

UR714 Leadership Development in the Urban Church

Dr. Nathaniel Perez & Dr. Charles Galbreath - Spring 2023

This Here Flesh Book Analysis

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This Here Flesh by Cole Arthur Riley is a poetic intergenerational story of the African American experience. Cole shared imagery that brought you to the place of where her Gramma and father were as she wrestled with her own understanding and theology. This is for anyone who wants to learn deeply about the black experience in America, in an uncut raw emotional descriptive. For those who want to know the truth, and what it is like this book would be appropriate for this audience.

One of the three strengths I found in this book is that it artistically weaves theology and stories so well throughout the book. You walk with the author as she wrestles not only with her own story but through the lens of her Gramma and Father. Another strength is integrating intergenerational experiences. It isn't just one perspective, but how this family pattern plays out to where she is. The redeeming power of going back to learn of her family story so there is opportunity to heal. Finally, the theological perspectives she highlights throughout the book was powerful. In the beginning she mentions dignity in the imagery of God weaving together clothes for Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. "People say we are unworthy of salvation. I disagree. Perhaps we are very much worth saving. It seems to me that God is making miracles to free us from the shame that haunts us. Maybe the same hand that made garments for a trembling Adam and Eve is doing everything he can that we might come a little closer." (p. 15) Cole brought out this characteristic of God that may have otherwise been missed. The act of bending down and taking garment and the act of making garments to help unashamed the trembling Adam and Eve, after they know they have made a mistake. Reserving their dignity and wanting them to still be close to Him in a tender fatherly way. The other was her description of Jesus and communion symbolizing nourishment for our body. "I don't think it an accident that we are made to remember God through an act that nourishes us in our own bodies. I've heard much of bodily

sacrifice, of taking up a cross, of dying and dying again. But I need to hear of resurrection—of the bodily love of receiving the Eucharist. You want to tell me to love God? Ask me when I've last eaten. Come now, you want me to tell you a prayer? You'll find it in the blood beating from heart to head to toe and home again. Don't ask me of salvation. Listen to the hum of my chest as I now fall asleep. I cannot see the face of God by rejecting my own." (p. 68) It's more than a religion it's a relationship. It's a God who deeply cares about the innermost of our being and well-being. It's deeper than a ritual and religious nuances, this is a God who is intentional in wanting to nourish us wholistically. I think if someone isn't attuned to artistic writing or understanding of why Cole refers to God as female, one would think this is heresy. It may make one uncomfortable with the curse words as well. I don't think it deters the messaging, only explicitly expressing the innermost emotions of the writer. There is a rawness that takes place in this text and its refreshing to not have a cookie cut experience.

Overall, this book is bold and powerful. It is useful to help the reader navigate their own family story. For those who many do not know and want to learn about the black experience in America, this book speaks in many levels. The chapter titles so appropriately address dignity, belonging, emotions, repair, restoration, to liberation. One of the takeaways I found is articulating and meditating on our experiences is key in understanding our identity and relationship to the Father. This book also sheds light on the importance of lamenting. There is so much grief in this world and in our own stories. As humans we need to take the time to process grief. Let alone, the history African American's had to endure, there is a litany of areas of grieving that needs to be addressed that hasn't been given opportunity to even acknowledge that there is a need. This pursuit of belonging is innate in our beings and I love the author making it a takeaway to not be afraid to ask questions to family and friends. Understanding our family

history so we heal well. This is something I strongly believe in and practice. I am all about spiritual formation and soul care, by going after family sin patterns, emotional and inner healing. There is a need to address this as there is a deep-rooted hurt not only by the church but in America. In ministry application I want to facilitate the space for spiritual formation, to take ownership in our healing paths and belonging. There is a need to invite Jesus into our story and see how He is woven in and throughout from the very beginning even in the darkest and hardest moment not in in our lives but in our family lives. The application of lamenting is huge, and I don't know if we know the rhythms of grief as well as we should. Finally, I believe the boldness to speak out what is true to our experience unapologetically. I think this fragility of not wanting to make another feel guilty needs to stop, and the need to express our experiences should be made direct and honest so reconciliation can take place.