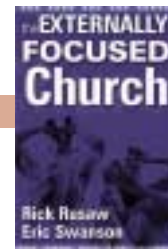


THE *Externally* FOCUSED CHURCH



A Revolution of Grace

A REVIEW BY JOE ELLIS

As I began reading the words of Rick Rusaw and Eric Swanson in *The Externally Focused Church*, I thought of the story about the Native American who was sending messages by smoke signals. He saw in the distance the mushroom cloud of an atomic bomb test and exclaimed, “I wish I had said that!”

During my lifetime I have seen the influence of three powerful movements in churches. One was the ideal of restoring the church to the faith, character, unity, and power of the first church. Building on this was a second emphasis known as the church growth movement, which has called the church to focus on fulfilling Jesus’ commission more responsibly.

Peter Drucker has called the third and current movement among churches the most important social phenomenon in American society in 30 years. Rusaw and Swanson’s book heralds this movement that focuses the church outward to servanthood in its mission field. It defines ministry as “meeting another’s need with the resources God has given you.” It properly suggests that in doing this we encounter Jesus most directly. If we want to be near the Shepherd we must go where the Shepherd is and help him. I believe this movement has the elements of a “great awakening,” a revolution of grace for individual Christians, churches, and entire communities. This refocus has incredible potential to empower the church to impact the world for good and for salvation.

Those who want to be authentic

disciples of Jesus and want their churches to be authentic should read—and heed—this book. It provides an understanding of, and help for joining, this movement to serve and evangelize the people around them.

CRUCIAL ELEMENTS

This book is fresh and incisive. It is exceptional amid the flood of books being published today, and I hope it does not get lost in the information overload. It is unique in that it combines three elements: information, experience, and transformation.

In providing information, the book makes an iron-clad case for the biblical

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directive that the church exists not for itself, but to carry out Jesus’ commission to serve and save the world. The case from Scripture is so strong that naysayers will be hard pressed to deny it. If someone were to collect all the clear and imperative Bible passages that mandate this outward focus it would comprise a sizeable book. Why, then, have so many churches not seen this perfectly obvious directive and obeyed it before now?

Churches talk a lot about the Great Commission; but, in the words of the maxim, “When all is said and done, more has been said than done.” An externally focused church does what

others only verbalize.

Throughout history some of the greatest movements have sprung up when a paradigm-shifter rediscovered something that was perfectly obvious but blocked from view by old habits of thinking and acting. Then, once people see it afresh, they are amazed that they had not seen it before. The externally focused church emphasis is such an idea whose time has come. This book has the potential for igniting a magnificent paradigm shift to a future that we can hardly imagine.

For more than 60 years Drucker has been considered the father of modern corporate management. One of his axioms is: “Any organization begins to die the day it begins to be run for the benefit of the insiders and not for the benefit of the outsiders.”*

This book puts a magnifying glass on the critical pivot point between two fundamental categories of churches: those focused internally, and those externally focused. This creates a watershed between authentically effective churches and stagnant or declining ones. Some readers who would say their church is externally focused will be surprised at how fully their churches fit the description of an internally focused church.

This external-focus principle is an application of Jesus’ paradox: serve yourself and die; forget yourself—be crucified with Christ—and live. Seek your life and lose it; lose your life in God’s service and find it. Seek to be served and miss out on abundant living; seek to serve and find the abundant

life here and Heaven, too. For many churches, success tends to be measured in terms of institutional concerns such as attendance, buildings, and budgets; but if a church is to live, it has to become a “living sacrifice” to the Lord’s enterprise in the world.

As to experience, the principle of the book is authenticated by many examples of real-life churches actually doing what they are advocating. The case studies cover such a wide variety of conditions and locations that every church can identify with at least one of them. The standard cannot be dismissed as “but our situation is different.”

As to transformation, the book processes the principle and its examples so well that the reader is led to change the way he thinks and acts. Each chapter provides exercises to help readers move

The Externally Focused Church (224 pages), by Rick Rusaw and Eric Swanson, is published at \$17.99 by Group Publishing.

to the right side of the watershed so they can, in turn, help to change their churches as well.

TRANSFORMING INSTINCT

The book goes far beyond bolt-on boilerplate programs. It helps to bring a transformation of instinct so that a church can creatively do what is appropriate to its time and place. The authors speak of dealing with the church’s DNA, its innate character that will issue into the right thinking and acting. Satan has undermined churches at the genetic

level to neutralize them by making them self-centered, ingrown, inward-focused, self-serving, distracted, sin-corrupted, and thus passive or inert. They become ineffective or useless for God’s purposes. To become truly effective, a church must undergo transformation at the instinctive or intuitive level so that we find ourselves automatically thinking and acting in accord with the principle. An external focus is not an option; it is in the very genetic code of authentic Christianity.

*Listed as one of the most important lessons churches need to learn from Drucker in Leadership Network’s NetFax, Number 75, July 7, 1997 (www.leadnet.org).

Joe Ellis, retired dean of Cincinnati (Ohio) Bible Seminary, continues to teach, write, and speak in the fields of practical ministry and church growth.