

Interaction with Mark Driscoll and Gerry Breshears' *Vintage Church: Timeless Truths and Timely Methods* (Crossway, 2008)

In *Vintage Church: Timeless Truths and Timely Methods*, Mark Driscoll and Gerry Breshears present a practical approach to ecclesiology, largely drawn from the life of Mars Hill Church, in Seattle, Washington, though certainly not limited by it. It attempts to cast a theological and theoretical vision for what Jesus' Church, especially the local church, should look like and think about while in this world. In addition, the authors suggest some practical suggestions and principles to guide a church's ministry. In the Preface, we find that Driscoll's ecclesiology is based on his Christology. Just as Jesus is a priest, king, and prophet, so should Body, the church, share in these functions. Along the way, the authors propose a number of key points.

First, a church's first passion and purpose for existence is the gospel. This is an unmistakable emphasis throughout the book. An extensive explication of the gospel is laid out throughout the entirety of the first chapter. Churches must be on guard against every sort of subtle substitute. Religiosity, overemphasizing an aspect of Christianity, and confusing the church with Christ are but a few ways this can happen. The first and last consideration of all the church does is Jesus—how does the church make known the name of Jesus so that people will love him, not themselves, not the church, not morality, nor a number of other good things? The Church exists for Jesus, nothing else and no one else.

Second, we must thoughtfully consider the nature and function of the church. This includes being able to “define” a church, in contrast to merely talking about a healthy or ideal church. This simple measure will protect the church from devolving to some mere social, volunteer group that takes on whatever passing interest that takes hold of its members. However, we must allow for the diversity of ways that the Bible talks about “church” (37), which includes not

merely a single local assembly and the cosmic, universal church; it also refers to the entire church in a city (1 Cor 1:2; 2 Cor. 1:1; 1 Thess. 1:1) or region (Acts 9:31).

Third, one cannot overstate the importance of church leadership. It is a non-negotiable that churches have a clear biblical understanding of what elders and deacons are called to be and do. In every sphere addressed by the book, the authors show how church leaders direct preaching, church discipline, strategy, priorities, philosophy of ministry, and set an example for Christ-like living.

Fourth, “to continually pursue unity a church must continually pursue change” because a “living church must change in the same way that a living person grows and changes, hopefully toward maturity” (147). Therefore, the authors can rightly assert, “The price of your church growing so that more people are worshipping Jesus is conflict” (147). Though unity is crucial, it is not the ultimate goal of the church, since unity always implies a center or focus. However, it is Jesus, not sin, sports, nor secondary issues, which should unite the church. Defining primary, secondary, and preferential issues is important for maintaining unity. Even subtle things like “doing too much” (146-147) can divide the church. Anytime God is truly at work in a place, we should recognize that we should not expect to always be able to “keep up with all that Jesus is doing” (155). This calls for faith and a single passion for the gospel.

Fifth, church discipline is essential for glorifying God. Though neglected, it fosters both the long-term numerical and character growth of a church. A church that takes Jesus seriously takes the gospel seriously. Therefore, it takes sin seriously. This means we think through the manner we do church discipline, which is not to be entirely identified as excommunication (a common confusion). Churches do not love Jesus nor people well if sin is little attended to.

Sixth, whether in the use of technology, church structure, methods, and ministry priorities,

local churches must intentionally foster flexibility and pursue creative means to gospel ends. This should not collapse into a love of the new; instead, churches must diligently study the culture, the needs of people, and news ways of making the gospel present among those who do not love Jesus. This will require a lot of humility by the church leaders, especially the senior leadership. Diverse skill sets will be needed; more so, churches must have the courage and love to take risks. Simply by listening and observing, the church will learn a lot about itself, the world, and areas of expertise seemingly unrelated to “theological” work (like technology, economics, etc.).

Seventh, a minor but powerful point is reiterated twice in the book (240, 309): those who frequently are most worried about “worldliness” are actually the ones to take on that form of worldliness that Jesus most often and directly opposed—man-made religiosity that emphasize rules and external appearances to the neglect of the heart. Neglected within most conversations about ecclesiology is serious reflection on how to avoid a stagnant church culture that, characteristically, is either syncretistic or sectarian. It is rare for leaders to make this an overt priority, to continually reflect on which way the church is drifting in one season or another. Elders should, in this way, be constantly “suspicious” of itself, *because* it is ever conscious of the powerful influence of indwelling sin.

Eighth, relevance is neither measured by how much the church is either like or unlike the surrounding culture; rather, “being relevant” happens when “the church co-opts the hopes and dreams of the city (for example, racial harmony and generosity to the most needy) by offering the gospel as the true hope for such things” (301). Jesus is always relevant.

When evaluating *Vintage Church: Timeless Truths and Timely Methods*, the reader must cast aside the two most common ways people talk about the church; either ecclesiology is treating as an abstract compilation of teachings on the church, or a text will amount to a “self-help book” for the most part void of Scripture. In this case, Driscoll and Breshears propose a vision of church that is rooted in Christology, emerges out of a balanced definition of *any* church (not just a healthy one), and takes into consideration the ever-changing realities that are faced in ministry. In short, the most valuable aspect of their work is that no function, structure, person, or theological topic related to the church is important unless it intentionally aims to help people know and love Jesus. Everything else—whether traditions, models, or methods—is negotiable. This book practically shows how this one passion impacts every decision in the church.

Because the authors are both well-read elders in their churches, they communicate what ecclesiology looks like in practice. In a word, it’s messy. Therefore, each chapter is full of stories that illustrate the process they have undertaken, even if it was full of mistakes, and not just their idea of an ideal end product. Further, since the authors plainly assert the primacy of the gospel above secondary issues, the tone is not dogmatic. Nevertheless, the authors constantly bring the reader back to Scripture, being careful not to create rules and barriers where the Scripture is silent. As a result, they avoid any hint of pragmatism, prosperity teaching, or an “us versus them” mentality. This volume is immediately useful for anyone involved in local church ministry. While there is definite value given the role of elders, yet those who read this book will see that growing or maturing a church requires ongoing, earnest, and diverse kinds of training that will constantly produce new leaders who can then initiate new ministries, imagine solutions to emerging problems, and maintain essential functions of the church.

Several questions arise when reading *Vintage Church*, including:

1. Given the priority of the gospel above all things [i.e. ecclesiology comes out of Christology], might it be healthier to form denominations and partnerships around soteriology more than ecclesiology?
2. What would be the priorities of implementing a change of vision in a church *from* a institutional, traditional mindset *to* a more missional philosophy of ministry as suggested in this book? [While we should not reduce it to “steps”, yet what would be some of the broad steps or the order that we would expect to use in introducing such change?]
3. If pastors are to a) form leadership structures more in keeping with Scripture, and b) make the Bible more *functionally* central, then would it not be wise for many Baptist churches to change their “deacon boards” to “elder boards”? This is not only for the sake of vernacular/semantics, but makes a more clear appeal to Scripture, thus clarifying what is required of church leaders.
4. When Driscoll attempts to say that all Christians are “missionaries”, does he say too much? Specifically, as Stephen Neill said, if everything is mission, nothing is mission. Is appealing to the Latin (“to send”) as a justification helpful, since we could also say the “Church” refers to all Christians. Yet, the term “missionary” and “church” have very definitive denotations, regardless of the technicalities of usage. Therefore, might this way of speaking actually contribute to missional churches losing focus on international missions?
5. What are some concrete ways that men can be influenced, trained, or equipped so that they truly lead churches, not merely following their wives? [Is there more than just having a “men’s Bible study”?]
6. In order to protect churches from lawsuits and make clear the meaning of church membership, should not every church require the signing of a church covenant in order to join a church?
7. How can churches assist believers in strategically penetrating various “relationship networks” in the goal of transforming culture?
8. Could this vision of the church (as presented by the authors) be applied to Church Planting Movements? Why or why not? How might missionary strategies be adapted to take seriously the points made in the book?