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Book Review: The Churching of America 1776–2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy by Roger Finke and Rodney Stark

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Salmon: Book Review: *The Churching of America 1776–2005: Winners and Lose*

Along with lay ministries and small groups, Hunter calls for a recovery of missional Christianity. Hunter believes, “[E]arly Methodism was an extravagant expression of missional Christianity” (17). According to Hunter, “John Wesley redefined Christianity’s main business. He taught Methodist leaders, ‘You have nothing to do but save souls’” (18). Leaders of a contagious Methodist movement will have the same apostolic urgency. Early Methodists not only saw themselves as “an ecclesia—the called out people of God,” but also “an apostolate—the sent out people of God” (18). It is the aspect of being sent out that particularly separates a movement from an institution.

Hunter offers helpful points, particularly for leaders of movements, regarding communication. First, he suggests “effective movements communicate their message and mission in distinctive ways” (33). Second, “[E]ffective movement leaders keep the vision, and its supporting narrative, ever before the movement’s people” (33). Third, “[T]o some degree, an effective movement’s leaders are embodiments of the movement’s message and purpose” (34). Finally, “[C]redible movement leaders define the people’s identity” (34). Today, Methodist leaders play a key role in helping Methodism regain its missional identity. Dr. George Hunter’s book is helpful in bringing clarity to what Methodists must focus on so their future will be greater than their past.

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Finke, Roger and Rodney Stark. *The Churching of America 1776–2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006, 283 pp. \$26.95.

Reviewed by Charles Salmon. Salmon is lead pastor of a church plant in Snoqualmie, WA (Church on the Ridge), which started in 2004 with 19 members and today has over 1200. He has a B.A. from Northwest University, an M.A. Re from SWBTS, and is working on a D.Min at Biola University’s Talbot School of Theology. Email: Charlie@churchontheridge.org

The Churching of America 1776–2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy takes an interesting approach to church growth in the USA and Canada over a 229 year period. This unique concept comes from the marketplace and not from the typical anecdotal church growth mode. Finke and Stark show relentless research and dogmatic consistency throughout the work. They go to great lengths to demonstrate how and why American churches succeeded and failed through this time frame.

Finke holds a Ph.D. in sociology and is a university professor who has authored numerous articles and works on the “science” of religion. Stark also

Great Commission Research Journal, Vol. 5, Iss. 1 [2013], Art. 14 holds a Ph.D. in sociology and has spent his life studying the “theory” of religion. His first book in 1966 began the long trail of his own spiritual journey of faith that has given the Christian world a wealth of help and perspective that is rarely accepted in conservative environments. However, each of them has the knowledge and skill set that offers rich insight for those open enough to receive it.

The general premise of the work is based on the free market economy that helped make America an economic powerhouse to the world. The basic question answered is: if the same economic principles were applied to American church history, what would the results look like? Why were there successful churches (“winners”), and why were there abysmal failures (“losers”) in the church growth world of recent American history? Church historians usually have not taken a scientific approach to these questions, and their conclusion is skewed, according to Finke and Stark, by bias and outright prejudice against thriving sects. Their methodology gives a much different picture of religion in America than the common articles that have been based on fear and paranoia from a perceived apostasy taking place in our world.

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With the use of charts, statistics, and facts from authenticated sources, a case is built that shows the rise and fall of significant American religious sects. Based on this data a clear declaration is made concerning the forces that cause rise and fall. Through their study, the mystery is removed regarding the presupposition of many social scientists that church growth is “the product of unusual social conditions and the changing demands of the people” (235), and they reveal a clear rationale of measurable, repeatable dynamics that any religious organization can document and replicate for sustained success.

From the opening chapter the authors make a bold statement, namely, that spirituality in America is not on the decline, as some assert, but has, in fact, been rising significantly since the American Revolution. The free market competition that is prevalent in our economic world plays a significant role in the church world; unfortunately, this has been discounted by church historians for decades. The true picture of church success is finally painted by clear indicators that do not mislead, and the deception of other historians is finally exposed.

The data led to a simple but profound conclusion. Any church, denomination, or religious organization that drifts or moves from the core principles and practices that facilitated growth in its inception will be replaced with another organization that maintains or revives those original standards. This fact is not unique to American churches but has been repeated consistently throughout the history of the church.

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This conclusion is crucial for any student of church growth. The mysticism of growth is removed, and even the “hand of God” is seen at a more tenable level. Any group should be able to reproduce the growth of previous churches. This is true even if the church is not a Christian church or promotes ridiculous doctrine. The displayed “beliefs” are not nearly as crucial as practices and the group’s integrity to those practices. Numerous examples of this were given throughout the study, from Mormonism to some abhorrent Pentecostal churches.

Looking deeper into the material, we discover that any church or religious organization that stops being unique in an attempt to fit in and reduce tension from the surrounding culture will “soon cease to grow and eventually begin to decline” (160). This data provides encouragement in that if the church does not allow drift or secular voices to pull it toward something less than what Jesus meant it to be, it will be successful. In fact Jesus said in Matthew 16:18 about His church: “I will build my Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (KJV). For a long time it has appeared that the church has been prevailed against and that it could not grow in the darkness of our current age. The authors show clearly that the reason for church growth is not so much about the work of darkness or light but about the work of people who are growing or diminishing the church.

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In Finke and Stark’s minds, there is no question that with appropriate leadership any church can grow. The last pages of chapter three record the uncomplicated seven-part formula for church growth found in early Methodism: 1) style of preaching, 2) self-sacrificing spirit in ministry, 3) system of free churches, 4) frequent revivals, 5) lay effort, 6) missionary spirit, and 7) doctrine of sanctification (113-116). Their attitude illustrates that when this process is used, it fosters healthy church development. They also show that these seven dynamics are not insurmountable for the average church. The inference is strong; lost people remain lost as churches continue to repeat the mistakes of the past and fail to implement the timeless principles listed to reach them.

Another significant element that was discovered by the authors regarding church growth is a passionate commitment to high standards of membership (248). The losing churches begin to relax the cost of inclusion and thereby cheapen the commodity of belonging. This, in turn, causes decline. The one caveat to this economic supply and demand norm is that when the membership standards become too restrictive, they close themselves off from any opportunities for growth (347). An appropriate balance exists between too few and too many demands an organization can make on its members. Those demands must change over the life of the organization to adapt to the environment that is changing around it. When

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this happens effectively and does not compromise core values, the organization thereby retains consistent growth.

From this perspective, it is almost humorous to think about the decline of mainline churches that I have served; they have failed this rudimentary standard. They hang on to what was done in the past by not discerning that letting go of the past is not the same as hanging on to who they were in the past and innovating today for current and future generations. This is simplistic and yet is incredibly overwhelming or impossible to implement in many churches, as shown by this reading of American church history.

Charles Finney is quoted in the material, and what he says smacks in the face the excuses abundantly heard by pastors as they commiserate about the lack of growth in their churches. They may hope and sometimes pray that God will send revival; however, this great revivalist of American history declared, “A revival is not a miracle . . . It is a purely philosophical result of the right use of the constituted means” (90). No amount of crying and whining can change the truth of his statement, and it is confirmed by the two hundred plus years of research shown in this material.

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The weaknesses of the book come from the lack of comprehensive data in the entire church continuum. Many sect/denominations are left out or ignored, and they may overlook some crucial data that would help or even discount their conclusions. Assuming that space and time were the limitations for the lack of comprehensive reporting, it might have been better to have left the cults out of the study and to have focused on a wider range of biblically pure churches. Though it shows that any organization with the right principles will grow, committed Christ followers would be more amenable to the material if the cults had been left out and possibly their sect had been included. However, the book gave me increased impetus to follow time-tested principles and reach those whom the church has failed to capture by God’s grace through negligent practices. If cults can grow and retain members, then we in the church of Jesus Christ with the power of the Holy Spirit ought to be able to apply the economic principles of growth and see greater results.

An untoward agenda that was guiding the research or conclusive material was not apparent. The exception could be the harsh language used of current and past church historians who, in their mind, had done shoddy work and used plagiaristic methods of documentation. To soften the tone, however, would soften the impact on the readers and lessen their gleaning from this perspective on American church growth history. The defining moment for me came in the final chapter’s first paragraph, quoting Ecclesiastes 1:11. Solomon is reminding us that

Salmon: Book Review: The Churching of America 1776–2005: Winners and Lose if we do not learn from history, we will repeat it. The harsh language may be apropos.

The book is replete with gold that pastors and church planters across our country would do well in mining. The cost is high and the methodology clear. It requires only those with the courage to accept the truth behind human behavior to see that man does not change. His response to God's church has been consistent to his nature for two thousand years. The specificity to our culture and context of the American church as described in the findings of this material ought to encourage and sober the honest Christian.

Americans are looking for real religion which means something and brings to them something that cannot be found in any other arena. The body of Christ is uniquely gifted to provide that environment, and yet through arrogance and neglect, we have excused many of our churches to ruin. The bright spot comes from the undying truth that if any church or denomination fails to reach the lost, there will be others in their wake who will rise up to meet the challenge. According to Stark and Finke, this cycle will continue as long as there are humans.

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I trust you can see the high value I place on the diligent work of these great social scientists. I believe they are a gift from God to His church in America.

Chandler, Matt. *The Explicit Gospel*. Wheaton: Crossway, 2012. 224 pp. \$17.99.

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The Explicit Gospel is Matt Chandler's first book. In this book, Chandler identifies the problem of a lack of clear gospel presentation and understanding in many churches and in many Christians' lives. Chandler argues that if leaders of churches were to really dig into their congregants' testimonies, they would probably find that their people do not have the true gospel but rather a Christian Moralistic Therapeutic Deism instead. At the heart of the book is a desire to help people understand the importance of a balanced view of the "gospel in the air" and the "gospel on the ground" without excluding one or the other.

Matt Chandler is the senior pastor of The Village Church in Highland Village, Texas. He pastors one of the fastest growing churches in America with four satellite locations. He is a popular conference speaker and a main leader of the