

Comparative Book Review

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The two books I read for a comparative review were, '*The Hole in Our Gospel*,' by Richard Stearns and '*Cities of God*,' by Rodney Stark. These two books were a nice read on one major point and that was missions, how it spread, how it should be performed for longevity and with passion. One being a book on the spread of Christianity, an urban movement and one on what God expects us to do about this movement.

I like how Stearns starts his book, "What does God expect of us?" (Stearns, 2010) On the same note, Stark enters his story with, "New Accounts of (early) Christianity are everywhere." (Stark, 2006). I place the word 'early' in parentheses, because I want to show that new accounts of Christianity are capable of flourishing even today, if we do our part. These two books are great reads about the message of God's love as revealed in the gospel, how it was spread, and how we are in need of spreading it today just like with the early Christians. Stearns speaks about how we feel more church attendance or praying is the key to accomplishing greatness, but what does God really want!? Stark mentions the past and how the people such as Paul, Silas, Timothy and Barnabus made an impact and carried on the tradition that Jesus wants us to run with today. Stearns even quotes, "I write this book from a biased perspective" (Stearns, 2010). He then quotes John 3:16 to allow these words to project onto his readers. He then goes on to say, "And if Jesus was willing to die for this troubled planet, maybe I need to care about it too" (Stearns, 2010). The book by Stearns goes on to say that God's vision was for us to transform this world. Stark likes to show that Paul first off, had no systematic programme to usher in followers. The people he converted from the diaspora had a weak connection to Jews, this is something that surprised me. In my mind it was the Jews in the diaspora. Gentiles were a huge portion of people who flocked in from Paul's ministry. Stark quotes, "The Diaspora Jewish community in Antioch was an old and large, but its first members weren't migrant Jewish merchants, as in many other

cities, but Jewish veterans retired from Seleucid army.” (Stark, 2006) He continued to show this balance of Jews and Gentiles. I learned that Paul used Antioch as his homebase and traveled from there on his three missionary journeys. To convert you must first take in the other person as your friend, help them with their personal lives and allow them to be your closest friend during the process. Paul was ministering in Ephesus two years or more, in Corinth at least eighteen months and possibly several years in Antioch. He spent plenty of time ministering and building relationships to show the love of Christ powerfully. Stearns opens up on this concept and says that the most difficult thing for a person of faith is seeing the big picture. He hints at spiritual blindness as being an issue on this topic. One thing that Stark’s shows us is that sects during this time were about exclusive religious organizations that held a high state in tension with the surrounding societies. I like how Stark writes on having a plan of formation, growth and persecution. Stearns also reflects on this when he speaks of , “We are to reclaim and redeem the world for Christ’s kingdom” (Stearns, 2010). Stearns highlighted that Jesus made His message accessible and understandable. Today we tend to complicate our ministry to look official, but all Jesus wanted of us was to love and care for His flock. Therefore Stearns quote says “...by justice, fairness, and concern for the poor” (Stearns, 2010). This goes well with missions today because we need to follow this form to persuade people and show people by example that Jesus is the way to go. When it comes to the actual number of Christians in the Roman Empire we really have no way of knowing the truth. Stark has a great chapter on this in his book. He sees that historians kept tally, by seeing gravestones and or contracts of how many people really followed Christ. Stark even sees the first several centuries as a slow growth and by the third century you see a huge growth. The scary part is that even the Roman officials were alarmed. The “divine Spirit,” as stated by Stark's (Stark, 2006) shows that the Spirit has had a huge impact on people

from day one and even into today's missions. I am interested in learning more about how Stark sees the philosophy of how one person is not generally converted, after one spontaneous visit with a person's faith. We need more time with a human to see growth in one's faith. I have seen in my day a lot of people come to faith in God on their first step into the church. I found it very sad when I read that George Whitefield had people get on the ground and beg for forgiveness. Stark's mentions, "...he was not asking them to change their religious identity, merely to intensify their commitment" (Stark, 2006). Stearns speaks of being scared when he was asked to take over World Vision and this was a main point on the map of missions to promote a cause of showing one love and acceptance compared to the hardness of someone asking you to beg for forgiveness. This reminds me of the indulgences of the Roman Catholic Church in Luther's time. This was a turning point for missions I can imagine. I have always loved the quote in Stearns book, "God does not call the equipped; he equips the called." (Stearns, 2010) I think that this says a lot about missions today and in times past, so this is a highlight of both books.

Stearns goes on to say that we were all made with a purpose and this is our job to find this purpose. I was touched to the core when Stearns mentions that he was right where God wanted him, broken and ready to serve. This is where we all need to step up with a faith goal. Christians rise high and broad, although Stark sees it as not everyone is called to be a Christian. In the book, '*The Hole in our gospel*,' Stearns actually says, "If God has given us this work to do, then we need to rise to the challenge and do it." (Stearns, 2010) If we all had this attitude we would be much further along than we are. A few pages later Stearns speaks of how his book was titled on pg. 168, "That is the *hole in our gospel*, and until we fill it, ours is an empty religion, one that God despises." (Stearns, 2010) We need to first and foremost honor God. This sentence alone shouts to us and shows us as missionaries and Christ followers that we must do our parts.

One part of Stark's book that surprised me was that of the supreme gods. Even the people of antiquity had many gods, they felt were the way to a life full of promise and success. This was not a mission God would have liked which went against monotheism.

Stark shows a strong point in this chapter where he speaks of matters on doctrine. He states, "...that doctrine does not play the primary role in attracting converts, but we must not forget that doctrine determines whether or not the term conversion even applies to a shift in religious orientation." (Stark, 2006) He also sees the diaspora Jews as being pious and not so influenced to become Christian. The parallel of Stearns book is in chapter 17 when he sees us as Christians today being on the wrong side of the social issues having a pious attitude. He uses the image of cowboys and indians and how the indians were always bad guys. I had to laugh at this because I have Choctaw Indian blood in my heritage. He did use a deep word to describe what really happened and it was a genocide. This is how many Christians have died since and most could have been missionaries. Slavery is another sad fact of our past and I learned that the first slaves were actually white, we now know more of the black race being enslaved in our history. This hits me negatively, because my loving husband is of African American descent. Martin Luther King speaks a great deal about this and it is in Stearns book. He quotes, "Here again, the church was found guilty, some members of sins of commission and others of sins of omission." (Stearns, 2010) He then goes on to use a MLK speech, which rips out the spirit of a fellow white man who mistreats our black brothers and sisters.

It is mentioned in, "*Cities of God*," that Gnosticism is a group of manuscripts that are ancient and some are references to Christ. I am not sure of this today. The book sees them as access to secret knowledge. They were recognized by early church fathers. Stark shows that rather right or wrong they are helpful in showing a light on Christianity. I found the definition

intriguing as to how it says gnosis meaning 'one who knows.' As mission workers we should be people who know. Stearns has a similar concept in his book when it comes to money. This chapter speaks of knowing the money flow through the church. Unlike that in the Gnostic, we need to have a hand on the money flow. The talk of money is open in scriptures and we are unsure if the Gnostic is true and relevant. In my experience it is the wealthy who give less and the poor who give it all. I could not help but smile when I read the heading of the next chapter in Stearns book, "Why We're Not So Popular Anymore." Stearns calls our fight for Christianity, "culture war." (Stearns, 2010) When it comes to the spread of Christianity we need new ways of captivating the world such as using stories out of the Gnostic, money offered to teach and patients with our new friends. The terms used to describe the Christians in the west are obscured, but realistic. Stearns charted words such as Judgmental, Hypocritical, Out of touch with reality etc. The chapter goes on to say that we see this as not true, but sadly I can say it's so. I like the scripture in James 1:22 "Be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves." (KJV) We must practice what we preach and what we expect our audience to do. I remember when my kids were little, they did everything I did, once they hit teenage years they became independent and did their own thing, but now they are in their mid twenties and fell back in line with what they saw me doing as a child. This might be the same with new converts, they will yo-yo up and down for a while until they see that Christ is the only way to travel and since Jesus is not here, we have to be His image for the audience to see. If I remember correctly, the next scripture of this verse speaks of one looking in the mirror and then walking away and forgetting what they saw. We have to remember the lesson here, we must remember the lessons of Jesus and know that reflection so well that this is what we put out into the world. JESUS LOVE. Being the light is so important in a dark and lost world. To piggyback off this, Stearns

goes on in the next chapter to explain you do not need to be a mega church to be the light. Even when it comes to sexual immorality. Honestly, any sin people face needs to be brought to the light. People are bad about harboring their feelings and this is why so many mental wards are packed full. We need to be the light and show humanity that it is ok to share that deep dark secret and become free of the burden one places on themselves thinking that this is the worst sin in the world. I know for myself when I learned this lesson, I lived freer than ever. I do not keep sins inside anymore, I right away find a trusted friend and share this pain. I put it in the light and expose it at the root. I learned how to distinguish it right away. I have never been a fan of the word heresy. I think that the top men of the church came up with the word to control and destroy people. This is what some Christians think of when they hear the word Gnostic. For the last year I have grown and see words that once used to be a threat and now do not even faze me. Heresy was one of those words.

The reason I complete my comparison on this note, is because I hate knowing people are suffering because they feel guilty of any sin committed. Us in the mission field need to step up to the plate and help these people see their light. Even if it is a small spark of light and shows them their value and worth. No matter what city they are in like that explained in *Cities of God*, or how we need to go about it like in the book, *The Hole in our gospel*. Plain and simple, Jesus is love and we need to replicate this example and show the world the Love of God.

References:

Stearns, R. (2010). *The Hole in our gospel*. Thomas Nelson.

Stark, R. (2006). *Cities of god: Christianizing the urban empire*. HarperSanFrancisco.