether or not we choose to 'obey', the greatest commandment is a moot

point. When our context has taught us that what we believe is all that matters, well then, what we believe is all that matters (and how we live or what we do or don't do, doesn't).

The Good News is about personal salvation vs. the Kingdom Come Near

When the Gospel is reduced to a personal response in the form of a prayer and/or public profession (often in conjunction with baptism), once the deed is done, nothing more is required of me: I'm saved. But if the Gospel is the good news that Jesus has come near and is transforming the whole world into His Kingdom for the redemption of all things, there is more to it!

We are being invited to join the Spirit on God's mission, sharing God's story in word and deed. If the good news of the Kingdom of God come near is Jesus, then the good news today of the Kingdom of God come near is us, His Body. Accordingly, I must ask myself, perhaps daily, how am I joining with God's people in my neighborhood to be good news, the Kingdom of God come near?

Oh, how our context matters.

What Gospel context are you and your people assuming? We've been intentionally confronting these defaults, our inherited contextual frameworks by dwelling in Kingdom texts and encouraging and challenging each other to practices that make our lives our witness.

[What Gospel context are you and your people assuming? Click To Tweet](#)

Church Issues

We 'Go To' Church (but we are the Church!)

Our current dominant mode of attractional church works against the call and practice of good neighboring. Good neighboring is a direct challenge to the consumer driven model that makes the building, staff and institution the provider of Christian goods and services.

In this context, the invitation to faithful presence and good neighboring is never issued. We miss the opportunity to experience the kind of transformation that sanctifies and moves us out of the church building and program into our neighborhoods with practices that posture the Kingdom. The incarnational nature of God's mission is lost and thus, never embodied and shared with our neighbors.

Church is a Space, not Our Place/neighborhood

In North America, it is estimated that more than 90 percent of churchgoers attend 'a church' outside of their neighborhood. Yet 'a church' that operates in a space, a building which is not the 'habitus' of its people, is a service provider not a stakeholder. Service providers provide services but they are not 'one of us.' They are not 'living among' as a neighbor. They feel no particular responsibility for the place that space is in (because it is not their 'place'- it's the church's (i.e. where the building and the staff are). If context matters, then making a commitment to our place where we live, our neighborhood, makes a huge difference for our discipleship and mission; and for our neighbors.

The 'church' disciples, not me

Many ordinary believers in our churches have been so conditioned by Christendom's positional postures that they do not see themselves as the church, as God's sent ones, ambassadors, priests of their neighborhoods, or, as Frost and Hirsh put it, little Jesus'es [1]. They do not believe they have enough 'expertise' to be disciplers in their neighborhoods, nor do they perceive it as their job. They perceive it to be the church's job, by which they mean the paid (and sometimes unpaid) staff that hold positions in the church's organizational structure. How are we working to

change that mindset such that all Christians recognize that we are all called out and empowered to love our neighbors, and bear witness in the places God has sent us?

If our church context teaches us that our job is simply to come and receive, we're missing out on who we're already called and made to be as Christ followers!

[If our church teaches us that our job is simply to come and receive, we're missing out! Click To Tweet](#)

God is at work in the church, not the world.

Of course, we would never say that, at least not aloud, but we live it. So often it's 'us' and 'them' but what if, as in Jesus' day, there is us?! What if every human being is a unique and beautiful, loved and valued creation of God made in His image? Then we are missing a lot! We won't recognize all that God wants to teach us about Godself through the other, all the gifts, passions and personality of the people 'outside' of 'our' community (our church). Yet, we have so often been incredibly surprised and blessed by God at work in and through our neighbours! What a joy it is—and a *paradigm shift*—to join our neighbours in ordinary living without the fear or the assumption that somehow they are on *the other side*. The other side of what- our preconceived notions, prejudices and exclusivism? Jesus said, Luke 9:50, "whoever is not against you is for you."

Culture Issues

Letting Go of Lingo

Increasingly we are living in a society that no longer understands 'Christianese'. Yet, how often does the church still assume that 'one size fits all' in terms of the communication of the good news? As Scot Boren and Alan Roxburgh explain,

It's not about being trendy or catering to the culture but about being missionaries in [our] neighborhoods, shaping the gospel in the forms and language of the local people. [2]

Discovering how to show and tell the Story, which includes our stories and our neighbors' stories, suggests a posture in which our lives and our love, not just a tract, communicate God's good news.

The Idol of Busyness

Our cultural context asserts that our value is determined by our productivity and therefore we are worth more if we're busy! And our churches are full of the busiest of people! In fact, when I talk with church attenders about the call to love our neighbors, the most frequent response is, we're too busy at the church—and they are! But is all this busyness a reflection of the Kingdom? If so, then taking time for relationships, celebration, hanging out in our neighborhoods and enjoying life together is, well, a waste of time. What would happen if more and more church people were to override such cultural illusions with Kingdom values like Sabbath, gratitude and eating together?

Loss of and longing for Community/neighborhood

There is, in North American culture, a growing recognition that community is important for our health and well-being as individuals and as a society. This cultural context is clearly an invitation from the Spirit for us to join in with what God is doing in the world, in our neighborhoods.

As long as church people identify their primary community as 'the church' —her building, agenda, fellowship and programs- they'll be oblivious to the community forming right next door! I have heard it said by church folk based on the above context, for example, that they have no need for any other community. What if it's not about what they

need? And what if what we think we need has been so shaped by the context of our church life, that we are not even aware of the 'abundant community'[3] that God is shaping and inviting us to participate in, right where we live. What if the church has a wonderful opportunity to embody 'love for another' as she learns again how to dwell with and amongst her neighbors, nurturing inclusive community, amongst tax collectors and sinners, *like Jesus*.

Now that's a context that matters.

The First Step

What's your first step? Inviting your congregation to (re-)discover neighborhood "not as objects of outreach programs or social service good deeds but as the real, flesh and bone place where God takes up residence and meets us all. This is a plea for the rediscovery of the local, the next-doorness of Christian life in a culture that spins us apart in a thousand different directions." [4]

What's your first step? We began with simple, short-term experiments in our neighborhoods –like sitting on our front porch or going for a walk around our block– then sharing our stories and allowing them to contest our inherited 'contexts'. The truth is, we're all contextual theologians and it's time for us to take up the challenge of thinking theologically about our beliefs and practices so that we can continually be responsive to the Spirit at work in our contexts, however 'post-' they might be.

1- A term I first heard used by Alan Hirsch. Actual source unknown.

2- Alan Roxburgh and M. Scott Boren. *Introducing the Missional Church*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2009), 131.

3- The title of John McKnight and Peter Block's book, *Abundant Community*. Also [an initiative that is changing our neighborhoods, one block at a time](#).

4- Alan Roxburgh reflecting on Holt's text, [God Next Door](#) (one of my favorite books).