

A REVIEW OF JAMES EMERY WHITE'S *RETHINKING THE CHURCH*

A Book Review

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*Rethinking the Church*, by James Emery White, is a practical book about how the church must change in order to fulfill the Great Commission. The change that White advocates is what he labels, “the radical redesign of church processes,”<sup>1</sup> with the emphasis placed on the word “process.” White defines “process” as a “complete end-to-end set of activities that together fulfill the purposes and mission of the church.”<sup>2</sup> Essentially, these processes form a “fivefold purpose”<sup>3</sup> of the church. The fivefold purpose is evangelism, discipleship, ministry, worship, and community. The goal to which these processes are moving toward is “reaching nonbelievers for Christ.”<sup>4</sup> The success of these efforts is then measured by how effective a church is in reaching the lost and seeing their own people continually nurtured and growing in the Lord. According to White, once the above material is in place, the work of establishing a “strategy for our day” is the next step in rethinking the church.

In chapters two through seven, White expounds upon the fivefold purpose of the church by considering how the church can “rethink” the processes of fulfilling their purpose. In chapter two, White takes a fairly typical approach to the process of evangelism by stressing the need for the church to rethink the method and environment of evangelism, rather than compromising the message of evangelism. In chapter three, White discusses the long-term nature of discipleship by showing how true change takes place over time and in the context of relationships. In chapter four, White encourages an every member ministry that transcends the traditional paradigm of “program-driven” ministry and instead opts for the relational approach that identifies needs and organizes accordingly to meet the needs of others. In chapter five, White moves past the “unstated assumptions” about worship to the

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<sup>1</sup> Pg. 13

<sup>2</sup> Pg. 13

<sup>3</sup> Pg. 41

<sup>4</sup> Pg. 33

matters of heart and evangelism all the while acknowledging the God-centeredness of worship. In chapter six, White writes a helpful chapter on structure that calls for a “rethinking” of the current structures within the Christian church that often times hinders real progress. In chapter seven, White finally begins to flesh out what it means to “be the church” by talking about the community aspect of the people of God who are called into transparent communion with both God and one another. In chapter eight, White shows how to integrate the rethinking of the church into true change that takes into consideration where people are at without being stifled or deterred from the ultimate goal. In conclusion, White closes the book by showing how the need to “rethink the church” is related to the ultimate purpose of the church, “God’s redemptive work.”<sup>5</sup>

As for the strengths of the book, White does a good job evaluating the areas where churches have overly complicated and formalized the Biblical processes of church growth. The move away from program-based ministry to relational ministry is a very strong mark of this book. Furthermore, the emphasis on purpose and mission is very helpful since most churches are more than fine to deal with purpose and mission on a general and broad basis. The church desperately needs to see the purpose for which they were established and then embrace the mission that God has given them. The proverb rings true, “Without a vision, my people perish.”

As for the weakness of the book, White should have began by giving a layman’s definition regarding the nature of the church. Though it is made clear in the introduction that the focus of the book is not to be theological, it is still necessary to define, rather than to assume, the nature of both the church and its message. Without a clear and central understanding of the nature and the message of the church, all efforts of rethinking are vain. This is not to say that White’s view of the church and its message is wrong, but rather, that is

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<sup>5</sup> Pg. 162

should not be assumed with such a broad readership. As for a final critique, one must remember that the “rethinking” of the church must be a “biblical rethinking.” In the opinion of the reviewer, the White’s normative approach to rethinking the church could be more detrimental than it is helpful. The recent confession from the “Willow Creek” movement leadership regarding the failure of their approach should serve as a prophetic call for the church to continually “rethink” and re-evaluate its purpose and mission in light of the clear teaching of scripture. All in all the book was a good read that provokes thought, but for the most part the content lacked the necessary theological content to really make this book matter in the future. The reviewer is skeptical that this book will be helpful in moving a generation of churches toward its ultimate goal, but for the “sake of the cause,” the reviewer would love to be proven wrong.