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A BOOK REVIEW OF

MARK DRISCOLL AND GERRY BRESHEARS,
VINTAGE CHURCH: TIMELESS TRUTHS AND TIMELY METHODS

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BY
JEREMY P. ROBERTS
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Driscoll, Mark and Gerry Breshears, *Vintage Church: Timeless Truths and Timely Methods* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2008), 335 pages. Reviewed by Jeremy P.

Roberts.

An analysis of ecclesiological books reveals much is written on the subject, but nothing with the unique combination of personal reflection and emerging twenty-first century thought processes may compare with Mark Driscoll and Gerry Breshears' book. Since 1996, Driscoll (B.A. Washington State University; M.A. Western Theological Seminary) has served as founding pastor and preaching/theology pastor of Mars Hill Church in Seattle—the sixty-fifth largest church in America and serves as president of the Acts 29 Church Planting Network. Since 1980, Breshears (B.A., University of New Mexico at Albuquerque; M.Div., Denver Seminary; Ph.D., Fuller Seminary) has served as Professor of Systematic Theology and chair of biblical and theological studies at Western Seminary in Portland. Driscoll and Breshears have coauthored three books together including *Vintage Jesus* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2007). Their scholarly publications demonstrate wide research in the fields of ecclesiology, theology, and North American missiology. It is with this background that the authors present a unique and fresh approach to their ecclesiological work.

Driscoll and Breshears begin with the thesis of their book—to teach the reader of the being and well-being of the church (37). The significant presupposition to the book is that “within the protestant theological tradition . . . there is a long history of seeing Jesus in his three offices of prophet, priest, and king” (9–10). It is from this presupposition that the coauthors launch their ecclesiological examination.

Overview

Driscoll and Breshears write on eight characteristics of a biblically-based local church: [1] regeneration in church membership, [2] leadership qualifications, [3] homiletics and worship, [4] administration of the sacraments, [5] unity, [6] holiness, [7] the great commandment (to love), and [8] the great commission (to evangelize and make disciples). At the conclusion of each chapter, “answers to common questions” are provided to summarize and proffer answers to questions that may have been unanswered in the body of the preceding pages.

The structure by which the authors write begins with the title of each chapter in the form of a question (e.g. “What is the Christian life?”) (13). Driscoll pens the corpus of the book by explaining how cultures (modern and ancient) respond to the subject at hand, and he then gives theological, historical, and biblical backing to his argument. Each chapter concludes with Breshears’ “answers to common questions.” He asks three-to-five open-ended questions per chapter, and follows the questions with simple points of application that are accompanied with thorough usage of biblical references to support his answers.

The preface of the book serves as a rallying cry for the Christocentricity of the church. The first sentence states, “This book is about the church of Jesus Christ” (9). The remaining pages of the preface center on this sentence.

The conclusion of the book, the twelfth chapter, entitled, “How Could the Church Help Transform the World?” is the epitomization of transitioning the reader from the being of the church to its well-being. Just as the introductory sentence of the book brings hope, so do the concluding words: “Jesus is alive. Anything can happen” (305).

Driscoll and Breshears include an appendix and indices. The appendix is Mars Hill Church's membership covenant, and the indices include a general listing of key words throughout the book as well as an index listing the biblical references throughout. It is while reading the biblical index that one may see the scriptural depth found throughout *Vintage Church's* pages.

Content

Driscoll and Breshears' book contains some key ideas that must be examined, content that is unusually important, and a couple of aspects that fail to contribute to the authors' main purpose. The content of their book provides processes to communicate their "timeless truths and timely methods" (sub-title of *Vintage Church*).

Key Ideas

The key ideas presented by Driscoll and Breshears include their process of, and importance explained within, their definition of *church*. Also, the clarity and approach they give to explaining the first among equals in eldership serves as a key idea. These key ideas make the book unique in comparison to other ecclesiology books.

As Driscoll and Breshears' purpose in writing this book is to teach the reader of the being and well-being of the church, a definition of *church* is essential to fulfilling the purpose at hand. The key insight presented by Driscoll in this section of the book is his point that few pieces of literature about the church define *church*. He goes on to state, "This is curious because without a definition of what a church is or does, I'm unsure how

we can even deem one successful” (38). Following this observant point, Driscoll goes on to extrapolate an eloquent definition of *church*.

Another key idea presented is Driscoll’s theological approach to the first among equals in eldership. He exemplifies Peter with Acts 1:15-22; 2:14-40, cf. Matt 16:18 to provide biblical support of the first among equals in eldership. 1 Tim 5:17 is also referenced as support to assist in building his case. Driscoll explains that “. . . for any elder team to function effectively, it must have a called, qualified, gifted, devoted, humble, and competent senior leader who leads the elder team” (73). This key idea is one of his most scripturally robust and keen insights throughout the book.

Unusually Important Content

Driscoll and Breshears’ tenth chapter examines multi-campus church ministry. This topic is unusually important due to the popularity of churches expanding to this model in recent years. This chapter addresses questions asked that are pertinent to twenty-first century local church ministry that may not have been necessary to be included in ecclesiological books published as recently as ten years prior.

Driscoll argues of networks of churches throughout cities such as Corinth, Galatia, Thessalonica, and Philippi (244). Driscoll is essentially arguing that the churches in these cities were multi-campus congregations. After this theological explanation argument of multi-campus ecclesiology (albeit too brief), he then explains pragmatic perspectives researched by Leadership Network and personal experiences at Mars Hill Church (245-252).

Parts That Fail to Contribute to the Authors' Purpose

There are two aspects of the book that fail to contribute to the authors' purpose: [1] Driscoll and Breshears' chapter entitled, "How Can I Utilize Technology?" and [2] Driscoll's unbiblical use of demeaning sarcasm.

Driscoll and Breshears' chapter on the utilization of technology in the church, chapter eleven, initially sounds like an exciting and innovative chapter to read. The title of the chapter, "How Can I Utilize Technology?," lends one to believe that it could contribute to enhancing the reader's ability to learn of the being and well-being of the church, but the authors fail to know the majority of their audience in this chapter (267). The corpus of the chapter is written from the perspective of a pastor of a church with thousands of attendees and millions of dollars. The following statement represents Driscoll's disconnectedness from the average church's budget and laity: "Our technology gurus have also created a new website community . . . that allows us to connect as a church online while also welcoming people to our network from around the world" (273). Few churches have a multitude of "technology gurus" to create such elaborate work. As nice as it may be to have such gurus at his disposal, it is an impractical insertion within his book.

Another aspect of Driscoll and Breshears' book that fails to contribute to their purpose is Driscoll's affinity for and use of demeaning sarcasm. Speaking negatively about someone and then claiming it as a joke is defiant of the writings of Solomon when he states, "Like a maniac shooting flaming arrows of death is one who deceives their neighbor and says, 'I was only joking'" (Prov 26:18-19, ESV).

An example of Driscoll's poor judgment of inappropriate sarcasm is by claiming Michael Jackson is no longer a man:

I once visited a church that gave me a free copy of the pastor's sermon—on tape—even though I have not seen a tape player since the days when Michael Jackson was male. Looking around the room at the obvious lack of anyone younger than Methuselah, it seemed obvious that their traditionalism had run off emerging generations, thereby dividing their church into the two groups of BT (before tapes) and AT (after tapes). (145)

Driscoll may gain some laughs and sell more books as a result of such shocking words, but this does not negate the truth that it is neither uplifting nor becoming of a child of the King of Kings. Furthermore, this sort of humor distracts the reader from learning of the being and well-being of the church—the very purpose for Driscoll and Breshears writing this book.

Strengths and Weaknesses

As is the case with most any book, there are both strengths and weaknesses presented by the coauthors. One must take both the good and the bad as no writing is perfect except the Word of God.

Strengths

Driscoll and Breshears tackle controversial ecclesiological matters with poignancy and clarity. The chapters pertaining to church leadership, homiletics, church discipline, and an explanation of a missional church are all handled with scriptural profundity and tactful fervor.

Driscoll presents the ability to express a mass of deep information in few words. An example of this is in his explanation of the relationship between Israel and the Church. In slightly less than one page, Driscoll biblically debunks the trend of Reformed theologians transitioning to replacement theology, the stance of older veins of dispensational theologians bifurcating the Church and Israel, and presents a biblical case (Ezek 36:22-38; Acts 1:5-7; and Ex 19:5-6) for Israel's relationship with the Church (58).

Weaknesses

One weakness of Driscoll and Breshears' book is Driscoll's definition of expository preaching. He obtusely defines it as ". . . simply going through a book of the Bible verse-by-verse" (91-92). This definition is both weak and inaccurate in comparison with other authorial proponents of expository preaching (e.g. John Stott, John Piper, and Mark Dever). Expository preaching is more than a running commentary, and Driscoll is sloppy in his definition of such an important phrase.

Another weakness of *Vintage Church* involves Driscoll's definition of the invisible church. This definition is inconsistent with his stance on the relationship between Israel and the Church. The invisible church is ". . . the community of all Christians throughout history who have been or will be loved and saved by Jesus Christ, including the believing people of the Old Testament," according to Driscoll (46). Merely twelve pages later, Driscoll states his stance that dividing the Church and Israel is unbiblical. The problem with Driscoll's argument is that if the church is in the Old Testament, then Israel and the Church must be the same. For Driscoll to make such a bold statement of the existence of the church in the Old Testament, it would have been wise if

he would have elaborated more than simply footnoting “Deut. 4:10; Acts 7:38; Heb. 2:12 cf. Ps. 22:22” (46). Driscoll’s inconsistency in this instance weakens the entire book.

Conclusion

Vintage Church is, for the most part, a Calvinistic and Baptist explanation of the church’s being and well-being. The book is clear and concise, but if the reader is seeking a robust defense of the ecclesiological stances professed by Driscoll, Breshears, and others of their theological ilk (Calvinistic and Baptist), Mark Dever’s *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004) or John MacArthur’s *The Master’s Plan for the Church* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1991) would be better choices.