

Book Review: Mere Churchianity by Michael Spencer

Written by Grant Nuss

Saturday, 26 December 2015 06:14

Perhaps like you, I, as a pastor and follower of Christ, look around me at what is going on in, for the most part, what calls itself the faith and church today. I too, as Michael Spencer realises as well, worry about the reality of people leaving the church and the church leaving Jesus. Now I am pretty vocal about this and, I must say, I often meet with resistance in this regard, some have even shunned me and that's okay, so it's refreshing to find someone else who worries about it as much as I do. So, prior to posting the Internet Monk's review of a book I am now reading for the third time, herewith a few excerpts from this book. In the first chapter "The Jesus Disconnect" When Church Signs Lie" Spencer writes; "When I hear churchianity-oriented Christians say; "Jesus wants us to build a multi-million-dollar facility to grow into", I'm skeptical. When I hear a church announce, "Miracle and healing revival! The sick cured every night. Bring your loved ones", I have to wonder how they can schedule a miracle. When I hear the church at large say, "We have the mission and vision of Jesus at heart", I ask why it's not more evident." He then, in chapter one, starts to look behind the sign saying; "Behind the Jesus is Here sign are seemingly endless versions of the church-growth obsession that has gripped evangelicalism for more than half a century. No longer do most Christians question the assumption that bigger is always better; God has (apparently) made it clear he prefers a gigantic church with enormous facilities. Sports arenas are converted into worship centres, and (man I love this comment) thousands of pastors can't stop imitating Rick Warren, right down to the shirt. What would Jesus do if he were confronted with an escalator inside a shopping - mall - sized megachurch? Would he let it take him for a ride?" He goes on; "How long could Jesus remain on his feet when directed to sing fifteen consecutive worship choruses, each one only seven words long and repeated twenty-three times? Behind the Jesus is Here sign are too many pastors with ambitions Jesus wouldn't recognise: ambitions to fly their own jets and put their smiling faces on book covers, morning-commute coffee mugs, and every television screen on the planet. Would Jesus invest in eighty acres of prime suburban real estate so he could build a "campus" as a way to change the world? Behind the Jesus is Here sign is a health, wealth, and prosperity "gospel" that removes God from the status of sovereign Lord and turns him into a convenient vending machine. Insert a prayer in the slot, pull the lever, and get a great life now. This type of thinking is big among Christians, but it shows very little respect for the omnipotent God who created the universe. Christians who worship the celestial vending machine assume that God is all about giving them more stuff and making them feel better. I wonder if Jesus mentioned promises of earthly goodies to the repentant criminal hanging on the cross next to him." This is a must-read for you if you are concerned about the state and current-thinking about both the church and Christianity today. Herewith the promised Book Review.

Michael Spencer's book, **Mere Churchianity: Finding Your Way Back to Jesus-Shaped Spirituality** has been released! To summarize its main message: **It's time for Jesus' followers to GET REAL.**

This is *the* manifesto for post-evangelicals. Anyone out there who thinks, "Jesus has left the

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building”? Michael thought that was the case too often in our American evangelical churches. After decades of working in congregations and Christian organizations, he observed these ironies:

§ We didn't know what Jesus was like.

§ We assumed that church would make us like Jesus.

§ We didn't read the Bible with our focus on Jesus.

§ Unlike Jesus, we were often ungracious and unloving to others.

§ Beyond his death and resurrection, we didn't grasp the meaning of Jesus' earthly ministry.

§ We assumed that Jesus stamped his approval on our way of life.

“Here is the truth,” writes Michael Spencer, *“Far from being Jesus-shaped Christians, we were church shaped”* (p. 7).

The Jesus Disconnect

Michael points out that there is a *“Jesus Disconnect”* in the American evangelical church. We advertise that church is the place to find Jesus. Instead, when people enter, they find moralism. Culture-war political rants. Church growth strategies. Pandering to religious consumers. Pastors with egoist ambitions. A “gospel” of health, wealth, and prosperity. A bourgeois suburban ethos of security, safety, and perpetuating the status quo. Programs that are light on genuine spiritual formation and teaching people to actually follow Jesus.

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If we spent three years with Jesus, as the disciples did, is this the Christianity we would recognize? iMonk argues that this religion of “*being a good Christian*” is a far cry from the disruptive, disturbing adventure of being Jesus’ disciple. It’s time to get real!

The Real Jesus

If our lives are going to be shaped by Jesus, and not simply by church culture, we must get to know Jesus. The second part of **Mere Churchianity** helps us see who the real Jesus is. Spencer gives us a “Jesus 101” course, reminding us of some basic facts about who Jesus is, and what his mission in this world is about.

Jesus’ work of dying on the cross and rising again were, of course, the climax and culmination of his redemptive ministry. However, evangelical churches have often given less attention to the ministry that preceded the Passion.

§ Jesus taught about God’s Kingdom.

§ Jesus practiced radical hospitality and inclusion of those rejected by the religious establishment.

§ Jesus prophetically denounced that same religious establishment.

§ Jesus did not engage in lavish marketing campaigns or focus on impressive “church growth.” Rather, he spent his life in a small place mentoring a few people and turning them into disciples.

§ Jesus called his friends to a life of doing the same and warned them that they too would suffer for it.

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Jesus kept it real, and honest, and down-to-earth, while at the same time giving us a vision of a completely new creation!

The Jesus-Shaped Life

The third section of **Mere Churchianity** points out some beginning steps toward truly following Jesus.

§ It starts with taking a new look at the *Bible*. Just the Bible. Not the Bible as interpreted for us by the dominant church culture, but the Bible in all its raw beauty and power. Read the Bible. See what it actually says about Jesus. Let Jesus' words and actions impact you full force.

§ If you want a Jesus-shaped life, choose not to be defined by *adjectives* that are commonly added to the word "Christian." Don't seek to be a "good" Christian or a "victorious" Christian. Just be a Christian. Just follow Jesus. The adjectives that churches and Christian traditions use often signify extraneous demands and expectations that go beyond what Jesus is calling us to be.

§ *Be who you are*: be real, be honest, be weak, be a sinner and *let Jesus be who he is*: your Saviour. Don't buy into wrongheaded views of sanctification that suggest we will be anything other than sinner-saints who need Jesus' grace, forgiveness, and present help every moment until the day we are glorified.

§ Realize that "*the church*" is *bigger than its institutional expressions*, and that God may lead you out of "acceptable" church culture into forms of fellowship and mission that will enable you to follow Jesus more fully.

The Jesus Community

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Finding a group of others seeking to follow Jesus in this fashion can be difficult. A host of people are leaving the church or on the verge of doing so because they can't find this kind of fellowship. People leave established churches because they often promote being a "fan" of Jesus rather than a "player" on his team. They are also tired of the consumerist style of Christianity that says we can buy the product, take the class, complete the program, and voila! we're followers of Jesus. As a result, many feel alone. And while solitude is an essential part of the spiritual life, we were also designed for community.

Start with yourself, and begin following Jesus in the life you live. Focus on the Scriptures. Build your relationships. Look for mentors that can guide you to Jesus. Find a humble place to serve others, and if possible, a community that supports you in that.

Finding a Jesus-shaped community may be difficult, and Michael Spencer concludes with this encouragement:

The decision to pursue a Jesus-shaped spirituality won't take you to a building with a sign out front. You may have to look hard to see the overgrown path of the "road less travelled by...that has made all the difference."

You will be cutting against the grain and swimming against the current. You may find yourself far outside the doors of many churches and thrown in with whomever the scapegoats of the hour happen to be. You should expect to be called liberal, emerging, naive, rebellious, and unsaved. Heads will shake and fingers will wag. But you're in good company. Jesus' own family raised questions about his stability.

...trust me you are not alone. There are millions like you, coming from every possible church, experience, school, ministry, and family in Christendom. I believe your presence is changing the landscape of the Western Christian world (p. 211).

May God use this book to help us all "get real."

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