

1-1-2011

Book Review: The Color of Church: A Biblical and Practical Paradigm for Multiracial Churches by Rodney Woo

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Recommended Citation

Robertson, T. (2011). Book Review: The Color of Church: A Biblical and Practical Paradigm for Multiracial Churches by Rodney Woo. *Great Commission Research Journal*, 2(2), 327-330. Retrieved from <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/gcrj/vol2/iss2/18>

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Robertson: Book Review: *The Color of Church: A Biblical and Practical Paradigm* several individuals at the same time? Would the same principles be as effective in a group setting?

Jesus told His disciples to make disciples of all nations. Paul told Timothy to pass along what he heard to reliable men who would in turn share with others. The emphasis in this book is to mentor individuals who would mentor others. Stoddard's hope is that mentoring plus reproduction would equal legacy. Stoddard seeks to inspire individuals to look beyond the ordinary and to make a difference in the lives of others. He encourages the readers to find their true purpose in life, to live with passion, and to pursue mentoring relationships.

I highly recommend this book to anyone who is interested in "principles" for mentoring. The book is easy to read with many relevant illustrations from everyday life. The author is open in sharing his positive as well as negative experiences in mentoring. His passion for helping others to begin the process of mentoring is evident. For those who want to start the process of mentoring but are concerned about the "how to" part, don't worry; focus on the ten principles explained in this book, focus on having the right heart for mentoring, and just go for it!

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Rodney Woo, *The Color of Church: A Biblical and Practical Paradigm for Multiracial Churches*. Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Academic, 2009, 290 pp., \$24.99.

Reviewed by Todd Robertson, Pastor, Antioch Church, Louisville, Kentucky

Rodney Woo, Ph.D., was the senior pastor of Wilcrest Baptist Church in Houston, Texas. He served Wilcrest for more than seventeen years. Under his leadership, the church adopted the following mission statement: "Wilcrest Baptist Church is God's multiethnic bridge that draws all people to Jesus Christ, who transforms them from unbelievers to missionaries." Wilcrest, a church in the suburbs of Houston, had been in steady decline, largely attributed to the white flight of the community. While the immediate context of the church grew more diverse, the church itself remained ninety-eight percent Anglo. By the end of his tenure, the church consisted of forty different nationalities and no majority ethnic group. The church also sent more than two hundred volunteers on international mission trips. While at Wilcrest, Dr. Woo served as an adjunct professor at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and Houston Baptist University. In 2010, Woo and his family were sent to follow a new call in his life to international missions, as he became the pastor of the International Baptist Church in Singapore. This church is also a multiethnic church in a city with a highly diverse

Great Commission Research Journal, Vol. 2, Iss. 2 [2011], Art. 18 population. In addition to *The Color of Church*, Woo has co-authored *People of the Dream: Multiracial Congregations in the United States* with Michael Emerson, and contributed a chapter in Mark DeYmaz's *Building a Healthy Multi-Ethnic Church*.

The thesis for this book is driven by Woo's belief that "The multiracial congregation is the most powerful expression of God's heart for the nations" (21). Therefore, by establishing the biblical basis, current reality, and implementation for the multiethnic church, Woo seeks to prove his contention that "It is God's will that all churches move toward reaching across whatever racial and ethnic lines that have been established in their immediate community. At the bare minimum, the local church should reflect the racial make-up of the neighborhood and do whatever it takes to embrace and integrate all the nations" (7-8). Woo succeeds in making a biblically-based, theologically-sound, and contextually-informed argument for the multiracial church. The audience for this book appears to be pastors, church and denominational leaders, and possibly seminary professors. The author clearly has an agenda to change the hearts and minds of leaders, so that they can influence the direction of the church in America today.

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The book has three main sections, which cover the biblical basis for the multiracial church, the current reality of the church, and steps to implementation for developing a multiracial church. Woo concludes the book with an inspirational challenge to his readers and a clear call to action. The format of the book is well conceived, and the theme progresses smoothly through each given section. The two common threads throughout each section of the book are the biblical references and the practical examples drawn from the story of Wilcrest Baptist Church. A very helpful feature of the book is that each chapter concludes with a summary, practical applications, and questions for discussion. This makes the book a great tool for group settings.

In section one of the book, Woo begins by addressing the biblical bookends of the story of God, starting with the creation of man in the image of God and ending with the glorious consummation of all things around the throne of heaven (Genesis 1-Revelation 7). As we are united in our origins, so we will be reunited as we praise the Lamb in a chorus made up of every tongue, tribe, and nation. While much of history between these two events has been divisive and destructive, Woo contends that the gospel is always about restoring unity through Christ. Therefore, if the church is to reflect the gospel, she will begin to model the ideals of the beginning and the end while we are in between.

Woo takes a full chapter to develop his own growth in understanding the scriptural call for the multiracial church and how that played out at Wilcrest. He

Robertson: Book Review: The Color of Church: A Biblical and Practical Paradigm then addresses the need for multiracial churches to have a clear theology that drives behaviors. Here he builds a case for the coexistence of unity and diversity as a reflection of being the bearers of God's image. After some practical advice on the attitude necessary to live out this theology, Woo looks at the imagery used for the church in the Scripture establishing that the unique identity and unity within the church is best displayed in a multiracial context. Finally, the author gives a call to repentance from the racism that is apparent in so many aspects of society and the church in America today. By providing seven key evidences of true repentance, Woo seeks to set the standard for measuring where one's heart is on this matter.

In section two of the book, Woo looks at the status of our culture and especially the church in America today. Using the theme of the great divide, he tracks the division between the races in the Scripture and the subsequent call to unity. The author then compares the racial divide between Jews and Gentiles with the divide between whites and blacks in the United States. He presents an urgent need for the church to cross this divide as a display of the unifying work of the gospel. The section continues with an assessment of the risks and rewards involved in crossing the racial boundary in church life. Woo is practical and candid in his assessment. Finally, he presents the significant external and internal obstacles that are inherent in the transition to become a multiracial church, and the need for each church to count the cost of making this transition. In this final chapter he uses "the hand model" to describe five positions one can take regarding the multiracial church. These include: advocates of prejudice, homogeneous advocates, seekers, fully integrated believers, and missionaries. Using these descriptors allows leaders and individuals to determine where they are in their attitudes towards change and what steps might be taken to move them to the next level.

In the third and final section of the book, Woo lays out a plan for implementing change. He begins with a call to establish rules of engagement that are necessary to keep focused on the most important issues for the church. Most notable here is the call to allow Scripture to be the ultimate authority and for people of all ethnicities to have a voice in the process of change. The concluding three chapters of this section expose the following three vital areas of significance in the life of the multiracial church: worship, leadership, and missions. These three chapters are some of the most practical and informative in the book. For church leaders who desire their churches to become multiracial, these three chapters are must-reads.

The greatest strength of Woo's work is his thorough use of Scripture. At every turn, he ties his ideas and arguments back to a biblical foundation, arguing that the Bible should be the final authority for the multiracial church. It is refreshing to see

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a book, among the many pragmatic “how-to” manuals being produced, that shows care to establish a strong root system for the arguments being made.

Another strength of this book is that it comes from a real story, an actual context, and is therefore highly practical. Woo’s own personal journey, along with the journey of Wilcrest Baptist Church in Houston, acts as guides for the reader. As biblical truth is woven together with clear principles and then illustrated by the Wilcrest story, the reader is able to understand clearly the points advocated. Because the Wilcrest story was not perfect or ideal, I believe that many church leaders will be able to relate to the struggles and challenges that Woo and his leaders went through to achieve the vision that God gave to them. The successes and failures of the Wilcrest Church offer great validity to the points Woo makes in the text.

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In terms of weakness in the book, there are times when Woo seems to stretch some of the Old Testament metaphors in applying them to principles for the multiracial church. His use of imagery and events, notably in chapter six, to relate concepts of crossing barriers is not nearly as careful as the rest of his exegesis.

A second weakness is Woo’s lack of engagement with multiracial church planting. He does mention (170–71) the failure of a church plant attempted by Wilcrest, but little else. This is an important area of engagement that should have been addressed. Further, it begs the question of why Wilcrest did not have a more aggressive involvement in church planting over these years.

I highly recommend this book for those who already have an interest in the multiethnic church movement, or who are intrigued by the increasing discussions about multiethnic churches. Woo approaches his topic as one who has lived the subject, who has thoroughly studied the subject, and who passionately believes in the subject. This is the kind of author worth reading.