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**Why Churches Die:
Diagnosing Lethal Poisons in the Body of Christ**

Reviewed by Gordon Penfold

Brunson, Mac and Caner, Ergun, Why Churches Die – Diagnosing Lethal Poisons in the Body of Christ, Nashville, Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2005. 216 pp. \$12.99

Mac Brunson and Ergun Caner offer an engaging view of church health by comparing the ailments that churches suffer to the ailments that afflict the body. “Practicing a science of spiritual forensics to prevent churches from death, they examine, diagnose and offer treatment for the cancer of gossip, the atrophy of shrunken faith, shortsighted vision, hardening of the heart, and more” (back cover). Their goal is to help churches and believers recognize the symptoms of spiritual disease so that churches might proactively respond to the threats before the diseases become deeply entrenched and cause the death of a church.

Mac Brunson has served four pastorates and is currently the senior pastor of First Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas. In addition Mac Brunson has served as the President of the Pastors’ Conference of the Southern Baptist Convention. Ergun Caner has served in five different pastoral roles and currently serves on the staff of Thomas Road Baptist Church, Lynchburg, Virginia. Between them they have more than 50 years of pastoral experience.

Each chapter of the book begins with an illustration of the particular sin that besets congregations and confronts pastors. The illustrations are from real life and will strike a cord with those who have any familiarity with church leadership and church life. The writers then proceed to develop a portion of Scripture where the same issue is confronted. Finally they diagnose the problem and offer biblical solutions (in most cases) to

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combat the stated problem.

Brunson and Caner develop the medical analogy between diseases (sin) in the church and diseases in the body. The book opens with the chapter title, "Toxins and Terminal Diseases in the Body of Christ." The subtitle reads "Extending the Right Fist of Fellowship—1 Corinthians 3:1-4." The book begins with this question and three responses:

- Have you ever stood in a church parking lot and listened to a story that ended with one of these sentences?
- "That church split over the color of the carpet!"
- "She walked right up to the pulpit and slapped the pastor!"
- "The deacons' meeting ended in an actual fist fight!" . . .
- Yelling, fighting, screaming. Taking sides against fellow believers. Doubting one another's salvation. Power plays, deception, and alliances that would rival any *Survivor* episode (7).

Why Churches Die begins with a close look at the first century churches in Ephesus and Corinth. The writers do a masterful job of synthesizing the Epistles to the Ephesians and the Corinthians with the Pastoral Epistles and Revelation. Most pastors and scholars recognize the dysfunction of the Corinthian Church, but Brunson and Caner also show the deep ailments of the Ephesian church. They masterfully draw in other pertinent portions of the Word that deal with these first century churches. This synthesis sheds great light on the deep problems that plagued both of these pioneer churches as well as the parallel problems churches face in the 21st century.

A sampling of the following chapter titles gives some insight into the genius of the book. Chapter 2 is entitled "Shrunken Faith and Coasting on the Past." This section compares lack of faith with physical atrophy. "Gossip and "Glossolitis: Swollen Tongues of Fire" details the devastating problem of the sins of the tongue (Chapter 3). Chapter 6 contains a discussion of "The Toxin of Bitterness: Poison of Jealousy and Vengeance." Chapter 11 is entitled, "Anorexia and Bulimia: Eating Disorders of the Word of God" where they discuss the common problem of spiritual malnourishment in today's churches. The book consists of thirteen chapters with twelve of them containing a depiction of the "Holy Dozen," twelve of the "most debilitating diseases in the body of Christ" (5)

The stated the purpose of the book is as follows: "To identify the diseases that besiege local churches, excise the poisons, and bring church back to the biblical model . . . joyous and encouraging" (2). The "joyous and encouraging" model is the model of

practicing the “one anothers” in simple joy and harmony; the way the Lord designed His Body to operate (2-4). The authors do a good job of diagnosing the “diseases” of the church. They also do a commendable job in drawing parallels between the sins of the church and the maladies the beset our earthly bodies. However, in a few instances it seems that the authors force the medical analogy to suit their purposes. For example, it seems that a different model could be used to describe the Pharisees in Chapter 7. The authors describe the Pharisees with the term “Gluttony: Always Full: Ever Empty.” It seems that the term “malnutrition” might better describe the Pharisees. The writers’ description of gluttony to me implies someone who is overweight and whose eating is out of control. The Pharisees appear to be the opposite. They were spiritually self-satisfied when in reality they were starving because they had rejected the Bread of Life.

While the book is strong on diagnoses I feel it is weak on the prescriptions that will bring health. One of the reasons I purchased and read the book is that I work with deeply troubled and near-terminal churches in my ministry. I was hoping for some keen insights on bringing sick churches back to health and useful service. A few chapters do offer good insights on the “prescriptions” necessary for a return to health. For example, in Chapter 3 Brunson and Caner give the following biblically based recommendations for dealing with the problem of gossip. They offer three remedies necessary to contain and confront gossip.

- 1) Solomon does not seem hesitant in dealing with the slanderer. Proverbs 20:19 ends with the admonition, “Avoid someone with a big mouth” (Holman Christian Standard Bible).
- 2) Do not put a gossip in any position in the church (James 3:1-2).
- 3) If you do not confront the gossip with his sin in a loving but firm manner, God holds you responsible (61).

Chapter 5 is an example of a chapter that clearly delineates the issue of hardness of the heart, but does not offer any prescription for correction. It is entitled, “Arteriosclerosis: Harden Not Your Heart, Nabal and the Heart of Stone.”. The opening illustration is about a man,

“Bobby Dean,” who was hardened and constantly complaining in this life. “He had outlived his wife of by fifteen years, though some in their small community conjectured that she had died simply to get away from him” (79). As I read this chapter I thought, “Yes, I know people just like this.” This is an apt description of some Christians. However, I was disappointed that

at the end of the chapter there was no prescription given to help transform a hardened heart. Churches surely have those who experience hardness of heart, but is there a remedy for them? If so, what is it and how may it be applied to their situation to help rescue them and their church from this destructive tendency?

Mac Brunson and Ergun Caner both come from Southern Baptist backgrounds and their language hints at this bent in ministry. However, this book applies to churches of any background. The causes of conflict detailed in this book are universal in nature. It is also obvious that the authors have a deep and abiding love for the Word of God and for the Lord's Church. This love is evident throughout the entire book. Each chapter discusses a problem in the church. They use the Scriptures to detail church problems and solutions so that the problems are not simply sociological or distinctly Southern Baptist. The issues and the responses are distinctly biblical. The writers are to be commended for their faithfulness to the Word of God.

I believe the strength of the book lies in its biblical foundation. Brunson and Caner use the Scriptures as the basis of their analysis of both the problems inherent in churches as well as the proposed solutions for each type of illness. Their exegesis of the text is impeccable and their applications of the truth are right on target (though they sometimes do not go far enough). The use of stories from their ministry experience draws the reader into the book to eagerly investigate the rest of each chapter. These illustrations that head each chapter are true to life. Church leaders will readily recognize these sinful traits and with little imagination could change the names to fit their own circumstances.

As mentioned above I believe perhaps the greatest weakness of the book is the failure to provide remedies for a number of the maladies that beset the church. As one who specializes in treating deeply diseased churches I was looking for more of the prescription aspect of saving troubled churches from extinction and renewing them to fruitful service. The title of the book *Why Churches Die—Diagnosing Lethal Poisons in the Body of Christ* names the real purpose of the book. The book does provide wonderful diagnoses to the sins that so easily beset us. However, the stated second purpose of the book "to excise the poisons and bring the church back to the biblical model . . ." seems to be wanting in a number of the chapters. However, every Christian worker will recognize the poisons and appreciate the candor and insight of this book.

One of the attributes of the book that helped me the most was the excellent treatment of the problems that plague the modern church. Brunson and Caner put biblical labels on many

of the “lethal poisons” that are robbing the church (and in some cases are killing the church) of spiritual power and vitality. This book will help me in the treatment of those churches who cry out for help and hope to regain a sense of life and joy before it’s too late.

I found this book to be stimulating, encouraging and engaging. I believe it is a volume that should be read by pastors, church leaders and those who are contemplating fulltime Christian ministry. This book gives a fair, balanced and timeless treatment of the problem of unfettered sin among the saints. We may not yet understand all of the remedies at our disposal, but after reading this book the serious church servant can have the advantage of recognizing these diseases before they reach epidemic proportions in the local church. Perhaps another volume is due that specifically deals with God’s cure for these spiritual maladies.

Reviewer

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