
Reviewed by John E. Bauer

Is the Christian church an organization? Is it an institution? Or is it a movement? Is the Christian church in North America focused on mission outreach or more on survival in a hostile world? Reggie McNeal creates a powerful argument in this book that the various human manifestations of the church in North America think and function organizationally and institutionally, to the detriment and abandonment of the command our Lord gave everyone in his church to preach the good news to the entire world. McNeal painfully describes the kind of mentality within the church that makes it virtually impossible to approach the emerging postmodern culture, which thinks about the church as something for church people, not for them.

In his attempt to change how church people think about themselves and the mission of the church, McNeal poses six tough questions. In each case, he frames the question in contrast to what he calls the six wrong questions.

1. a. Wrong question: How do we do church better?  
   b. Tough question: How do we deconvert from Churchianity to Christianity?

2. a. Wrong question: How do we grow this church? (How do we get them to come to us?)  
   b. Tough question: How do we transform our community? (How do we hit the streets with the gospel?)

3. a. Wrong question: How do we turn members into ministers?  
   b. Tough question: How do we turn members into missionaries?

4. a. Wrong question: How do we develop church members?  
   b. Tough question: How do we develop followers of Jesus?

5. a. Wrong question: How do we plan for the future?  
   b. Tough question: How do we prepare for the future?

6. a. Wrong question: How do we develop leaders for church work?  
   b. Tough question: How do we develop leaders for the Christian movement?

In trying to answer the tough questions, McNeal provides an excruciating analysis of why those in the church are prone to ask the wrong questions. And much of his criticism comes from a deep conviction that the church is out of touch with the culture in which it exists—a culture that feels a deep spiritual hunger, but that does not necessarily equate spirituality with religion.

It is natural for Christian denominations to lose their focus. Centuries of doctrinal controversies have led to sophisticated refinements in teaching. Tremendous energy has been expended to find reasons to remain separate from other Christians as opposed to finding ways to share the gospel with the lost.

This book is not for the faint of heart. Nor is it for those who are comfortable with the declining state of affairs in American Protestantism. But for those who are not afraid to be challenged in their thinking, and for those who have a passion for sharing Jesus with others, McNeal’s book has the potential to transform the way people think about the church and its mission to preach the good news to every nation.
And for those who suspect that McNeal espouses things like throwing out traditional worship, or dispensing with serious Bible study, they will find comfort in the fact that he does neither. Style does not matter. What matters is that the church understands the culture— not to adopt it, but to engage it for the same reasons a missionary does— in order to gain a hearing for the gospel. In such a church, Bible study will remain of great importance, but in places and in ways that do not conform to the traditional “classes inside the walls” model. In such a church, worship style is less important than the substance of worship, but at the same time, the church is not afraid to allow forms of worship to emerge that speak to the hearts of new believers.

Can the Christian church in North America shift the paradigm toward a mission-driven focus? McNeal has his doubts. It is the nature of institutions and bureaucracies to resist change in favor of preserving the heritage and tradition that has been built up over many years. Perhaps one of McNeal’s most astounding assertions is that persecution of Christian leaders who have a passion for mission work in the American culture comes from inside the church.

This book is a must read for pastors and lay leaders who anguish over every lost soul and who desire to see the church focused and committed to saving the souls of those who need to know Jesus.


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Bill Hybels is the senior pastor at one of America’s biggest “mega-churches,” Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, Illinois. It is only after 30 years of service at Willow that he has felt confident writing a book about leadership in the church. And yet, even after 30 years, he remains more convinced than ever that the local congregation is the hope of the world (or at least the community it serves) and that effective servant-leadership is the key to its successful fulfillment of its mission.

Hybels sought for many years to determine the attributes of a healthy and vibrant church. From his extensive travels he came to understand that successful ministries are not unique to one denomination. Nor are they the results of careful planning or location. And very surprising indeed was his conclusion that “good preaching and teaching alone do not ensure ministry vitality.” With respect to the latter, he writes that “sermon junkies tend to stay in their comfortable pews, growing ever more knowledgeable while becoming ever less involved in the surrounding community. Conversions are rare because there is little outreach. The body is being fed and satisfied in a corporate teaching setting, but that’s about all that’s happening” (p. 25).

Instead, what Hybels found to be common among vital ministries was that “they are led by people who possess and deploy the spiritual gift of leadership.” And so he concludes that “the local church is the hope of the world and its future rests primarily in the hands of its leaders” (p. 27).

What follows then is Hybels’ treatise on church leadership, what it consists of, how it is developed, and how it is utilized in service to God in the church. His book includes chapters dealing with vision casting, strategic planning that turns vision into action, and team building. He shares numerous personal experiences from his ministry at Willow Creek related to resource development (i.e., stewardship). He provides practical assistance for developing emerging leaders and for discovering and developing one’s own leadership style. And to avoid the temptations that often come from being a leader, Hybels relentlessly pounds the concept of servant-leadership, reminding the reader that it is God who calls people to lead so that “the gospel be preached, the lost be found, the believers be
equipped, the poor be served, the lonely be enfolded into community, and [so that] God gets the credit for it all” (p. 28). Although borrowed from business and academic sources, Hybels’ thoughts on leadership are framed by Christ’s overriding command for his church to “share the good news.”

This book is recommended for church leaders who desire to develop the spiritual gift of leadership for the glory of God.