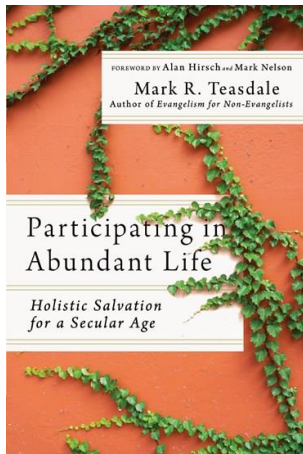


## BOOK REVIEW

# Participating in Abundant Life: Holistic Salvation for a Secular Age

*By Mark R. Teasdale*

Reviewed by Gregory P. Leffel



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Mark Teasdale is Professor of Evangelism at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, United Methodist clergy, and church consultant. He worries that clergy, church members, Christian activists, development workers, and even his seminary students are entirely tongue-tied when trying to explain the content of their salvation and their motivation for social mission in public life. Too often, he notes, they become timid, downplaying personal faith and evangelism in their social activism to get along in pluralistic public spaces (or we might ask, to attract funding?). Or else withdrawing from social involvement in fear that secular values will confuse their evangelistic mission.

Teasdale writes to clear the air about what salvation means in and for the world and the common good. He wants to help “Christians better articulate their beliefs ... [and to equip] Christians to live out their salvation in the world as it is, learning how they can maneuver in a secular culture without feeling embattled or as if they must trade off the fullness of their faith to be effective” (27). Effective, that is, in evangelistic witness to their faith as well as effective in their public-facing actions to support humanitarian aid, development programs, and community organizing.

Drawing from the Good Shepherd—“I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly,”—Teasdale defines salvation as “abundant life.” A fullness to be experienced by participating in God’s life-giving abundance now as well as in eternity. Salvation’s abundant life is much more present-tense, earthly, wholesome, lively, and social than Christians often conceive it. Even now, salvation breaks into the world’s life as people of good will work for peace, justice, and human fulfillment. People of faith naturally join them while also pointing to the source of abundance in God’s mission of salvation.

Teasdale is not alone in this perspective. For example, the World Council of Churches Commission on World Mission and Evangelism’s 2013 document *Together Towards Life: Mission in Changing Landscapes* (Keum 2013) makes much the same point about pursuing abundant life. While refreshing, Teasdale’s argument is not new. His remarkable innovation is to bring this pursuit down to earth by measuring it; that is, by defining specific quantifiable criteria Christians may use to measure our progress toward bringing forth abundance in public life.

These metrics are grouped around three concepts: standard of living, quality of life, and eternal life, measures, he argues, that express the common human desire to flourish and that are shared in one way or another by all people of good will. Each of the three concepts gets chapter-length treatment, offering theological and sociological arguments to justify them, and then—here is the breakthrough—defining them quantitatively using commonly accepted public criteria. These include the UN’s Human Development Index and Sustainable Development Goals, the Global Happiness and Well-Being Policy Report, and the OECD’s Better Life Index, among other measures.

By drawing upon objective measures developed through well-vetted social science research and that represent broad consensus nationally and internationally, Teasdale has appropriated a common language—i.e., everybody can agree on improving people’s standard of living and quality of life—to get Christians, persons of other faiths or no faith, civil

society actors, even politicians on the same page to work for the common good. And to do it efficiently and effectively by providing criteria to set mutually-agreed-upon, measurable goals, and then to measure progress in attaining them. On this common ground religious and secular groups can build a kind of missional ecumenism based on shared vision and values, a space where Christians can demonstrate their faith and be understood, even appreciated, as they try to bring eternal life to bear abundantly on the present.

Teasdale writes most directly for the benefit of congregations and lay leaders, pastors, and future pastors (his seminary students). His book is a primer, though a sophisticated one, not a research monograph. It fits into the evangelism genre but overlaps with development studies. It can be read along with William J. Abraham's *The Logic of Evangelism (1989)* and Bryant L. Myers's *Walking with the Poor (2013)* for greater depth. Denominational and other Christian NGO leaders will appreciate it if just by being warmly reminded why they do what they do. But with its use of metrics and developmental concepts, the book also provides a useful language to help NGO leaders better communicate with supporting congregations and contributors. The book may also be helpful in strengthening the faith of new development workers who might well be shaken by the difficulty of their work in public settings.

For a "practical" book, *Participating in Abundant Life* is admirably rich in its combination of biblical, theological (broadly Protestant; curiously Roman Catholics and Catholic Social Teaching are left out of his ecumenical picture), philosophical, sociological, and global development perspectives. There is a lot here. Lay persons may find it a bit challenging, but not terribly technical; an experienced lay leader or pastor could easily lead parishioners through it. Indeed, it provides a solid foundation for a serious and necessary program of discipleship and spiritual formation for Christian engagement in public life.

A solid foundation, yes, but not the whole building. In an era dominated by the managerial expectations of performance philanthropy, analytic measures, and objective outcomes, congregations will benefit from Teasdale's recommendations to quantify their public engagement and meet the accountability and quality measurements the public expects. Such a professional approach can move well-intended but unfocused charity towards concrete social investment. Teasdale provides the rationale to create public-facing programs and simple numerical measurement methods scaled to the needs of pastors and their congregations to implement them. Seasoned development specialists will necessarily have a more sensitive, extensive, and sophisticated mix of quantitative and qualitative measures.

Let us also remember that fundamental social transformation is a job rough enough to try the faith and wear out the commitment of any saint. Yes, structural injustices must fall, legal and economic systems be reformed, minds changed, the causes of poverty erased. Sadly, in today's contentious times, when we engage with the deep political and economic roots of the problems that prevent many from finding a decent standard of living and quality of life, we discover that the "common good" is a rare and contested commodity; that one's "person of good will" is another's "agent of destruction," that rancorous politics divide the well-meaning from one another. There is no reason why Christians cannot thrive in this tangled environment, because we are called to this sacrificial fight for the world's sake, even if we struggle to find abundant life there, but Teasdale gives us little guidance in dealing with such inevitable political conflict. Being wise as serpents and innocent as doves requires a sophistication that the church rarely achieves and *Participating in Abundant Life* is only a start.

All the same, Mark Teasdale has framed in a paradigm to pull the church out of itself, and to put it squarely into public life where he believes it can thrive. He has laid a foundation for congregations and individual Christians to build upon.

## References

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