

Book Review

The Innovation Crisis: Creating Disruptive Influence in the Ministry You Lead

By Ted Esler

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288 pages

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<https://www.asianaccess.org/senior-leaders/bio-joe-handley>.

Esler's latest book on innovation in ministry is both timely and challenging for those of us serving in churches and in the missionary field. He gives a clarion call for Christian workers to break out of the current molds and attempt bold new ventures for God's kingdom. As he aptly notes, "I believe we have a crisis of innovation among ministries today... The Christian worldview is waning in Western society. The enormous cultural and religious shifts around us are making decades of ministry irrelevant (258)." This passion for innovation drives Esler to exhort Christian leaders to follow William Carey's example to:

Expect great things from God, [and] attempt great things for God.

The Innovation Crisis does a masterful job of weaving theory with practical, real life modern examples of how innovation can be attempted. Esler integrates solid theoretical principles and illustrates them with stories giving both context and inspiration for better understanding and clear pathways for implementing these innovations within one's own ministry context. He outlines five different avenues for approaching innovation that are quite

helpful. Creatively drawing from William Carey, the shoemaker, he calls these five pathways “The Shoemaker Rules.”

The first pathway involves “seeing a problem worth solving” (ch. 2). Esler outlines the importance of finding gaps in ministry that we can creatively try to tackle. He identifies the importance of having a mission statement that helps focus an organization or an individual. And, if leaders find that creativity does not emerge naturally, Esler suggests a “blue ocean strategy” to open new vantage points of what may be possible.

The next shoemaker rule is “riding the wave of existing innovation” (ch. 3). In this pathway, collaboration, stacking, platforms, and scale are introduced as viable means for tackling the challenges identified. All of these are proven approaches in business and have value that can be deployed to strengthen a ministry.

Third is a “bias to action” (ch. 4) where Esler outlines various myths about innovation to try to shake people from the assumption that only certain types of leaders can innovate. He shares practical examples of experimenting with projects and bringing incremental change that many will find helpful. Since few are actually true innovators, as he explains, these experiments and incremental steppingstones provide ample means for those struggling to move forward.

The next pathway, “empathize, then strategize” (ch. 5), provides one of the most useful methodologies that many may be unaware of. Design Thinking is introduced as a vehicle for helping leaders to unleash new solutions and brainstorm valuable perspectives and insights to address challenges. This five-stage process is the one used by renown groups like IDEO and leaders will find that it is well worth investigating in order to bring innovation to their ministries.

Finally, Esler challenges the leader to “think big” (ch. 5) and tackle “wicked problems.” These are problems that are so difficult that they may seem impossible to even attempt. By stretching to large-sized challenges, one is forced to think outside of boxes and attempt things, much like William Carey did, that are beyond imagination.

These shoemaker rules are then followed by several chapters that encourage readers to identify targets and step into the role of an innovative leader. Again, several practical examples and creative ventures are shared to help the reluctant take up the challenge. With all of this, the book lives up to its billing, as Carey Nieuwhof ably notes in the foreword: “You’ll encounter some super sharp observations, innovative thinking, really tough questions, challenging ideas, and a call to innovate that will hopefully make you (and me) uncomfortable enough to do something risky that might not work.”

While I have great appreciation for what *The Innovation Crisis* reveals, I would be remiss not to offer a few critiques or suggestions for further study. Esler does a fantastic job digging into the theories and laying out the groundwork for ministries to look at innovation. Pointing to the likes of Peter Drucker and Everett Rogers as foundational to this genre, as Esler does, is

important. However, I was surprised that Drucker's (1985) own book on innovation, *Innovation and Entrepreneurship*, was not mentioned. I also believe the research on *Immunity to Change* (Kegan and Lahey, 2009) could have been explored and would have added significant value to the overall excellent work that Esler conducted. Another concurrent entry in this field well worth reviewing is Doug Paul's *Ready or Not*. It complements Esler's contribution.

Additionally, while the book includes biblical passages at the front of each chapter and a few theological reflections throughout, exploring a more robust theology of creation or innovation could help Christian leaders understand the importance of pursuing innovation. I will conclude by praising Esler for his thoughtful and important insight shared below. This shows his humility and wisdom in making this outstanding contribution for us as ministry leaders:

A final warning is that, as Christians, we must recognize timeless truth that is not subject to innovation. We are not going to further enhance the gospel with innovation. We are not going to solve the problem of sin through innovation. Managerial practices will not replace biblical models of ministry. It is within the limits and framework of Scripture that we will find human flourishing. Innovation has an application for ministry but it is not the kingdom of God. (38)

With this brilliant caveat, Esler should be commended for providing a rich resource for the Church and Mission worlds, inspiring and challenging us to boldly innovate to honor our Lord's commission and better serve him in that venture.

To further your understanding, you may also enjoy the IQ test Esler provides. He notes that it is unproven as an instrument, but I did find it insightful, and it could be helpful in your journey toward innovation: <http://theinnovationcrisis.com/iqtest/>

References

- Drucker, P. (1985). *Innovation and Entrepreneurship*. New York: Routledge.
- Kegan, R. & Lahey, L. (2009). *Immunity to Change*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School.