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Book Review: The Prodigal Church: A Gentile Manifesto against the Status Quo by Jared C. Wilson

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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.

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

thing you build up to rather than focus on" (27). This observation is the heart of Wilson's problem with the attractional church.

Wilson sees two ideologies driving the attractional church—pragmatism and consumerism. He criticizes pragmatism because it assumes that "what works" is wise and beneficial. He identifies consumerism as being ingrained in the Church Growth movement, but questions whether consumer desires should be the primary concern of the church. Wilson deems it a mistake to assume "that the customer's interests are legitimate" (55).

To evaluate practical matters of the attractional church, Wilson turns to worship services, the use of Scripture, programs, discipleship, and pastoral care. He gives each of these topics its own chapter, and the force of his evaluation is strengthened by his clarity in summarizing the attractional model, while evaluating it through the lens of Scripture.

In the concluding chapters, he offers a practical way forward and a personal story. Practically, he suggests that we measure the right things by asking different questions such as, "How many of our people are being trained to personally disciple others?" (158) While humbly and boldly sharing his painful, personal struggles, he found the attractional church missing the hope of the gospel.

Wilson's aim is to gently challenge the status quo of the attractional church, and I believe he is successful in persuading the reader with his pastoral concern to think carefully about how one "does church." Wilson started by asking the reader to be open to an important evaluative question, "What if what we're doing isn't really what we're supposed to be doing?" (24) Throughout the book, he successfully evaluates the ideologies and practices that do more harm than good in the attractional church and leads the reader to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

He succeeds in his tone of gentleness because from beginning to end, he demonstrates recognition of his own bias. I appreciated his resistance to self-promote when he said at the end, "I have no interest in getting you to be a Calvinist or to join The Gospel Coalition.... I'm not trying to sell you a label. There's no offer, here at the end of this book, to join a club" (194). At the end, Wilson's vulnerability in sharing his personal story demonstrated the kind of openness he was asking from the reader to challenge oneself. Wilson is successful because his convictions are seasoned with respect and humility.

Most importantly, he is successful in persuading the reader that all is not well in the attractional church. He accomplishes this by undercutting the trust in numbers as a gauge of health and success by looking at recent research. He notes that recent research shows that "by and large the people filling these church buildings week in and week out turn out to be other Christians" (35). In other words, rather than making disciples of non-Christians, the attractional model has succeeded primarily in transfer growth. He understands that those who are proponents of the attractional church may

see this as a failure of other churches, so Wilson convincingly uses Willow Creek's REVEAL survey to demonstrate that numbers do not tell the whole story and that bigger is not always better.

Anyone looking for a concise biblical critique of pragmatism and consumerism should read Wilson's book. He brings pragmatism and consumerism under the microscope of Scripture and summarizes the danger in these ideologies clearly: "The way the church wins its people shapes its people. So the most effective way to turn your church into a collection of consumers and customers is to treat them like that's what they are" (54).

While addressing the practice of the attractional church, I found the chapters on the use of Scripture and worship services to be most beneficial. Wilson's evaluation of the attractional church's preaching and use of Scripture is severe. Turning to research, he reports that in the time when the attractional church is growing in numbers, it has grown less Christian because "only 62 percent of the born again Christians surveyed strongly believe that Jesus was sinless" (74). This is because the emphasis on practical application and cultural relevance often treats the Bible "more as a reference book than as a story, and more as a manual of good advice than as an announcement of good news" (72). He makes a firm indictment of this kind of preaching because it may actually teach the law and "unwittingly facilitate the condemnation of the lost" (88). Rather than assuming Jesus and the gospel, he believes it must be made explicit and given the spotlight.

When it comes to the attractional church's worship services, he asks, "Are we gathering as watchers or beholders? Are we gathering to see a performance or to see the passing by of the glory of God?" (103) Wilson addresses the use of "video venues" as a practical application of his theology of worship. Especially helpful is the thought that "video venues assist the idolization of and overreliance on preachers" (117). If pastors are to find faithful men and train them up in the word according to 2 Timothy 2:2, video venues may hinder that aim.

Wilson's book, while persuasive and clear, is not without flaws. The flaws do not ultimately undercut his purpose, but they do show areas that need further development. Chapter 6 is the weakest chapter, as he does not show how busyness combined with having too many programs is unique to attractional churches. He effectively critiques the problems of busyness and offers up the alternative "simple church" model, but does not clearly connect how busyness is tied to the attractional model. He assumes that the attractional church "increases its programs, its classes, its opportunities" (217). To further weaken his critique, he uses the example of LifeChurch, a church he deems to be based on attractional principles, and shows how they have adopted the "simple church" model. This may be humble and respectful, but it is not helpful in proving his point.

Another underdeveloped part of his argument is practical suggestions on how to make the change from attractional to gospel centered. In

chapter 8, he offers a helpful suggestion that the church must measure the right things, but he only offers six questions that would help to measure the right things. This left me wanting more meaningful reflection on how to make the change.

Last, Wilson was probably focusing on the main problematic areas of the attractional model; however, his indirect mention of evangelism and his neglect of addressing global missions left a significant gap that needs to be addressed.

Even though I would consider myself within the same tribe as Wilson, I still learned a lot from him and consider the book valuable as he clearly articulates some of my concerns with the attractional model. Wilson's efforts may be directed at those within the attractional church model, but I believe it is still a necessary corrective for those within the "gospel-centered" tribe because many churches still practice and rely on the attractional model. The ideologies are not limited to those already in the attractional church, and it would have been helpful for Wilson to unpack how his tribe struggles with them as well.

The Prodigal Church makes a persuasive call for attractional church leaders to realign their churches with the gospel. Wilson convincingly addresses the weaknesses of the attractional model and offers a call to something bigger than just numbers and growth—the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. I would strongly recommend this book to leaders within the attractional church that need pastoring through the difficult task of self-evaluation. Even if one is outside of the attractional church, it is still worth reading as a clear manifesto and a helpful reminder to all who wish to center their churches on Jesus Christ. Wilson's gentle call for the church to realign with the gospel and repent of its obsession with numbers is a needed one for the church to maintain its mission of making disciples and have the kind of success that matters for eternity.

Parr, Steve R. *Sunday School That Really Works: A Strategy for Connecting Congregations and Communities.* Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic and Professional, 2010. 218 pp. $12.12.

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First developed in 1780 by Robert Raikes, Sunday School is often considered as an antiquated model of ministry. Steve Parr, Vice President for Sunday School and Evangelism with the Georgia Baptist Convention and adjunct professor at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, issues a clarion call to churches not to ignore the impact a strategic, purposeful, and organized