

Comparative Book Review

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Book Review

Summarize the main ideas the author is communicating

The Art of Neighboring by Jay Pathak & Dave Runyon is one of those books that every follower of Christ will need in their life. This book will convict you and your walk with God by asking a simple question: What if Jesus intended for us to love our real neighbors? (pg.15) The answer to this question is the main message of this book. The authors explain in the first chapter that loving your neighbor as yourself can be simple (pg. 20) but it will take time (pg. 43) and overcoming fear (pg. 59). Pathak and Runyon break down who our neighbors are first by using a passage that we all know which is the good Samaritan. They explain that this passage shows us who is a true neighbor. A true neighbor is someone willing to “adjust their schedule to accommodate those in need who are nearby” (pg. 34). The authors go so far and said that “the Samaritan would be the modern-day equivalent of a terrorist stopping to help him” (pg.34). They end their point of view by stating that we should take the Great commandment literally and not metaphorical (pg.36). They point out that our neighbor is someone who lives across from us or right next to us who have real names and real-life issues (pg.36). Each chapter focuses on how we can be loving and compassionate toward our actual neighbors but also give us guidelines on how to do it and what not to do. They use the simple tactic of drawing a map of their home and the eight homes that are in the surrounding area. It looks like a “tic tac toe board” (pp36-39). Then they inquire as to the degree to which they are familiar with the families of those eight houses. According to their own experiences, the great majority of individuals are unable to identify the eight persons who live closest to them (pg.39). Pathak and Runyon give many supportive reasons for why we should get to know our neighbors and present plenty of personal instances of how satisfying and enjoyable it can be to do so. One of the reasons is that since God allows us to live in our neighborhood, that means the people around us are individuals that God

places in our path to change our lives and maybe change theirs. They also discuss, drawing on their first-hand experiences, some of the difficulties that might arise when we open our life up to the people who live next door to us. One of those difficulties is not placing boundaries. They dedicate a whole chapter on boundaries (pp.129-142). The authors explain that when we as neighbors don't establish boundaries with others, there is a possibility of unhealthy relationships. Our neighbors become codependent on us and mistakenly take responsibility for their lives (pp.134-135). This book is filled with helpful items such as questions for group discussions, block party kits, and much more information that can be found on their website.

Cities of God by Rodney Stark is another book that every student of scripture should have in their library. This book uses quantitative sociological and statistical data to prove how Christianity was able to spread across the urban cities of the Ancient Roman Empire. Stark uses this statistical data from the first few centuries of the movement to test his many hypotheses. Stark's approach is to establish a hypothesis in each chapter and then test it using quantitative techniques, as opposed to reading a theory into evidence (pp.17-23). His main argument is that many causes contributed to the exponential growth of Christianity in the ancient world. Some of these causes an average believer would have not known. One of the causes is that individuals often convert to a new religion through someone in their already-established social circles (pp.30-31,64-69). Second, these connections mostly developed in the Roman Empire's crowded metropolises (pp.70-83). Third, a modest pace of conversion in these main population centers may account for the expansion of Christianity in a relatively short time frame (pp.67). How Starks begins his book is using the research that was conducted on Moonies in the United States throughout the second part of the twentieth century to form a foundation on what conversion is and what it is not (pg. 8-13). He uses this research to back up his argument that conversion is a "matter of the relative strength of social ties" and it is "primarily about bringing

one's religious behavior into alignment with that of one's friends and relative" (pg. 11). In other words, he argues that developing personal relationships is more important than explaining the doctrines of Christianity first and foremost when it comes to conversion. Stark then presents the sociological data from thirty-one key cities around the empire to back up his argument (pp.34-59). He begins by modeling how Christianity's expansion is consistent with low-to-moderate conversion rates in urban centers and widespread dissemination through travel and trade (pp.73-82). Along the process, he revises his findings and provides evidence for them by considering the impact of different social contexts on the adoption of Christian doctrines (pp 25-31). These other elements provide a detailed description of Roman religious tradition (pp 31-34). He includes the impact of "oriental" religions (Isis and Cybele worship) (pp.85-117), takes into account the robust response to the gospel in Hellenized Jewish communities of the Diaspora (pp.120-139), and deftly navigates the impact (or lack thereof) of the various Gnostic heresies (pp.141-181). He concludes with a short section on the decline of Paganism (pp.199-207) and an appeal for the use of quantitative evidence in evaluating historical claims (pp. 209-222).

What is one concept that stood out to you in this book?

The Art of Neighboring

One concept that stood out to me is located in chapter seven which is labeled "Motives Matter" (pp.99-117). The author stresses that doing the art of neighboring is not to evangelize our neighbors. If a person practices the art of neighboring correctly then the result is that their neighbor will come to know who God is (pp.99). Pathak explains that our motives in doing these practices in being a true neighbor are very important. He states that we should not be like "Sales Workers" and try to pitch the good news to people. We should not "use high-pressure sales techniques to sell the gospel" (pp.101). This is not a good way to share the good news with anyone. Pathak continues to explain that the "ulterior motive in good neighboring must never be

to share the gospel” and that “the ultimate motive is just to share the story of Jesus and his impact on our lives” (pg.102). He summarizes his thoughts on our motives by stating that “we are called to love our neighbors unconditionally, without expecting anything in return” (pp.103). One point that the author stated which took me by surprise and humble me is the fact that many believers want their neighbors to have an authentic relationship with Christ. But we need to learn to accept the truth that some of our neighbors will choose not to and still desire to be friends with them (pg. 103).

Cities of God

One concept that stood out to me is located in chapter five which is labeled “Paul and the Mission to Hellenized Jews” (pp.120-139). In this chapter, Stark concluded that “Paul’s missionary visits had no independent impact on Christianization once statistical controls are made for the Hellenic and the Diasporan effects is very scriptural even while it is very nontraditional” (pg.139). This is very shocking since it has been taught in many churches that Paul and his missionary had a major impact on the Christian world. Stark believes that Paul’s impact was incidental and overplayed (pg.134). He stated that Paul was not the only person traveling to different cities in the ancient world that was preaching the gospel (pg.134). However, the author explains that Paul was more of a “trainer, organizer and motivator of missionaries than as an actual founder of congregations” (pg. 134). Stark does point out how both Hellenism and the Diaspora community had a strong effect on Christianity (pg.135). He says that communities with a historical connection to Hellenism were already Christianized even before the arrival of Paul (pg.135). Finally, what the author points out is the fact that Paul’s mission was aimed at Hellenized Jews. The reason for this is that Hellenized Jews had a far better understanding of the Christ narrative than other Jews, making it more likely that they

would convert to Christianity even if they would be able to keep much of their Jewish and Hellenic religious beliefs even after the conversion (pp.126-129).

What implications does this concept have for leading in a church context?

While reading these two books, some things needed to change and improved when it comes to leading in a church. The first thing is to have the right motive when it comes to serving our neighbors. Our neighbors are more than just someone we can get to convert to Christ. These are people with real names and with real-life situations. Sometimes we get carried away with the idea of how many people we can get to convert to Christ instead of worrying about our neighbors. Leaders show by example how we should love our neighbor according to the scriptures. But if our motives are wrong then we end up missing the mark. Our motives should be pure and honest with those around us. It should not be full of manipulation on how we want our neighbors to be like because we feel uncomfortable with how they live and/or what they believe in. The second thing is leaders should research more on what the scriptures say in both New Testament and Old Testament. There is so much more that we don't know about the Ancient Roman world that the early church was living in. Reading *Cities of God*, you learn how the cities function as a whole and apart from one another. You come to understand that the Ancient Roman Empire was not a very clean place, that it was quite congested, that there was a great deal of criminal activity, and that it was subject to a great deal of natural catastrophe (pg. 26). But once we do your research just like Stark did, then we may conclude that we may never have thought possible like the fact that Paul didn't have a great influence on Christianity as it is taught in many church circles. I learn that there were many people in the church community that God was sending throughout the empire and laying down the foundation of Christ way before Paul was in the picture. I think that in the church community that I am a part of, many leaders

idolize Paul, who was simply a servant of God like you and me. This is something that bothers me and I pray that this will change in the near future.

What needs to change in your life as a result?

Two things need to change in my life. My motivation for establishing friendly relations with my neighbors and for strengthening the process of evaluating the soundness of someone else's preaching and teaching is the need to ensure that what I am hearing and putting into practice is accurate. While reading *The Art of Neighboring*, I have learned that I only know one name out of all my neighbors. Her name is Christina, and she lives with her mom, who is disabled. I do desire to talk to her more and get to know her more than just the girl who lives on the fifth floor. But I have lived in my building's apartment for more than twenty years. So now it will be very awkward to even approach her and start a conversation. Pathak and Runyon do give good advice on how to start a conversation. But I'm very introverted, which makes it hard for me to even go to the person. My motivation to reach out to Christina was to share the gospel with her, but Pathak made it clear that a believer is commanded to just love with no strings attached. This is something that I am unlearning because I was taught differently by others. I understand that maybe Christina just needs a friend or a neighbor who is willing to lend a helping hand. I believe that another reason why being a good neighbor is so hard is the fact that I was taught at a young age that strangers are dangerous. But I am learning slowly that my neighbor is just an individual who has their own story and beliefs and is just trying their best to live life. As a result of learning this about myself, I have decided to work on being more open and braver to have a conversation with my neighbor. Even if it is a simple hello, because I do not even do that. While reading the *Cities of God*, I remember a lesson on the New Testament that was taught in my church where they put a lot of emphasis on Paul and what he did and not on what Jesus did in the Gospel. I found this strange, but I never questioned it. Now I learned that teachers and preachers only know what they have already learned from others. However, I have encountered other leaders who refuse to learn more about the Bible. For them, what they have learned is sufficient. I believe *Cities of God* is one of those books that many leaders in my church circles would reject because it goes against what they have learned from their teachers and pastors. Therefore, like Stark, I am more encouraged to research more about what the scriptures mean in context from different denominations' perspectives so I can have a better idea of what my fellow brothers and

sisters believe. I started to find different books on Christian ethics and missions that I am planning to read over the summer and share with close friends and family.

References:

Stark, Rodney. *Cities of God: The Real Story of How Christianity Became an Urban Movement and Conquered Rome*. San Francisco: Harper, (2006). ISBN-10: 0061349887

Pathak, Jay and Runyon, Dave. *The Art of Neighboring: Building Genuine Relationships Right Outside Your Door*. Baker Books, Grand Rapids (2012). ISBN-13: 9780801014598