



What Church Can Be: An Optimistic Vision with Some Blueprints. Matthew Kruse. Maitland, FL: Xulon Press, 2020, 317 pp., paperback. ISBN 978-1-63050-564-6

One does not need to look far any more for a myriad of resources on church growth, revitalization, health, etc. Approaches to “doing church” seem as multitudinous as there are churches themselves and each competing vision is not only couched firmly in its individual cultural context but aspersions seem to be cast towards unavoidable diversity such that a pastor who simply desires to serve his people well to the glory of God can be left confused, frustrated, and ultimately discouraged and insecure. After a historical ecclesiological dry spell, much work has been done in this area recently, mostly notably through the solid efforts of 9Marks ministries. Building on this Biblical foundation, Mathew Kruse’s book is a welcome addition for at

least three reasons.

First, Matthew’s book is deeply Biblical. Based on Paul’s exchange with the Ephesian elders at Miletus (Acts 20:17-38) each chapter takes a part of Paul’s farewell speech and dissects its application for defining and maturing the church. Infused with additional Scripture to supplement this foundational passage, the commitment to Biblical authority and sufficiency is key.

Second, while bound to his culture,¹ Matthew does a good job of attempting to recognize how his applications may be culturally bound and therefore pushing to make them more supra-cultural. That said, as a student of both his own culture and Paul’s, woven throughout the book is a good example of how to properly understand, adjust, and adapt to culture without compromising Biblical content. Taken together, this upfront approach to cultural context allows the reader to determine what “fits” in their culture and what doesn’t, thus equipping the reader to both understand the supra-cultural principles while simultaneously working through ways to apply it in their own cultural context.

Third, each chapter ends with a practical way to apply the realities of Paul’s understanding of the church, or at least the church he helped plant in Ephesus. This “blueprint” as Matthew puts it not only walks through what to do, but also purposefully maps out a plan that at least gives a broad understanding of how to do it. Having established the principle itself and why it is an important part of church life, I found it unique and practically helpful to walk through at least the beginnings of a plan of implementation as each chapter came to a close.

A final note would be the rank honesty Matthew consistently displays. This is not a book of perpetual triumphs, written by an entrepreneurial mega-star who grew a congregation from nothing to thousands and now condescends to give you twelve sure-fire steps to replicating his

¹ Matthew is church planting in the Boston area, so Bostonian and New England culture predominates throughout. I personally found it interesting how much his cultural context mirrors my own in Atlantic Canada.

“success”. This is a story of God’s continual grace, given to an undeserving sinner who attempts to lead his people to that same grace, all while slogging it out in one of the hardest patches of soil in the USA. For any pastors struggling to value faithfulness over fame, discipleship over numbers, and long-haul maturity over silver bullets and quick fixes, this book admirably points to God again and again, using His metrics for value and worth and exalting Him and Him alone.

One caution I would offer is to stick with the title of the book and not make it say something it does not. First, the title is not “What Church SHOULD Be”, as if Matthew’s (or his interpretation of Paul’s at Ephesus) vision for church, as outlined in this book, is what every church, regardless of context or culture, SHOULD be. Second, the title is not “What Church MUST Be”, as if Matthew’s book defines church for all cultures and contexts at all times, and if you are not constituted as his church is you are in sin.

The title is “What Church CAN Be”, which means at least two things as I read the book. First, this is an outline, as Biblically faithful as Matthew can be, based on Acts 20, as to what the church can be. Every context and culture is different, so that must be borne in mind while reading, leading to the reality that this is simply an outline, broadly speaking, of what church can be, expressed differently according to the many factors that contribute to each local body of Christ. Second, this is a hopeful title, speaking to what church can be in the sense of vision for the future. Using the church at Ephesus as a guide², we are given an example to hold up, examine, and use as a potential assessment and template for what our church can become.

I have used this book as an assessment tool, systematically “grading” my church on each chapter and then looking for ways to maintain our strengths and make weaknesses into strengths moving forward. I would highly recommend working through this book with your elders and seeking God’s face for what your church can be.

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² At least the church during Paul’s connection with it. We know by the time John writes in Revelation 2:1-7 problems have crept in, most notably a lack of the type of love they had at the start of their existence. To use Matthew’s language, they are now struggling in the areas covered in chapters 2 (O2), 10 (Outsiders), 13 (Love Letters), and 17 (Hands).