# How Good is your Church?

Book Review - A review of Laura Barringer and Scot McKnight's *A Church Called Tov: Forming a Goodness Culture that Resists Abuses of Power and Promotes Healing* (Tyndale House, Illinois, 2020).

As we emerge from Coronavirus isolation, some are wondering whether to reconnect regularly with a local congregation, either in-person or online, or to practise a more private faith. It seems to me that the New Testament presents Christianity as a communal practice rather than a "me-and-God" experience. When we are joined to Christ, we are incorporated into his Church (1Cor 12:13; 1Pet 2:4-5) and this is expressed through active participation in the ministry and mission of a local church (Heb 10:24-25).

Our relationship with God is "earthed" in our relationships with one another (Jn 13:34-35; 1Jn 4:7-12). The way we treat one another is to reflect God's love for us and others. Likewise, how other believers treat us will shape our understanding of God and faith. Basically, we learn and practise the faith together (consider the many `one another's' in the New Testament). We are formed or discipled in community, with our church's culture – what is affirmed and allowed – depicting and transforming how faith is lived out. As an extension of this, a church's culture will also shape how leaders are developed and function, with the authority given and accountability exercised providing patterns and parameters for leading.
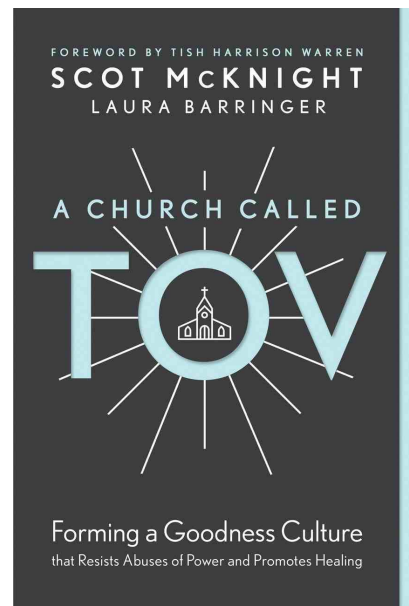
All this is to say that church matters and church culture matters. If we are to *have flourishing churches with Christlike followers that redeem society* (our BUV Vision), we need to ensure that our congregational cultures foster this. In their recent book, *A Church Called Tov*, Barringer and McKnight provide guidance on creating such cultures. The word *'tov'* is the Hebrew word translated 'good' in Gen 1:4 and elsewhere. It expresses God's design and delight – Church as God wants it to be.

Barringer and McKnight begin by acknowledging and lamenting the prevalence of abuse within churches and discuss several related features of the toxic culture that fosters this:

1. **Narcissism**. The authors note that though Narcissism is commonly understood as strong personality and pride, it often reflects insecurity that needs to feel superior and successful.[1] They focus on narcissistic leaders and how sycophantic supporters

---

[1] For further reading on Narcissism, see Chuck DeGroat, *When Narcissism Comes to Church: Healing Your Community From Emotional and Spiritual Abuse*, (Intervarsity Press, Illinois, 2020).

enable their controlling behaviour. However, they also caution that churches can be narcissistic, needing to be seen as `the best' according to whatever metric they value (size, influence, etc). Woe betide those who are perceived as challenging the status of the narcissistic leader or church!

2. **Power through Fear**. In toxic cultures authority is understood as power over others, with faithfulness being presented as compliant submission (Mk 10:42-45). Fear – of disapproval, shaming or exclusion by leaders – is a prime motivator in mobilising and managing the congregation (cf 1Jn 4:18). As an interesting self-check for Pastors and other Leaders, the authors invite us to reflect on our reading of the Gospels: Do we find ourselves identifying mostly with the disciples, the marginalised or with Jesus?

3. **Denial of Critical Feedback.** When people raise criticisms, concerns or complaints, good churches will not seek to discredit them, manipulate the narrative to portray alleged perpetrators as victims nor supress the truth (1Jn 1:5-10). The authors caution against the misapplication of biblical passages such as Matt 18:15-17, 1Tim 5:19 and 1Cor 6:1-8 to stifle the pursuit of truth and justice. "In a healthy culture, leaders will avoid denial and spin, in favour of finding and telling the truth – even when the truth is painful."

Barringer and McKnight then proceed to describe **seven key elements** of a *tov* culture:

1. **Empathy**. A good church will follow Jesus in feeling the pain of marginalised and needy people and responding with compassion. The authors list a number of examples of those who may feel marginalized in churches and then, as a specific example, discuss how churches might be more inclusive and affirming of women.

2. **Grace.** When we affirm that our relationship with God is the result of grace rather than merit, we should recognize that we all are equally loved and valued members of God's family and so extend to one another the freedom to participate, to fail and to be forgiven. Receiving God's grace should yield a generosity of spirit (1Jn 4:11).

3. **People ahead of institution**. Organisational needs or goals should not supersede the good of the people who comprise the church, for we are God's image-bearers and we are to relate to one another as siblings-in-Christ. "Churches with a goodness culture will do what is right because they love people and want only the best for them." This is not to say that churches must satisfy the wishes or needs of every individual, but that they prioritise treating people with respect and compassion.

4. **Truth**. As mentioned above, good churches do not try to supress the truth, but rather seek to reveal it and respond to it with confession and repentance as appropriate. This is part of respecting people – including those who voice uncomfortable truths – rather than protecting institutional reputations built on falsehoods (Eph 5:8-14).

5. **Justice**. Good churches seek to discern and do the right thing – that which reflects the teaching and character of Jesus – even if it challenges personal loyalties or institutional interests.

6. **Service.** In a *tov* church, serving others is not regarded as extraordinary or heroic, which can foster a celebrity culture, but simply as the way we follow Jesus. People

are empowered to serve others with their gifts and resources, because it is acknowledged that Christians seek to serve rather than to be served (Mk 10:45).

7. **Christlikeness.** The authors contend that over all the organisational goals a church might pursue, `the entire mission of the church and its pastors is to become like Christ and nurture others to become like Christ.' (Rom 8:29; Eph 4:11-16) McKnight is critical of the Pastoral role majoring on organisational leadership, preferring the personalised model of nurturing people towards Christlikeness.[2] Contrary to his view, I consider that in larger churches, where such individualised ministry is not possible, Pastors can pursue this goal by serving as `shepherds of systems' ensuring that the systems are responsive to the uniqueness of individuals rather than being one-size-fits-all programmes.[3] Nevertheless, a *tov* church will be committed to helping individuals and the whole congregation to become more like Christ.

So, **how good is your church?** I recommend Barringer and McKnight's book as a helpful resource for those seeking to develop churches that are resistant to abuse as they practise church as God intends it to be. Pastoral Teams or other Church Leadership Groups would benefit from reflecting together on the book, perhaps reading and discussing a chapter per month, addressing questions such as:

- What key points stood out to you in this chapter?
- Do you disagree with the authors on anything? Why do you disagree?
- How would you assess your church's culture in regard to the matters discussed in this chapter? Share a story or two from your church to support your assessment.
- Are there some practical steps you could or should take to help your church to form more of a goodness culture?

The book could also serve as pre-reading in preparation for a leaders' retreat focussing on developing congregational life or as the basis of a church review that might include congregational feedback on the various features. Support in facilitating such activities is available from the BUV's Church Health & Capacity Building Team.

Rev David Devine

Head of BUV Church Health & Capacity Building.

May 2021

---

[2] This chapter condenses his fuller discussion in Scot McKnight, *Pastor Paul: Nurturing a Culture of Christoformity in the Church* (Brazos, Grand Rapids, 2019).
[3] See, for example, R Paul Stevens & Phil Collins, *The Equipping Pastor: A Systems Approach to Congregational Leadership*, (Alban Institute, Bethesda, 1993).