

Comparative Book Review

Student: Chase Barbe email: barbec@allianceu.edu

Program: Masters of Divinity

Alliance Theological Seminary

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Before choosing which two books I was going to read, I spent some time in prayer and read some online reviews. I decided to read “The Hole in Our Gospel” by Richard Stearns and “The Insanity of God” by Nik Ripkin (not his real name). I’m so grateful to be guided to these two masterpieces as the authors have challenged my worldview and understanding of the Gospel. It is like my eyes have been opened to the reality of what God calls me to do as a member of the body of Christ. The scales have fallen off and the clarity of God’s mission has come to view. After finishing both books, my life is never going to be the same as I’m motivated to accomplish the good works that God prepared beforehand for me to walk in. I’m done sitting on the sidelines of comfortability.

“The Hole in Our Gospel” is a compelling book written by Richard Stearns, president of World Vision (1998-2008), a Christian humanitarian organization that seeks to solve issues of poverty and injustice around the world. The book is a call to action for all Christians, especially Americans, to take seriously Jesus’ commands to care for the poor and marginalized around the world. In part 1 of the book, Stearns lays out the case for why the church has failed in her responsibility and how it can begin to make a difference.

Stearns builds his argument by saying in our evangelical efforts we have watered down the gospel to a kind of “fire insurance” that one can buy. With this limited view of the gospel, there is no personal life change and no accountability to go and follow Christ wherever He leads. Stearns then recounts his own experience from climbing the corporate ladder to reluctantly heeding to God’s call to lay down his selfish ambitions. It was a “dark night of the soul” season in his life, but he eventually surrendered to follow God’s call to be president of World Vision. He writes, "What if there are children who will suffer somehow because I failed to obey God? What if my cowardice costs even one child somewhere in the world his or her life? God had broken me, and I knew I could no longer run from Him" (Stearns, p.49).

Stearns goes on to share his experiences of visiting poverty-stricken areas of the world and seeing the devastating impact of poverty and injustice on millions of people. He argues that Christians cannot ignore the suffering of their neighbors and that the Gospel message calls us to take action and work towards social justice. The Gospel is not just proclaiming the kingdom of God and saving souls from sin, but also to transform lives and change the world.

Later in the book, Stearns delves deeper into the challenges facing the world today and the role of Christians in addressing them. He discusses the problem of poverty, inequality, health, education and human rights by showcasing eye-opening statistics that shake up the reader’s worldview. “More than 26,500 children died yesterday of preventable causes related to their

poverty, and it will happen again today and tomorrow and the day after that. Almost 10 million children will be dead in the course of a year” (Stearns, p.107). Stearns argues that it is not the Church’s fault for this broken world, but it is our responsibility to do something about it. After breaking down the statistics that cause poverty in the world, Stearns warns us to not be overwhelmed by this seemingly impossible task but rather, “we must see the human beings at the heart of poverty and injustice as people who need and deserve our love and respect. I believe we really can alter the world, but we can only do it one person at a time” (Stearns, p.163).

Stearns ideas and challenges to the church are backed up by Scripture which gives his words a weighty sense of authority. My favorite chapter and I believe the strength of his book comes down to chapter 20. There Stearns writes a letter to the church in America which is convicting to the core. Using the Bible, he boldly confronts the lukewarmness of the American church and calls us to walk in faith and to love our neighbor because Jesus first loved us. It has made me examine myself and lead me to repentance because of my lack of obedience to God’s will revealed in Scripture. The greatest strength of Stearns’ book is this call to action that is grounded in biblical truth. All church leaders and lay people should read this book to ignite a flame of passion to deny themselves, pick up their cross daily and follow Jesus.

The potential weakness in Stearns ideas is his lack of diversity in perspectives. The book primarily reflects his own experiences and perspectives as a white American evangelical. I can really relate myself being from that same demographic, but it does not engage deeply with the perspectives of Christians from other cultural, racial, and socioeconomic backgrounds. This limits the book’s ability to address complexity and diversity of social justice issues.

“The Insanity of God” by Nik Ripken is a memoir that chronicles the author’s journey as a missionary (with his family) and his encounters with persecuted Christians across the globe. He grew up in rural Kentucky and when he read the great commission in Matthew 28, he was

convicted to his core to go and bring people to Christ. He met his wife who also felt called to be sent out to the ends of the earth as a missionary.

Ripken's experiences in Somalia were devastating as he and his family witnessed the brutal persecution of Christians in a dominant Muslim-based country. The civil unrest caused suffering and disparity to all people, which really challenged Ripken's faith and caused him to question if his humanitarian efforts were making a difference. He and his wife started an NGO that served the Somali people when no outside help was coming to the aid of these dying and lost people. But as they provided food, clothing, water and medicine, evil kept rearing its ugly head through the militia, stealing up to 80 percent of the provisions and killing their own people for receiving aid from the American 'infidels'. The question of; "Why does God allow suffering and persecution to occur?" kept Ripken up at night and he describes feeling disillusioned and traumatized by the violence he witnessed.

By the end of his six years in Somalia, Ripken began to consider the spiritual needs of the Somalis and concluded that his efforts were not very successful. He and his team had made a major impact in getting the UN involved by making known the Somali crisis but there were few disciples being made. In fact, it was estimated that there were less Christians after their six years there than when Ripken first arrived. These were some of the troubling questions yet to be answered, "How do we make a spiritual impact in a place so hostile to the faith? If sharing with a friend could lead to my friend's death—will I share my faith anyway? How can God's love overcome their hate" (Ripken, p.112)?

It was those questions that pushed Ripken to travel to countries around the world to interview persecuted Christians and learn from their experiences. As Ripken writes, "Maybe their wisdom could help other believers like us minister more effectively in impossible places such as Somalia" (Ripken, p.142). He first visits Russia where the stories of faithful followers

captivated Ripken to the point of thinking, “what if persecution is the normal, expected situation for a believer? And what if the persecution is, in fact, soil in which faith can grow? What if persecution can be, in fact, good soil” (Ripken, p.162)?

One of the most profound places he visited was China where he met with hundreds of underground church leaders who face imprisonment for their beliefs. The church was thriving in the midst of persecution because they knew what it meant to be church for one another; “The network of house churches did not have, or want, church buildings to gather in. But they certainly knew what it meant to love and look after the concerns and needs of their members” (Ripken, p.215). Ripken had learned the importance of community and fellowship in the face of persecution, and how these experiences have strengthened the faith of these believers. In fact, one of the house church leaders asked Ripken, “Do you know what prison is for us? It is how we get our theological education. Prison in China is for us like seminary is for training church leaders in your country” (Ripken, p.231).

After his journey, Ripken reflects on the lessons he had learned and how they have transformed his understanding of God and his relationship with Him. He concludes that the Christian faith is inherently “insane” in its call to love and serve others, even in the face of hate and evil. He emphasizes the importance of prayer and spiritual warfare in the lives of persecuted Christians. One of the most humbling conclusions was that Ripken realized, “that God allowed us to go out into the world so we could find out who Jesus was from people who really knew Him and actually lived the Word of God” (Ripken, p.304). These faithful followers of Christ challenge our sometimes “spiritually-fatal, watered-down, powerless western faith” (Ripken, p.304).

One of the major strengths of the book is Ripken’s authenticity. Being a seasoned missionary, his witness to these countries gives his writing a deep level of truth, which

influences the reader to trust that the stories he shares are based on real-life experiences. Also, his spiritual insights are profound in the nature of faith, suffering, and God's sovereignty which creates a gap in my own experience with God currently. But he doesn't intend to shame the reader but rather call the Christian to action by examining their own faith and to consider the true cost of following Christ.

One of the weaknesses is how to apply this awareness of persecution to our current lives here in America where we have freedom of religion. The book could cause Christians to seek out persecution and martyrdom, which I don't think is Ripken's intent. As his friend Stoyan said, "Don't you ever give up in freedom what we would never give up in persecution" (Ripken, p.311). We are to boldly proclaim the Gospel with love, gentleness and respect, not pursue harsh confrontation.

Both Stearns and Ripken share a deep commitment to spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ and serving those in need. They started with different backgrounds, but both come to the same conclusion that the gospel generally presented in America is quite different than what is presented in the Bible. They both travel overseas to other countries to experience the brokenness of the world and see first-hand how desperate people are to receive the full Gospel. Ripken focuses more on the persecuted church and the cost of following Jesus whereas Stearns challenges Christians to live out their faith by serving the poor and the marginalized. Ripken started with the humanitarian efforts but was lacking in wisdom on how to introduce Jesus Christ to the people. I believe Stearns would argue that Ripken and his team were demonstrating the Gospel to the Somali people by just lovingly caring for the oppressed, hungry and homeless when no one else was.

Both books have challenged me to walk out my faith with boldness instead of keeping my faith to myself. By integrating the authors ideas of mission, ministry and social justice into

my own life, I can be a better leader through my actions. Instead of just knowing a lot about God and the Scriptures, I need to lead by example. I get to go and make disciples of all nations. I get to visit orphans and widows in their affliction and keep myself unstained from the world. I can't do it alone, so I need others to share this same vision. If God exalts me as a leader in the church, I want the body to be fully committed to God's mission instead of having a consumer mindset which so easily deters the church in America. The questions that I struggle with is, "Do I seek out a place with Spirit-led people who are already living a faith-filled life and learn from them? Or do I become the catalyst for life change in the community I currently am in?" As the days go on, I believe the path forward is becoming clearer as God puts together a team, with me included, to build out his church here in the low country.

We are in the beginning stages of a church plant and I'm going to continue to bring the perspectives of mission to the discussion table. I'm going to recommend the team read these two books because I know it will have a weighty impact. I don't want us to just raise capital for a large church building and fall into the trap of the typical American model. Rather I want us to be focused on making a lasting impact in the community and the world. We have the opportunity to do something special and I believe the emphasis needs to be twofold. First is to make disciples who have counted the cost and are willing to give up their lives for Jesus, not just simply believe. Second is to serve the needs of the church and the community around us because there is poverty at our doorstep. By truly investing in relationships and building up the body in smaller gatherings, we can raise up leaders who can plant more churches. I want to build a faith community that is similar to Ripken's experience, where there is great resemblance to the early church seen in Acts. I'll do whatever it takes.

The call to action from both books is remarkable and if it doesn't get you to step out in faith, I don't know what will other than the audible voice of God. I was continuously caught up

in emotion while reading these books causing me to stop reading a few times. The personal stories carry such depths of pain, fear, sadness, joy, and love. The lives of these followers of Christ overseas are so remarkably different than our point of view in comfy America. We no longer can hide from the clear teachings of Christ in the Bible and the testimonies of believers overseas. The American church needs to be awakened out of its slumber for us to reach our full potential as part of the body of Christ. These authors accomplished their goal by changing me. Who else will join?

References:

1. Stearns, Richard. *The Hole in Our Gospel*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, (2014).
2. Ripkin, Nik. *The Insanity of God* Nashville, TN: B&H Books (2013).