

Book Review

Churches and Cultures and Leadership

Practical Theology of Congregations and Ethnicities By Mark
Lau Branson & Juan F. Martinez

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Churches and cultures and Leadership: A Practical Theology of Congregations and Ethnicities is a book written by Mark Lau Branson and Juan F. Martinez. What's interesting about both of these authors that solidifies their expertise with this topic is their diverse background and relationships. Having diversified backgrounds should ultimately help the readers to quickly catch a glimpse of the big picture when it comes down to leading a multicultural church.

Mark Branson is a Caucasian man who was ordained in an African American Pentecostal church and he's married to a Chinese American woman. His travels have taken him to various parts of the globe, including living in Peru and other major countries. In his travels, Branson has had the awesome privilege of coaching many pastors in the Philippines as well as being a member of a Japanese American church. His vast expeditions and lifestyle has afforded him a unique opportunity to explain the necessity of investing in developing multiculturally.

Martinez on the other hand is a Mexican man married to a Cuban woman. According to the center for Religious and civic cultures, He is an ordained Mennonite Brethren pastor. His academic work focuses on Latino Protestantism in the United States. He is particularly interested in Latino Protestant identity in the midst of acculturation and how that impacts Protestant understandings of church and pastoral ministry. Juan has been a pastor, church planter, director of a Bible institute and rector of a seminary in Guatemala.

Both Branson and Martinez unusual background serves as a backdrop for this discourse. As you read their book you will discover that both authors seeks to emphasize the urgency of developing multicultural churches. They write, "*We have all been shaped in a historical context of prejudice and racism. We carry the influences of our environment in our minds and hearts; too often our actions, choices and words perpetuate ethnic biases. These are many prejudices,*

rooted in racism, built into our institutions. We believe that God's love for the world is definitive in Jesus' inauguration of God's reign, and therefore we believe that the church's identity and agency should be characterized by reconciliation. Such reconciliation, if it is defined and empowered by the gospel, must be personal, interpersonal, cultural and structural". (p. 12)

Once you open the book you notice that the format is distinctively divided into three major parts. Part I: Theology and Context, covers chapters 1-3. Part II: Sociocultural Perspectives covers chapters 4-8 and Part III: Leadership, Communication and Change covers chapters 9-11. Perhaps the division is intended to compartmentalize the reader's thinking for a broader understanding, since the context of the book can seem a bit challenging to comprehend. They also share in the beginning of the book a list of bible studies and group exercises.

Although Branson and Martinez's multiculturalism is fascinating and leaves many readers wanting to experience their multicultural history, reading their book takes away that pleasure of viewing their perspectives because it is not an easy read. In fact, several places in the book display jargon that the reader will have to re-read and re-read in order to gain some sort of basic understanding. It's my hunch that their style of writing was done to push the reader and cause them to cautiously and critically pay attention to the necessity of developing a multicultural mindset.

The narratives, bible studies and group exercises seem to be formulated to acquaint the reader to a whole new world of multicultural challenges in the church. According to both Branson and Martinez, their goal is to "*promote more attentiveness, wisdom and faithfulness concerning intercultural life in and among churches, and between churches and their neighbors*". (p. 13) "*They also indicate that the purpose for them writing the book is to help church leaders to see differently, to gain the skills and competencies needed for multicultural*

contexts, and to create and environments that make God's reconciling initiatives visible and powerful". (p. 57)

In a world where many churches are searching for leaders to exemplify certain competencies that would advance church growth and member participation, this book, *Churches and Cultures and Leadership* book does provides a synopsis of obtainable tools that can be utilized to engage multicultures.

After careful deliberation of the book, it looks as if the majority of its significance is centered on the conceptualization of discovering the overall mission of the church. The author suggest a distinct methodology for dealing with certain issues that arise and how practical theology is concerned with the intercultural life in churches. The incorporation of narratives and exercises helps to hone in on their expectations. The book provides a broad overview of competencies needed to be an effective diversified leader in today's church.

The tension of the book does strike to be quite vigorous in its message. Perhaps the author's goal is to illustrate the intelligence theory behind their research and what has transpired in history, which unquestionably has impacted many churches around the world. They explicitly and consistently point out their commitment to a particular understanding of ecclesiology and how it affects all people globally. There is a connection in how God shapes a church to participate in God's love for the world.

In chapter one Branson describes the phenomenon behind practical theology and multicultural initiatives. This chapter involves taking a glimpse into some biblical narratives that are relevant to the topic, then it strategically sets out a method for the work. Branson starts off by using Jeremiah's narrative. According to him, "this narrative, is not that unique". (p. 34) In fact he says, "*other Old Testament narratives also provide grounding for multicultural life:*

Israel was to bless the nations (Gen 12): the law insisted on welcoming immigrants (Deut 10:19); Leviticus 19:33-34): God sent Jonah to give witness to Nnenevah; other prophets remind Israel of their obligation”. (p35-36) He also shares scriptures references from the New Testament. Jeremiah’s narrative begins in chapter 29. Branson’s states that “*any church that wants to learn about and be shaped by God’s agenda of gospel reconciliation will need to study its historical context.*” (p. 50)

Chapter two Branson explores the missional ecclesiology and church context. Here he talks about an ecclesiology that requires attention to God, to each other and to the world that God loves. He says, “*these spheres of attention and practices cannot be pulled apart; God’s initiatives instruct us that these overlapping speheres must be connected*” (p. 60) he portrays that people are the most integral part of a church’s existence. As such, it would behoove church leaders to employ others with specific competencies as it relates to the development and growth of their congregants. He says, “*a church’s missional life is the core of God’s gospel engagement with the world*”. (p. 38)

He goes on to define what mission really is. In addition he adds that leaders have to work on focusing attention on the interaction of meanings, relationships and practices that form such people as a church of reconciliation. Since we use the terms spiritual formation, congregational formation and missional formation, Branson sets out to interpret those meaning.

He says that spiritual formation is about, “*tending to God, learning about God’s activities and character and participating in God’s life and initiatives. We are formed spiritually as we engage the narratives of Scripture, study the church’s histories and traditions, worship, welcome God’s grace and forgiveness into our lives.*” Congregational formation is concerned with how we attend to each other in our churches. He says, “*the affections and activities of a group are*

altered by Jesus call to love each other, to attend to anyone who is marginalized by assumptions and routines, and to be especially aware when we import a society's prejudices into our church life".

Lastly, he share his perspective on Missional formation. Missional formation refers to how God shapes a church to participate in God's love for the world. He advocates that *"a church's identity and agency are shaped by how we attend to God, to each other and to the world we live in, in light of our vocation to be reconciled and reconcilers."* (p. 61)

Chapter three explores sociocultural structures, ethnicity and churches. Branson and Martinez use ethnicity and cultures interchangeably throughout this chapter. They share belief that *"churches exist in the midst of other social structures-lite ethnic groups, nations, local neighborhoods or global migratory movements"*. Also included in this chapter are two major types of intercultural church life.

"The first is multicongregational churches, where various ethnic and/or linguistic congregations maintain separate body life but work together and celebrate their common identity in Jesus Christ through worship and ministry activities. The second is the multiethnic church, in which those of various ethnic and cultural backgrounds work together to form one congregation". (p.91)

In Chapter four, Bransob helps the reader to understand worldviews, reality and assumptions. This approach involves developing a new way of thinking that ultimately propels transformation in the life of an individual and church. In doing so, he references Jurgen Habermas, a German philosopher. Habermas *"proposes a conceptual framework that can assist us in understanding how a culture might be understood, and even reshaped"*. (p. 99)

Chapter five deals with language, gestures and power. Martinez believes that *“the use of languages other than English becomes even more complicated in the life of the church. Native languages are usually the best tools for effective communication of the gospel and for an understanding of communicating with God. But since speaking English in all domains of life is considered crucial to national unity, American Christians often find their Christian and national assumptions at odds”*.

He raises the questions, *“should the church encourage the use of languages other than English or should it adopt an ESL perspective, using other languages only as transitional tools as people learn English?”* (p.126) He then answers his question by saying *“a common solution to the problem is to use children, who know or are learning English, to serve as translators for their parents or other elders”*. (p. 127)

Chapter six teaches the reader about defining social relations. As a continuation of chapter 5, Martinez goes on to say that *“language not only affects communication but it also affects social relationships.?”* (p. 132) *“The way each level of formality is used reflects class, education and racial differences and these differences are not consistent from country to country”*. (p. 133) For instance, defining relationships by that could be informal for English but potentially formal in Spanish. He inserts that *“because of such differences in social and familial relations, it is difficult for different ethnic groups to agree on issues of structural racism or social fairness.* (p. 139)

Chapter seven talks about self-perception and individuality. Reciting the line from the Declaration of Independence that states, *“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that*

among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of happiness” Martinez is convinced that “human individuals have the right to live their lives, making their own choices, seeking their personal happiness”. This aspect is based on a specific view of the individual that developed in the Western world and affects how people view themselves and their place in society and in the world. (p. 154)

As it relates to individualism, Martinez assess that the concept of the individual expressed in the Declaration of Independence is largely based on the philosophy of John Locke, Locket asserts that *“humans have a number of natural rights as individuals, and society and civil government are organized to protect those individual rights”*. (p. 157) whether we choose to accept it or not, individualism has had a major impact on the church. Martinez says that people choose or change churches based on individual interests, and so “successful” churches adapt to the market.

He also states that *“individualism also affects concepts of ethics. Personal morality is usually defined by individualistic concepts of right and wrong. A standard framework for what is considered ethical behavior starts from the individual”*. (p. 158)

In chapter 8 both Branson and Martinez gives us insight on perception and thinking. This chapter is centered around how our mental processes are shaped by our worldview, which is shaped within a particular culture. (p. 170) since perceiving and thinking can share a variety of meanings, so they proceed to give their definition of the words. As outlines, sensing is something outside of the person that comes into contact with the person’s capacities to receive input. Perceiving is some level of receptivity in the person that allows the data in, and some initial sorting begins. Thinking is the mental activity that seeks patterns, assigns significance and meaning, and encodes the data for further work. (p. 171) That’s why, according to them that “it is

not uncommon for church disagreements to be rooted in different ways of perceiving and thinking”. To conclude they suggest that “*pastors and leaders can use the praxis cycle to help their congregation understand how differences in perception affect biblical interpretation*”. (p. 184)

Chapter nine is the beginning of Part III. It takes the reader into understanding intercultural communication. Branson points out that “*church readers, in their interpretive and relational work, have a primary role in shaping environments and prompting conversations that increase the communicative competence of a congregation*”. (p. 190) Again he notes Habermas thought on the communicative competence. Habermas describes three worlds-objective (descriptive speech), subjective, (inner self that is expressive in speech) social (interpersonal, a world of regulations and norms) He states that, “*all three worlds require validity for discourse*”. (p. 191)

Chapter 10 covers leading change. Challenges can arise because a church’s context has changed or because a church’s commitments shifts so that they are motivated to pay more attention to the diverse world of their context. I love when he talks about staying the course. Branson mentions staying the course. He says, challenges will always appear. Humans will hurt each other. Sin messes every initiative. Good ideas will lack resources. However, we believe that when churches are committed to gospel reconciliation, when we take risks that are rooted in God’s call on us, then grace is adequate (p. 231)

Lastly chapter 11 talks about practices for the calling. Interesting enough this chapter summarizes, expands and adds practical approaches they have already covered in the previous chapters. He believes that we need a new generation of leaders who will be able to push out beyond the “accepted” models and think about church communities in new ways. Given the

reality of globalization, we can anticipate more intercultural interaction, not less, in the future.
(p. 242)

Overall, although at times I found the material a bit burdensome to comprehend, I must say it is information that is definitely needed for church leaders in the US. Honestly, I would have loved to have seen a dash of simplicity that would have made the reading more engaging and interesting. Reading material that doesn't set a tone of excitement and leaves the reader wanting more in the very beginning, will prove to be ineffective literature. Ineffective literature does not get your point across smoothly. When that happens, if you are not innately in tuned to the subject, you will only remember for the purposes of work rather than using it as a defining moment in your life.