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Book Review: Your Church is Too Small: Why Unity in Christ's Mission Is Vital to the Future of the Church by John H. Armstrong

Robert I. Garrett Jr.
Dallas Baptist University

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Garrett: Book Review: *Your Church is Too Small: Why Unity in Christ's Miss* relationships with our neighbors are transformed, we move in a trajectory that results in our organizations becoming healthy communities. This seems to be rare, yet it also seems to be the great yearning of people working together in organizations. People desire to be involved in organizations like this, yet they are very rare, in part because there are so few leaders who understand the values of being a "steward leader." There are few transformed leaders, so there are even fewer transformed organizations, which can then transform society and culture. Rodin is very persuasive and inspiring in this section of his book.

No glaring limitations are in this book or its ideas. However, the weakness will be that the audience will read it and only follow or understand part of the principles. *The Steward Leader* is a holistic concept. Following only a few of the ideas or principles will not result in transformation of the leaders or of the organizations they lead. It starts with foundational principles and then builds from there. It starts with very personal and private issues in the life of a leader and then moves out concentrically into all the relationships of the leader's life. The reader cannot jump into the process in the middle, nor just add a supplemental idea to his or her leadership process and practice. It is a holistic journey that I fear most leaders will miss, ignore, or just choose to follow the trajectories that they have followed thus far in their lives, which have resulted in a modicum of success.

Rodin has made a great contribution to the body of information broadly defined as "leadership." I am going to use this book as a text in some of the classes I teach. However, the bigger application for this reader will be that I am going to ask the people in the organizations that I lead to read this with me and join me in the journey of being a "steward leader." As we are personally transformed and move in the steward trajectories, I hope that our organizations are healthy and transformed as well, and reflect that they are part of the kingdom of God.

John H. Armstrong. *Your Church Is Too Small: Why Unity in Christ's Mission Is Vital to the Future of the Church*. Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 2010. 220 pp. \$19.99.

Reviewed by Robert I. Garrett, Jr., Director, MA in Global Leadership, Dallas Baptist University.

The title of this book calls to mind the title of a book quite popular a full generation ago. *Your God is Too Small* (J. B. Phillips) argued for a broader view of God's place in the life of every believer. Armstrong likewise argues that the church has become too small in the minds of many Christians. This narrow image which

Great Commission Research Journal, Vol. 2, Iss. 2 [2011], Art. 15 places limits on the church defined by our own experience “shrivels our spirit and hinders Christ’s mission” (13).

In the Foreword, J. I. Packer notes that John Armstrong is a church leader who has “traveled the distance from the separatist, sectarian fixity of fundamentalism to embrace the kingdom-centered vision of the church” (11). Doctrinal and denominational divisions, however important, are secondary to the “missional-ecumenical vocation” (11). The vision of unity Armstrong offers refers to loving cooperation in life and mission and requires “neither unanimity nor uniformity nor union” (11).

Armstrong self-identifies as a pastor and church planter for more than twenty years. He is an adjunct professor of evangelism at Wheaton College Graduate School and a guest lecturer on many seminary campuses. Currently, he directs an organization called Act 3 which promotes unity among Christian communions. Armstrong’s book is the result of more than ten years of effort by its author, who has penned eleven previous books.

317

The book is written in a popular first-person style as an autobiographical journey. Over the past twenty years, Armstrong has come to understand his own spiritual identity in a new way in which a vision of the mission of Christ has gripped his imagination in a way that would work for the renewal of the entire Christian church, affirming with fresh understanding the reality of the “one holy catholic and apostolic church” (26–27). He advocates rejecting the conflicts and schisms that have separated evangelicals in America.

The book divides its appeal for a larger vision of a unified church, cooperating together for Christ’s glory, into the following three major sections: past, present, and future. From the past, there is a biblical and historical basis for Christian unity that Christians have failed to appreciate appropriately. In the present, restoring unity in the church is a major step toward God’s people living out the gospel mandate. A future missional-ecumenical movement is understood as a coming paradigm that will disturb Christians out of their current petty fiefdoms and challenge them to unite in a wider cause.

The road to the future begins with a frank recognition that the contemporary church exists within the cultural megashifts that redefine our context. Christians must revisit the past to develop what Webber called an “ancient-future faith” (18). Doing so will expose how naïve and dangerous it may be to assume that present understandings of the church are adequate, since “America has, in fact, become a breeding ground for new religions and sects” (18).

If Scripture alone is taken as supreme (Heb 4:12), then the witness of Scripture

Garrett: Book Review: *Your Church is Too Small: Why Unity in Christ's Miss* is to the living Christ as the final revelation of God, who promised to build His church (Mt 18:16). Not until the last two hundred years has it been possible to imagine the church as “a myriad of independent and unrelated congregations and movements that interpreted the Bible as each saw fit” (19). Even among the Reformers, a common faith was found in early ecumenical creeds. A “critical realism” does not divorce the hope of a future idealized church from the actual reality of the historical church (20). However, the priority of the kingdom of God (John 17) will help the church see her role in making a reality the vision of Revelation 5:9–10, where members of every tribe, language, people, and nation join the redeemed in honoring Christ.

Over the long run, there cannot be pessimism about the direction of the church because “it belongs to Christ!” Where the kingdom of God breaks out, churches will prosper. While it is anybody’s guess what the church will look like in terms of cultural forms, the church will play a decisive role in preparing for the final coming of Christ. What God is doing in our time is creating a new vitality that defies human explanation and is characterized by an unexpected willingness of both Catholics and Protestants from various groups to relate to one another in gracious ways, seeing in one another brothers and allies rather than competitors (23). At the same time, young Christians, especially evangelicals, are abandoning the ship of traditional churches (23), driven by a sense that things have gone wrong and that there are deeper spiritual roots to be found elsewhere.

Armstrong’s journey toward “catholicity” begins in worship moved deeply by the final words of the Apostle’s Creed, so that he became committed to “one body and . . . one Lord” (Eph 4:4–5). He speaks of three “conversions.” As a small boy in 1956, he came to know Jesus. In his early ministry in 1977, he came to embrace a doctrinal commitment to Calvinism. Later in 1995, he became to see from John 17 and Ephesians 4 that the unity spoken of in the church could not only apply to an “invisible” church, but also that this unity should translate itself into concrete reality (26–27). While he soaked his soul in John 17, Armstrong also began to look for Christians who were from different traditions. He was inspired by discovering “a community so vast that it overwhelmed me in its richness, beauty, and diversity” (32). He found fellowship among those whom he had once feared. Also, some of his former suspicion now seems like the party spirit, strife, discord, and divisions against which the New Testament warns (1 Cor 1:10, Jas 4:1–2).

Armstrong sustains that the *de facto* “divide and multiply” strategy adopted by fractious churches for church planting simply misses the powerful message of John 17 (36). In addition, it deflates the “greatest apologetic” available to a lost world, which is a community founded on consistent love for one another (50–54).

Great Commission Research Journal, Vol. 2, Iss. 2 [2011], Art. 15
Against this fragmentarianism, Armstrong proposes that Christians place Christ at the center, seeing Him as architect of His church.

So, from the past we have four classic marks of the church from the creeds: the church is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic body (66–72). The church is one from a uniqueness of common allegiance to Christ, and oneness among all believers is a goal to be pursued. The church is holy because its God is holy, and because from that holy God there is a sense of what is morally required. The church is catholic—not in identification with the Church of Rome—but in terms of being geographically and culturally universal. The Greek term *katholikos* can be literally translated “through the whole world,” and it reflects the missionary character of the gospel. The church is apostolic in the sense that it is linked to the faith of the apostles, meaning that we must judge our own community against the dynamism and conviction that characterized the early church.

The second section examines the present challenge of how to restore unity in the church. Armstrong suggests that the Apostles’ Creed would make a very good confessional basis, made necessary because “the scandals and heresies of American Christianity dilute our witness to a watching world” (82). Sadly, the lack of unity creates weakness in the church, delighting Satan who “hates a unified church.”

The seeds of disunity come from interpreting the same core doctrines through “distinctively different pattern of thought, government and worship” (83). We must see sectarianism not as a mere unfortunate fact of life, but as “our enemy”—to be opposed by a diversity that represents catholicity among believers.

To think rightly about the church means embracing a “new ecumenism” that is founded on mission and the transformation of nations (103). Since Protestant denominations face an uncertain future unless they are redefined on the bases of mission, this enterprise is most urgent (105). Unless new churches and networks learn to relate positively to other Christians also embracing a healthy orthodoxy, the result will be simply more different groups and increased sectarianism. What is needed is a new emphasis on becoming like the church in the New Testament.

The church must discover that it is a servant to humanity and the community of God’s kingdom. Just as Jesus became flesh, the church as Christ’s body can incarnate the reality of the kingdom. A turning of Christians toward one another will be part of a coming renewal.

This renewal will recognize the importance of tradition, which as Jaroslav Pelikan explains, “tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living” (123). This tradition comes from biblical tradition, classic Christianity (as expressed in the creeds), and the wisdom of church fathers. This is a deep well from which Christians can draw guidance and encouragement.

Garrett: Book Review: *Your Church is Too Small: Why Unity in Christ's Mission* Armstrong designates as "the great evangelical catastrophe" that authority was granted to the Bible alone, since "we have exalted our own interpretations of Scripture" and promoted schism in the process of splitting hermeneutical hairs. He sees the result of this as "a small view of the church and a big view of our own importance" (131).

Looking into the future, Armstrong sees what he calls the "missional-ecumenical movement" gaining hold as Christians recognize that denominations are not found at all in the Bible, and, in the search for a true church, new convergences are experienced (138–39). A new interest in finding oneness with "everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord" provides the starting point for seeking an ideal church (140). In this church, where diversity is valued, the famous dictum is functionally useful—"In essentials unity, in nonessentials freedom, in all things charity." This new unity would transcend denominations calling for a loyalty beyond their boundaries rather than provoking tired old questions like, "Which church is the one true church?"

320

In the Missional-Ecumenical Church, unity will be a sign and an instrument of Christ's mission. John R. Mott and Lesslie Newbigin have called for a missional form of ecumenism. Armstrong suggests along similar lines that a missional reformation will provoke a concern for a lost world that requires us as Christians to recognize that we must love each other first for the sake of the lost (161).

This becomes a new paradigm in which reconciliation occurs as groups share in common witness and ministry to their communities. The book concludes with an appeal that God will disturb us as evangelicals into making the drastic shifts that our challenging times require.

In assessing this book, one can affirm the spirit of the author who seeks to find a way back toward a common bond with other Christians. Correctly, he suggests that perhaps the most powerful motive to unite otherwise very different Christians is a mutual and deep commitment to share the gospel with a world that is clearly lost and in need of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

While the tone of the book is popular, and neither the argument of the book nor the interpretation of pertinent biblical texts is traced with academic care, it is remarkable to hear this testimony of an evangelical who has discovered the way out of his own faith ghetto. He recommends the path he has found to his fellows who can recover from sectarianism and find a better way toward a unity that could empower the church for its mission to the lost world.