Barefoot Church: Serving the Least in a Consumer Culture

By Brandon Hatmaker

Reviewed by Darren Cronshaw

Brandon Hatmaker is a pastor of Austin New Church, Texas (www.austinnewchurch.com) but also serves his city and beyond as co-founder of Restore Communities (www.restorecommunities.org) and is engaged as a missional strategist with Missio (www.mission.us). He writes about his transition from being a self-confessed consumer Christian on a megachurch staff, to being prepared to do whatever it takes to lead his church to serve the poor, and to take off his own shoes for homeless people – to become a "barefoot church".

He outlines practical strategies for helping a local church focus beyond itself – to their own neighborhoods, and to the world as our neighbor. Unfortunately, lack of awareness and access can limit Western Christians from taking an interest to global concerns. He challenges Christians to take initiative, as his church has done with hurricane relief, advocacy against slavery, and serving Austin locally on fifth Sundays. His challenge is to be good news as well as speak it:

The church is on the fringe of our society, and we need to find new ways to undo the damage to our reputation. We have to change the way we are seen by the world. We have to become good news again. ... 

Mercy and justice ministry is a life mate to the spoken word in this equation. In an increasingly post-Christian and postmodern context where moral authority trumps positional authority, we would be wise to make sure that our deed matches our creed. (pp. 73, 79)

Hatmaker critiques the tendency in churches to spend first on ourselves (e.g., to look after Sunday Staff, or to add admin staff before mission workers). And he explains how he invites unbelievers to join the church in service initiatives, and how they partner with non-profits and are prepared to give up the agenda and the glory, as with their programs for caring for people living with AIDS, helping kids stay in school, caring for families and the homeless, and sponsoring food banks and reforestation.

The wisdom I most appreciated in Barefoot Church was how to transition a church in these directions. Hatmaker explains his missional community multiplication strategy, and empowering those small groups to serve their city. He counsels leaders to expect tension, but not to celebrate the sort of tension that comes from making change about us and defending our position. He explains how leaders can share the vision, give permission, protect margin for mission, pray, and be intentional about surveying and community needs and unconventional addressing them.

With inspiring stories and an appeal to change the scorecard for how we measure churches and their mission, this is excellent reading for any aspiring missionaries-to-the-West looking for practical ideas for serving the poor.

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