

Book Review

The Outward Focused Life: Becoming a Servant in a Serve-Me World

Dave Workman

(Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008) 189 pages

Reviewed by Douglas F. Olena, Ph.D. candidate, Cardiff University, Wales

Dave Workman, senior pastor of Vineyard Community Church in Cincinnati, Ohio, presents stories and short reflections with one purpose in mind—to encourage believers not only to look at people outside the Church, but to do something to make their lives just a little bit better. Workman encourages believers to engage outsiders’ attention by doing things with a different attitude, distinct from the mercenary pose that suggests, “We do good in the community so that people will come to our church.” He encourages Christians just to love people irrespective of the consequences. Most frequently, he notes, the consequences are not obvious. People most often take the small charity or kindness with a smile and are never seen again. The extraordinary, heart-wrenching stories that fill this book remind the reader of the neediness of one’s neighbors and how connecting to people in the body of Christ brings redemption.

The book is composed of short, one- to two-page stories, each with a single focus, organized into nine collections. Though the collections are uniquely titled, with a few exceptions, I had a difficult time identifying clear distinctions between the stories. The collections may just indicate differences in emphasis instead of differences in category.

Aside from some quibble about structure, the content of the book itself defocuses

structure. This is not a theological text, unless one considers doing kindness to people an interesting theological puzzle. This is a book for those who do not spend their lives with books. Workman aims to demonstrate how, with no training and little resource, one can make a difference. One need not have completed Christianity 101 to understand these principles. He does not focus on Jesus’ profound answers to difficult questions but merely points out that Jesus’ connection to the lost in His community, His personal touch, His companionship, and His interest in the welfare of people draws believers into a community of caring individuals. This reality serves as the light set on a hill that should remain uncovered. While not a “how to” manual, one could certainly begin a ministry from the hints in this book. Workman provides a Web site where people can receive assistance in implementing the principles presented: <http://outwardfocusedlife.com/>

Although the book is not an autobiography, Workman reflectively finds his way into its pages. He tells of his journey toward servanthood, his struggle with personal attitudes that fight an outward-focused life, and the appraisals of his own self-centered motivations. However, being a servant transforms a person, and so he includes that process of transformation as part of the story.

In the ninth collection of stories, Workman connects the work and the worker. It is here, in the process of becoming a new person in Christ on the journey of life, that Workman hits a home run. Not as a matter of utility or intention, but as a matter of fact: serving people changes the servant. Here the remark

of Jesus, that it is more blessed to give than to receive, takes flesh in the modern church, not in the antagonisms or ambiguities of theological or doctrinal quarrels. Servants with the right attitude are some of the happiest, well-adjusted people in the world.