

March 2011

The Gospel-Driven Church

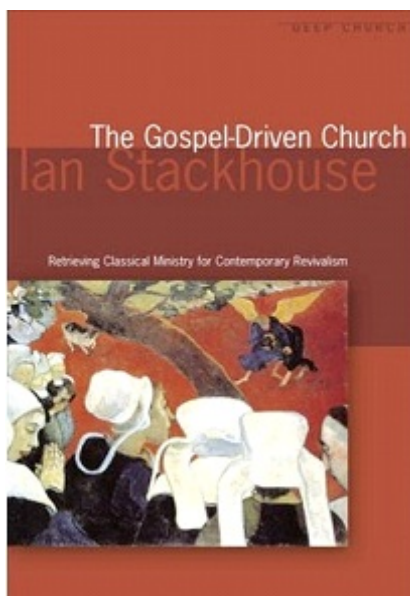
Retrieving Classical Ministries for Contemporary Revivalism

by Ian Stackhouse (Paternoster Press: Sparkford, UK, 2004,2005)

A book review by Jack De Vries

Sometimes you read a book and it makes you feel a bit uneasy -- you don't really agree with everything written in it. But yet there are truths in that book you need to hear! It is like the preacher who reminded his church that if they really wanted to know God's will for their lives, read the parts of the Bible they have not underlined. It is true, isn't it. We often underline the things we agree with. Well, I recently read a book that made me feel a bit uneasy -- but there were many parts I underlined.

The book is by Ian Stackhouse, *The Gospel-Driven Church: Retrieving Classical Ministries for Contemporary Revivalism* (Paternoster Press: Sparkford, 2004,2005). I bought a copy of this book because of the endorsement given to book by a scholar I truly respect, Eugene Peterson, professor emeritus of Regent College, Vancouver, B.C., Canada. He wrote: "Those of us who care about the church of Jesus Christ have been offered a plethora of rhetoric and programs for renewal in recent decades. They range from serious to silly and it is not at all easy to discern where to draw the line. Ian Stackhouse's book is a model of careful biblical and spiritual discernment, both appreciative and cautionary. I find him a most welcome ally in our 'stay against confusion.'"



Ian Stackhouse is a practitioner in ministry, being the senior pastor at Guildford Baptist Church (Surrey, UK) since 2004, after serving another congregation for 11 years. It is obvious he cares about the church of Jesus Christ, as do I. Among the churches I serve, the Christian Reformed Churches in Australia, we are committed to being gospel-driven and so I thought this book would be a welcome discussion on how to make the gospel-driven church a reality.

This book does not make for light reading. The book is technical throughout and footnoted exhaustively. It seems that this book is targeted not for popular reading, but for those theologically trained and in church leadership. You might not take this book along for some vacation reading on the beach. But don't let that stop you from taking a serious look at this book. It offers insightful commentary on the state of the contemporary church which will help churches keep the gospel central.

Stackhouse's main thesis is that the contemporary church has given into the "numbers game" – the all-consuming quest for getting more people to attend their church. This has resulted in at worst compromise, and at best pragmatism, where they simply try to mimic 'success' stories elsewhere. This can be seen in the way that churches are so quick to

embrace the latest "fad" that promises growth, whether this be Alpha, spiritual warfare, being seeker sensitive, or even embrace the Toronto or Pensecola model of revivalism. These fads, he argues, have diverted attention from discipleship. In their eagerness to grow numerically churches have become soft on the gospel. Instead church "renewal is best realised when we attend to those things -- preaching, sacraments, prayer and pastoral care -- that reconnect the church to the original gospel of what God has done in and through Christ." (77)

In making his case Stackhouse refers to many church leaders and ministries which have helped me develop a missional vision for the church, people like Peter Wagner, the late John Wimber, and ministries like Willow Creek. In some aspects Stackhouse is overly cautious and somewhat of an alarmist. He writes, for example, of "the soft evangelism of places like Willow Creek and programmes like Alpha, which, in effect, simplify the gospel for the sake of relevancy and immediacy."(20) But anyone who has engaged Willow Creek or Alpha soon realises that there is nothing "soft" or "simplifying the gospel" in either of these ministries. The opposite is true. Willow Creek is deeply concerned about radical discipleship as demonstrated in their *Reveal* resources and related church strategies. The same can be said of Alpha, particularly if one delves into the heaps of discipleship material tailored for those who have completed the first basic Alpha course. Just check out the full range of Alpha and Willow resources. There is little "soft" or "simplistic" about these ministries. So as I read *The Gospel-Driven Church* there were many parts I did not underline; I put huge question marks beside a number of statements and paragraphs.

Having said this, I don't believe for a moment we ought to read only those books we agree with. There is also truth to be discovered in these books. This was also true of *The Gospel-Driven Church*. For example, I

appreciated much of what Stackhouse wrote about worship in revival. In the contemporary church there is too much which could be described as "fadism". He writes: "We worship the Father, through the Son and in the Spirit. Yet, worship is never less than a good confession. Worship is not a performance by which the church seeks to access divine power; rather, worship is the way we pay attention to the magnitude and mystery of Christian truth, and through it bear unself-conscious witness to the kingdom of God in the world." (65)

The chapter, *A Crisis in Preaching*, is one of the better chapters in this book. Perhaps my own interest in homiletics leans me toward this chapter -- but I believe there is more to it than that. Stackhouse reminds us about the central task we have as pastors and church leaders. He writes, "Preaching the gospel, however, ought to be at the vanguard of the church's mission -- the means by which the church is evangelised by its own gospel." (115) Or, "in the realm of preaching, it represents a belief that as we faithfully expound the scriptures, the combination of good theology and the presence of the Holy Spirit will cause churches to grow."(88) These quotes are wise reminders for the church in the 21st century -- that as we seek to be missional and desire our churches to grow in number, first things must remain foremost: the preaching of the gospel - the proclamation of God's Word!

Allow me to refer to one more chapter in the book -- a chapter that challenged my thinking, and perhaps will also challenge yours, the chapter on *The Lost Art of the Cure of Souls*. He makes the claim, referring to Eugene Peterson, that church size matters. "The issue of size, for Peterson, is related to a prior commitment to only pastor a congregation where personal knowledge of each and every member is possible." (227) Now this flies in the face of the megachurch model which is growing prevalent in western Christianity. Many of our churches are so big

that a pastor no longer has personal knowledge of his flock. Many pastors have reduced their role within the church to one of management. I applaud the positive movements toward small groups and the cell church. This has provided better pastoral care and improved general overall church health. Yet Stackhouse's call for pastors to recall the lost art of pastoral care is worth heeding. From almost three decades of pastoral ministry I have come to appreciate the importance of pastoral care, of having personal knowledge of each and every member of the flock. Pastors today would do well not to abdicate this essential ministry of pastoring a congregation.

If you looked at my copy of *The Gospel-Driven Church* you will find both question marks in the margins and underlined sentences and paragraphs. I encourage you to pick up your own copy of this book - and let it challenge you, convict you, and encourage you in the throes of ministry -- as it did me.