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## Book Review: Growing God's Church: How People Are Actually Coming to Faith Today by Gary L. McIntosh

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McIntosh, Gary L. *Growing God's Church: How People Are Actually Coming to Faith Today*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2016. 187 pp. \$15.99.

Reviewed by Dr. William (Bill) J. Ingram. Rev. Dr. Ingram is the Executive Pastor at Valley Baptist Church San Rafael, California. He has a B.A. from Southern California College, an M.A. from Hope International University, and a D.Min. from Biola University's Talbot School of Theology. Email: bingram60@yahoo.com

Gary McIntosh is a nationally and internationally renowned speaker, writer, and professor of Christian ministry and church leadership. He is a church growth expert, who has published hundreds of articles for Christian periodicals and has authored or coauthored twenty-four books, including *Growing God's Church: How People Are Actually Coming to Faith Today*. Dr. McIntosh teaches at Talbot School of Theology, Biola University, and he also leads the McIntosh Church Growth Network, an organization that provides consulting, church leader coaching, and workshop presentations. He is a recipient of the Donald A. McGavran award from the Great Commission Research Network, the Distinguished Alumni award from Colorado Christian University, the Donald A. McGavran award from Fuller School of Intercultural Studies, and the Robert B. Fisher award for Faculty Excellence at Biola University. He received his Master of Divinity at Western Conservative Baptist Seminary and his Doctor of Ministry and Ph.D. from Fuller Theological Seminary.

Gary McIntosh's passion for evangelism rings loud and clear throughout *Growing God's Church: How People Are Actually Coming to Faith Today*. The "central premise of his book" is that every believer becomes "truly missional." To become truly missional, he states that evangelism has to be "restored to a primary place in life and the ministry" (21) of the church and every Christian. McIntosh believes that "few leaders (today) understand how men and women are finding faith or connecting with a church" (21). Leaders are looking at decades-old research, which is no longer valid. McIntosh gives two examples from his research. First, research from the 1980s indicates "that 85 to 90 percent of people" (21) who come to Christ do so because of family and friends, while according to McIntosh's current research in this book (from 2016), only "59 percent of faith-conversions" (21) are a result of family and friends. A second example he points to where leaders are quoting outdated research is in terms of the role a pastor plays in conversions. Thirty years ago, pastor(s) accounted for "just 6 percent" (21) of conversions, whereas today pastors account "for 17 percent" (21) of all conversions. His book provides needed information for leaders today.

*Growing God's Church: How People Are Actually Coming to Faith Today* is an academic study about how people are coming to faith, but it is not purely an academic study. McIntosh offers thoughtful and insightful questions and

practical applications to help the local church develop evangelism that can reevaluate the current postmodern culture. The book “is organized around ten crucial questions—five biblical and five practical” (25).

The five biblical questions McIntosh attempts to answer in *Growing God's Church* that center around mission are the following: “What is our mission? What is our priority in mission? What is our role in mission? What is the focus of our mission? What is the context of our mission?” (25). Understanding the mission of Jesus leads to understanding the mission of the church. The mission of Jesus, according to McIntosh, “was doxological” (28). That is, Jesus’ ultimate mission was to glorify God, “but his [Jesus’] earthly mission was to ‘give eternal life’ to all mankind (John 17:2)” (28, 29). “The mission of the disciples flowed out of Jesus’ mission” (34). The early church understood that Jesus was sent “to bring eternal life to lost humanity” (34), and the church was to continue his mission. Mission, according to McIntosh, is proclaiming “that eternal life is available to those who believe in Jesus Christ, particularly in his death on the cross, his burial, and his resurrection. It is to proclaim that Jesus is the unique savior of the world and he is the only way to the father, the only way to eternal life” (36). The church’s priority is to “proclaim the good news of salvation to all the nations (peoples) of the world, beginning at Jerusalem and then moving outward in concentric circles until reaching the ends of the world (v. 47: Acts 1:8). This was the priority of the church. This is the priority today!” (48–49). This priority does not exempt the church from the ministry of service. McIntosh states that proclaiming the good news “does not mean we should ignore serving our communities and mankind” (49). However, our commission “is to go, sharing the gospel of salvation made possible through the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is our priority” (50).

His book clearly states that every follower of Jesus Christ has a role in evangelism. “Our role in mission is to take responsible action at three levels of evangelism” (60). The three levels of evangelism are presence (60), proclamation (61) and persuasion (62). *Presence* evangelism involves good works, which are “the foundation for” evangelism. (61). We are then to *proclaim* the gospel, that is, adding “good words to good deeds” (61). Finally, our role is to *persuade* people to become disciples of Jesus Christ, “rather than just converts” (62). This substantiates that making disciples is the focus of the local church. The church “is to baptize, and the group is to teach. Maturity into full discipleship takes place in Christ’s body, in the local church” (73). Disciple-making ministry is centered in and throughout the church. According to McIntosh, “The actions of the apostles and early disciples point to the fact that our mission today is about the church” (82). He points out that the church belongs to Jesus (78). “The church is ... something new” (78). The church is “permanent” (79). The church’s primary task “is to make disciples, which includes gospel proclamation and

assimilation of new believers into local churches where they may begin the process of spiritual formation” (86).

In the second section of the book, he answers five practical questions: “Who led you to faith in Christ? What method most influenced your decision for Christ? Why did you begin to attend church? Why do you remain at your church? What is the pastor’s role in evangelism?” (25). This section feels more academic than practical because of his use of survey data to substantiate his points. McIntosh goes to great lengths to give helpful insights on the way that Americans come to know Jesus Christ. He also compares this to the ways Americans used to come to know Christ. McIntosh breaks down the survey data by gender, generation (Builders, Boomers, GenXers, and Millennials), and region (rural, small town, small city, medium city, large city, and metropolis). The survey data provides a helpful overview of how religious life has changed in the last forty-plus years. After answering each question, he ends each chapter with “Down-to-Earth Ideas.” Some of these insights are fresh (e.g., “have one or two individuals each month share their testimony during a worship service” [102], “move the meet-and-greet time from the beginning of your worship service to the end” [113], “create casual forms for spiritual conversations, especially for younger adults” [151], etc.). On the other hand, many of the down-to-earth suggestions, such as to “be sure that there is an open and welcoming spirit in the church toward all guests” (141) and “maintain a passion for winning the lost to Jesus Christ” (150), have been previously suggested; however, these previously-suggested ideas do not negate the importance of his proposals. His book is a good resource of ideas that provides strategies for making changes.

According to McIntosh and his research, the most effective methodology of “winning nonbelievers to faith in Christ is simply conversation” (155), although McIntosh would say conversation is “more of a principle than a methodology” (155). What makes conversation more of a principle than a methodology is that it “works in all times, places, and among all peoples” (155). Conversation does not stand in isolation; it works with other principles. Conversation takes place in the context of relationships. McIntosh offers ten other principles that have been effective in churches that are fruitful in evangelism. These are:

Principle 1: Effective evangelism is demanded by God (156).

Principle 2: Effective evangelism is measurable (156).

Principle 3: Effective evangelism focuses on existing relationships (157).

Principle 4: Effective evangelism is intentional (158).

Principle 5: Effective evangelism is a balance between truth and relationship (158).

Principle 6: Effective evangelism is a result of training believers to share their faith with others (159).

Principle 7: Effective evangelism involves nonbelievers in church activities before they believe (159).

Principle 8: Effective evangelism leads new believers into community (160).

Principle 9: Effective evangelism is supported by prayer (160).

Principle 10: Disciple making is a process (161).

One might be tempted to dismiss this book, believing that it is purely an academic endeavor; however, it is more than that. Although *Growing God's Church* is based on research, the goal of the book is to help pastors, church staff, churches leaders, and denominational leaders fulfill the Great Commission. The book offers both helpful—although not always new—insights and potential common pitfalls to be avoided, all of which could lead to much greater success in growing local churches.

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Wilson, Jared C. *The Prodigal Church: A Gentile Manifesto against the Status Quo*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015. 240 pp. \$15.99

Reviewed by Joey Chen. Joey has a passion for what God is doing in cities and is currently lead pastor at Sunset Church in San Francisco, California. He is also presently working on a D.Min. at Talbot School of Theology. He earned his M.Div. from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and his B.A. from Cedarville University.

One may find it difficult to keep track of all the books that claim to help leaders build a successful church. These kinds of books often give steps, a how-to guide, or a map of how to become a bigger and better church. Jared Wilson's new book, *The Prodigal Church*, stands out because it is not selling success, but it provides a gentle call to question if "the success," as defined historically in other books on church growth, is the kind we should want. Wilson is concerned that the American church may not be making the type of disciples it intends, and its practices may be counterproductive to the church's mission. He wants the reader to evaluate the ideologies and practices of the attractional church model and realign them with the gospel.

To set the tone, he spends the first chapter explaining that he does not want the book to be a rant, an argument for a traditional church, or a reactionary rejection of current models, but he wants the book to "call to question ourselves" (21).

Over the next six chapters, Wilson defines the attractional church and evaluates its ideology and practices. He defines the attractional church as "a way of ministry that derives from the primary purpose of making Christianity appealing" (25). He is upfront about his low opinion of this model, yet consistently points out its positive contributions and resists exaggeration.

Wilson recognizes the noble aims of the attractional church in its attempt to reach non-Christians and its desire for contemporary relevance. However, he sees a glaring problem with the lack of emphasis on the gospel. He says, "Too often this message of Christ's death has become assumed, the