

BOOK REVIEWS

Towns, Elmer L. *The Ten Most Influential Churches of the Past Century: How They Impact You Today*. Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image Publishers, 2014. 240 pp. \$13.58 paperback.

Reviewed by Anthony Svajda, pastor of First Baptist Church in Jewett, Texas. Anthony has a Bachelor's degree from Dallas Baptist University in Business Systems and a Master of Divinity degree in Evangelism from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. He is currently working on a Ph.D. in Evangelism and Church Vitalization.

Elmer Towns' book, *The Ten Most Influential Churches of the Past Century: How They Impact You Today*, outlines some of the most impactful Christian movements of the past century. Towns' evaluation is written in order to inspire church leaders to understand that the Lord can and will use His people to reach the culture and revolutionize the church to be most effective in the context in which they are planted.

The Ten Most Influential Churches of the Past Century is divided into three major sections and then into subchapters that provide more details. The first major section, Part One, examines the ten most influential churches according to Towns' personal evaluation. Part Two briefly shares ten other great influential churches of the Christian faith. Part Three, only one chapter long, moves to draw commonalities from the most influential churches.

The first ten chapters of Towns' book are dedicated to the top ten most influential churches of the past century. Towns methodically traces the history and circumstances surrounding each movement to demonstrate the

influence they had on the culture of Christianity today. A portion of each chapter is devoted to the church leader or pastor who was pivotal in the movement, then continues to include an evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of each movement.

Part Two consists of the churches and ministries that landed outside of the top ten most influential churches. The eleventh through twentieth churches are briefly covered as Towns describes their historical significance, the person who acted as the catalyst for the movement, and what influence the church had on church methods.

The final section of this book discusses the positives that Christian leaders can take away from these great influences over the past century. Towns accomplished this through breaking his evaluation down into two different areas. The first, what we can learn from the pastors of these churches, seeks to understand the common denominators among the leaders of these churches in order to glean six points of application for church leaders today (195–197). The second area, what can we learn about the church, draws out eleven common themes that the churches exhibit in one form or another (198–207).

Overall, *The Ten Most Influential Churches of the Past Century* is a fascinating read. It is extremely interesting to see the ways that Christianity has evolved through these movements over the past century and to see a breakdown of the strengths and weaknesses of each movement. Throughout the top ten churches, Towns is diligent in mapping out the history of each church's movement for his readers as well as explaining how that church's influence has changed the way Christians do church activities today. This compilation of accounts was informative in understanding the major contributors and innovators of Christian culture.

Although Towns outlined the top ten churches in detail, he did not spend much time explaining the churches that landed in the eleventh through twentieth positions. For those in the top ten, Towns outlined their movement's environment, leaders, methods, strengths, and weaknesses. However, the churches in the eleventh through twentieth positions were each given barely a page of explanation. Towns simply explained who they are, where they are located, and what they accomplished. This may lead readers to wish that Towns would have gone into greater detail with these churches and rename the book *The Top Twenty Most Influential Churches of the Past Century* or to exclude the second part of the book altogether. Regardless of the potential plans of correction, Towns could have addressed this shortcoming easily.

The second issue that presents itself in this book is Towns' focus on the practical at the expense of the biblical. Throughout the book, Towns focuses on churches that have had great influence regardless of what the influence is, whether it is positive or negative, or whether it is biblical or unbiblical.

Even through Towns' evaluations of the churches, there is no clear, biblical definition of what a church is. Therefore, aside from an organization calling itself a church, there seems to be no real qualifier for Towns, except for the amount of people present. This is seen through the vast array of churches listed. There is everything from the conservative and Sunday School-driven First Baptist Church of Dallas to the Internet congregation of Glory of Zion International Ministries. It is apparent that Towns believes influence is measured by numbers rather than what is biblical.

Towns also created a troubling issue with the research for the ten most influential churches. According to Appendix A, Towns produced a set of qualifications for church influences over the past one hundred years. He put the trends into no particular order and presented the trends to focus groups of D.Min. students with wide backgrounds of theological beliefs and denominations (211). The focus groups revealed twenty influential trends among evangelical churches over the past century (211). Focus groups were assembled again to order the top twenty trends (212). Once the top twenty trends were ordered, Towns himself assigned churches to each of the trends (213). The issue with this procedure is the large amount of opinion polling through the whole process. The process begins with Towns' opinion of the qualifications and trends that resulted, continues with the opinion of seminary students, and ends with Towns' assignment of churches. There is no quantitative evidence or data to support this information outside of opinion. Towns does claim to be objective by stating that because he is a traditional Baptist, he has purposefully included several churches of other denominations in the results (213). However, it is clear that the list does not rest upon quantitative facts but rather upon Towns' interpretation of a century's worth of church movements.

Although *The Ten Most Influential Churches of the Past Century* has some flaws, it is still an informative read. This book has value historically and practically for scholars and Bible students alike.

Edwards, Sue and Barbara Neumann. *Organic Mentoring: A Mentor's Guide to Relationships with Next Generation Women*. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2014. 218 pp, Softcover, \$14.99.

Reviewed by Grace S. Morris, MRE, New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. She is a doctoral graduate assistant in the Fish School of Evangelism and Missions at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

In today's culture, there is a generational disconnect in mentoring. Many young women desire to have someone walk through life with them, yet older women want a mentoring session to have structure, study, and a purpose. Sue Edwards and Barbara Neumann wrote this book suggesting