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Book Reviews

A Second Resurrection: Leading Your Congregation to New Life

Reviewed by Randy M. Keeley

Easum, Bill. A Second Resurrection: Leading Your Congregation to New Life. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007. 126 pp. \$14.00.

I sat beside my grandfather when he died. He struggled for every breath all through the night and the day before. As he drew his last breath, I knew immediately that was it. Although everything had changed, it appeared that nothing had changed. His body rested upon the hospital bed as before, but the life had gone out of it. The doctors were summoned and with all of their expertise and state of the art medical techniques, all that was left to do was to declare that this 93-year-old man had died. If my grandfather was to live again upon this earth a resurrection was needed.

Bill Easum has been the “attending physician” called to aid over 600 churches in his twenty years as a church consultant. The author has the unpleasant task to announce that in many cases the patient is dead. Although some will be in disbelief because the body remains, the fact of the matter is the spiritual life has gone out of it. However, he also announces the good news that through Jesus Christ it can experience a resurrection!

As the pastor of Colonial Hills Church in San Antonio, Texas, Easum witnessed the resurrection of the church. During his twenty-four years as pastor, the church grew from thirty-five in worship to over a thousand. During his thirty-five years of pastoral ministry, he served four churches in two denominations. Easum is the Vice-President of Easum, Bandy & Associates, a full-service church consulting firm.

Easum believes the problem with churches in Western Protestantism has been misdiagnosed, they are not just sick; they are spiritually dead to the purposes of God for His church. After

spending the past three decades trying to revitalize them through church health seminars and growth techniques the vast majority of them are still declining (3). The reason the focus on church health has not yielded results for many of them is that they are not just sick, they are dead and in need of resurrection.

Easum summarizes what he means by a spiritually dead church: "... if your church spends most of its energy on itself and its members, it's spiritually dead. Such churches are living corpses. They are physically alive; but they are spiritually dead to the mission of the New Testament—to make disciples of Jesus Christ. They've turned inward and exist solely for themselves. They look for ways to serve themselves, and the kingdom be damned" (5-6). The book also contains a twenty-one-question litmus test to determine if a church is spiritually dead.

Churches are planted with an exciting vision to reach their world for Jesus Christ. But the process that leads to death may settle in quickly as a church reaches a comfortable size where more people are not needed to keep their doors open. Comfort gives way to complacency and status quo. Contentment with the status quo leads to fear of change. As funds and people begin to disappear the church experiences angst over the future and begins to long for the good old days. "Line item budgets are read more closely than the Scripture, and guess what happens to people's relationships with Jesus? He is replaced by the culture of fear. At this point God leaves the room and the church is on its own" (27)! Survival becomes the focus as the church enters an entrenched fearful state. The remaining positive leaders leave and the church spirals downward (25-28).

Turnaround also follows a predictable process that begins by casting a preferable future causing discomfort for those maintaining the status quo. Fanning the discomfort of those embracing the new vision leads to a passion and urgency for the mission of reaching people for Christ. In time as the process progresses, the leaders must embrace the new direction or they must be replaced. The change in leadership leads to excitement about the future and a culture of courage is born. As the spiritual leaders continue to grow the turnaround cannot be stopped, leading to an explosion of growth in the church. The entire process of turnaround can take three to five years (28-30).

The pastor and the leaders of the church are used by God to play a key role as He miraculously resurrects His church. The leaders must believe that all people need to find salvation in Jesus Christ (33-37). Leaders must die to themselves and their own interests and put Christ first, focusing on His mandate to make disciples. This becomes evident in the lives of leaders as they live

out the life of Christ in their personal lives (39-42). The lives of the leaders are the curriculum studied by the church for the turnaround. This begins as they see leaders being obedient to God's commands, living by faith, feeding on prayer, and being willing to lead the church toward a preferable future with perseverance (55-67). The concluding chapters offer practical tips on leading a turnaround and what to expect after it begins.

The tremendous value I find in this book is the hope of a resurrection for the many churches that have been struggling to discover why their best efforts at revitalization have failed. In a clear and practical fashion the author accomplishes his goal to "guide the leaders of these churches through the painful yet ultimately life-giving work of leading a church to new life in the Spirit" (vii). After making his case for the fact that many churches are spiritually dead, he guides the reader through the three stages that a turnaround church always goes through. "It begins with a new pastor. Either the pastor experiences a personal resurrection or the church actually gets a new pastor. Next is the resurrection of the leaders of the church either by transformation or replacement. Finally, the church itself is resurrected and turned around through some tactical change" (1).

Chapter four, "Turnaround Is an Eternal Issue," appears to be written to a non-evangelical audience. The author characterizes struggling churches as believing there are many ways to God, being focused on the Great Commandment, and doing good. In contrast, thriving churches focus on Jesus as the only way, and the Great Commission. The author cautions: "Don't make the mistake of thinking these comparisons are merely replays of the old battle of the fundamentalist/evangelical verses liberal/progressive" (34). As an evangelical however, I believe it is important to remember that unless these beliefs lead to proper practice our churches will be just as dead spiritually.

One of the greatest contributions this book makes is its emphasis on the spiritual issue behind the failure of the church in North America. The decline of the church is not simply a matter of technique in need of a better way of doing things. It is a spiritual issue of failing to submit to the Lordship of Jesus Christ and fulfill His purpose and mandate for the church. "...until they [a church in decline] are able to realize it is a spiritual thing there isn't much hope. This is where we see the spiritual bankruptcy of the church—leaders who do not understand that their growing relationship to Christ is all that matters to any turnaround. It's not programs or gimmicks but spiritual maturity" (15).

Another strength of the book is that although it is a straightforward, painful diagnosis of the condition of the church, it is

filled with hope and a clear prescription. Like strong medicine, it is not easy to swallow or a quick fix, but it lays out a clear process that invites the Lord to work the miracle of resurrection.

Although most of the principles in the book are easy to comprehend, I believe that a few case studies illustrating the principles of turnaround at work would be very helpful to the reader. Seeing real life examples of churches that experienced resurrection could further embolden others to take this journey.

An area of turnaround that needed to be addressed in greater detail is what the author refers to as "The Coup" (93). Even though differences in church polity may require different tactics to affect a coup, this seems to be a critical area where many pastors may lose the war.

I found this book to be very helpful in understanding some of the difficulties I faced as a pastor in leading a turnaround church. A major mistake I made was in attempting to do it alone. To some degree I skipped over the second step, the resurrection of the leaders, in the three-step process. In the introduction the author wisely recommends that the pastor gather a group of those who long for turnaround to read the book with him and join him on the journey (2). As I lead an association of churches and come to the aid of some of them who are in decline this book will help me remember to assess and address the spiritual issues of decline before techniques. It will be a valuable resource in our church assessments.

This book will not only be helpful to churches in decline but to church plants and to churches experiencing growth. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Understanding how a church dies spiritually (chapter 3) could help many avoid decline. Many of the principles to turn a church around may likewise help healthy churches to become healthier. Pastors and church leaders will greatly benefit from reading, discussing, and implementing the principles of this book together.

Talking about death is never a pleasant thing. But the hope that I will see my grandfather one day in heaven is the same hope I have for the church in North America because it rests upon our Savior Jesus and the power of His resurrection!

Reviewer

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