

Scot McKnight and Laura Barringer, *A Church Called TOV: Forming a Goodness Culture That Resists Abuses of Power and Promotes Healing* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale Publishing, 2020). 256 pp. RRP \$22.99 Hardback.

Deconstruction of Evangelical expressions of faith is an increasingly accepted undertaking within modern society. The seemingly unending barrage of failures by prominent Evangelical leaders has prompted an examination of the foundational assumptions that comprise the modern Evangelical tradition, many of which have been cast as “Biblical” to avoid scrutiny. In their book entitled *A Church Called TOV: Forming a Goodness Culture that Resists Abuse of Power and Promotes Healing*, Scot McKnight and Laura Barringer provide a framework for interrogating the toxic patterns of behavior which contribute to the increasing number of scandals and failures among Evangelical leaders. What differentiates this book from the plethora of attempts at deconstructing ecclesial leadership is the authors’ construction of a viable and theologically-sound alternative. Tish Harrison Warren succinctly identifies this core objective of the book, writing in the text’s introduction: “The great virtue of this book is that the authors also show how to help establish church cultures that lead to flourishing health and goodness” (p.x).

McKnight and Barringer resist the leader-centric approaches that dominate the ecclesial landscape by arguing that the formation of an ecclesial culture is a cooperative venture between the institutional leaders and members of the congregation. This potent insight dispels the myth of heroic leadership found in much of popular leadership literature, particularly among authors writing from a Christian worldview. Readers, whether serving in an ecclesial capacity or attending as congregants, are encouraged to actively participate in understanding and reforming the culture of their local church. The deconstruction process of *A Church Called TOV* entails identifying the misappropriation of power through the construction of false narratives designed to extinguish criticism. The stories within the text documenting abuse generate some uncomfortable moments through an honest assessment of the toxic behaviors within churches of the Evangelical tradition. The inclusion of actual people and events provides the reader with access to the pain and trauma created in the lives of the victims of abuse. This reinforces the importance of addressing systemic ecclesial structures that contribute to the toxic expressions of leadership.

With the painful but necessary task of deconstructing ecclesial leadership completed, McKnight and Barringer propose reforming faith communities by utilizing the Hebrew word *Tov*, which means “good” or “goodness” (p.86). The authors propose that the foundational building blocks for constructing a culture of *Tov* are empathy and grace. Empathy towards those outside the traditional levers of power serves as a reciprocal act of the grace extended by Christ to His

followers. This requires intentionality in telling the stories of marginalized people with the objective of promoting their contributions within an ecclesial context. When empathy and grace are present in a culture, it results in assigning intrinsic value to human beings based upon the *Imago Dei*, the doctrine of mankind being created in the image of God. Prioritizing this foundational truth provides the underpinnings for churches to serve the congregants and the community through the pursuit of justice.

Promoted as the circle of *Tov*, the model proposed by the authors serves to circumvent the systemic toxicity that so easily embeds itself within ecclesial cultures. Churches that emphasize empathy and grace resist the destructive forces of narcissism and fear. A people-first culture resists the “institution creep in which the needs of the organization...begin to supersede the needs of the people in the church” (p.121). This allows churches to resist and replace false narratives that reinforce unhealthy behavior patterns. As destructive patterns are confronted, churches are better equipped and able to resist both demands of unconditional loyalty to Senior Leader(s) mandated by a loyalty and celebrity culture.

Particularly interesting for professing Pentecostals is McKnight and Barringer’s assertion of the importance of the Spirit in cultivating a culture of *Tov*. At the end of the section introducing *Tov*, the authors propose that “God’s design for us comes to fruition through a *Spirit-soaked, Spirit-filled, and Spirit-directed life*” (p.88). Regrettably, the book does not explore the role of the Spirit beyond the short portion introducing the concept of *Tov*. What makes this oversight ironic is that the churches discussed throughout the book are located in traditions that lack pneumatological depth. A more robust discussion concerning the role of the Spirit in nurturing habits of goodness within an ecclesial environment would have strengthened the claims of the book significantly.

The rise of celebrity- and loyalty-driven cultures among churches, as discussed by McKnight and Barringer, establish the chapters on justice and service as immensely relevant. The authors propose the need to rediscover ordinary acts of service as a buffer against the superiority-complex of celebrity-driven leadership within the church. They suggest that this celebrity culture is fueled by the cultural phenomenon of American meritocracy, which is rooted in the twin pillars of achievement and accomplishment. The power of promoting ordinary acts of service contains the antidote whereby local communities of faith can reduce the personality cult that accompanies the desire for mass recognition (pp.187-8). The circle of *Tov* is portrayed through the book as an alternative to American meritocracy, in which local churches can be characterized by ordinary acts of service and the pursuit of justice.

Evangelical expressions of faith, particularly in America, are at a crossroad. The continued push to deconstruct Evangelical faith without a corresponding push to reconstruct its faith is driving the movement to the point of self-destruction. *A Church Called TOV: Forming a Goodness Culture that Resists Abuse of Power and Promotes Healing* has the potential to stave off such self-destruction. The strength of *A Church Called TOV* is its ability to engage in direct confrontation with the abuses perpetrated by churches within the Evangelical tradition, with an optimism for the future of the Church. Whether part of the institutional leadership, a volunteer leader, or congregant, *A Church Called TOV* will serve as a valuable investment towards strengthening the formation of a goodness culture— one that resists abuse of power, and promotes healing.

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