

Reggie McNeal. *The Present Future: Six Tough Questions for the Church*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003).

A Review by Kevin DeYoung

Reggie McNeal is the director of leadership development for the South Carolina Baptist Convention. His “life calling is to be a missionary to the church in North America to help it rediscover the mission of the church” (xix). After spending decades in church leadership, McNeal is now fed up with the business as usual approach to church. Hence, *The Present Future* is a polemical book (xvii) of deconstruction (xv). The situation in North America is not hopeless, McNeal argues, but things are worse than we think and further along than we thought (145). In short, “the institutional church in North America is in deep trouble—and it should be, because it has lost its mission” (141). The church has become a religious club for people who think, dress, behave, vote, and believe like them (xvi). The church has lost its way, its influence, and its entire purpose.

McNeal identifies six new realities of “the present future” that must be addressed by church leaders if the North American church is to be renewed. Reality number one: the collapse of the church culture. The world has changed, but the church hasn’t. We have withdrawn from the community and are in denial. More and more, young people are leaving the church. We have chased the “next thing” and only ended up farther behind. We are living in the modern world, instead of the postmodern. We have reduced Christianity to club membership. We need a “deconversion” from church culture, “a deprogramming that we typically associate with helping people escape the clutches of a cult” (11). We have made the church all about an institution and forgotten our true mission: “to join God in his redemptive efforts to save the world” (19).

Reality number two: the shift from church growth to kingdom growth. For several decades, the church has poured its energy into church growth. This was not all wrong, but in large part it was misguided (22). We have been asking the wrong question: how do we get people to come to us instead of asking how we get to the people (24). We have been putting our efforts into institutional survival when we should shift our goal to community transformation (26). We’ve become too religious, and not spiritual enough. Too many Christians are monoculturalists who want everyone to be just like them in everyway. As a result, our strategy has been “come and get it” instead of actually going into our communities and working for transformation. The old approaches to evangelism don’t work anymore. We need to practice service and hospitality. We need to go where people are. “They’re not coming to us,” McNeal cries. “We’ve got to go to them” (42).

Reality number three: a new reformation: releasing God’s people. McNeal argues that we have been asking another wrong question. We have been wondering how we turn members into ministers, when we should be asking how we turn members into missionaries (48). What he means is that we have overburdened our people with church responsibilities instead of sending them out to work for community transformation (48). We haven’t tried to connect with people outside the church. We are stuck in a modern world, a rational faith, and an educational approach to spirituality (54-55). The church needs to wake up and smell the postmodern coffee, get rid of the club mentality, and go partner with God in his work in the world.

Reality number four: the return to spiritual formation. The six realities have a lot of overlap. In reality number four, McNeal again chastises “church culture idolatry” and a club mentality. We have focused on making good church members instead of kingdom followers of Jesus. The remedy to this problem is “life coaching” (77). We need to move from text-driven discipleship to life-driven, from classroom to living room, from didactic to experiential, from privatized learning to team learning, and from scripted development to shaped. The church’s number one pursuit should be the development of human beings created in God’s image and redeemed through Jesus (91).

Reality number five: the shift from planning to preparation. We have been trying to plan for the future, but God does the planning; we do the preparing (95). The difference between planning and preparing is vision. We need to look at our communities, look at who we are, and look at what we can do for the long haul. This is how vision is developed. Key in the preparation component is keeping score. McNeal is careful to say that the scorecard is not baptisms, budgets, and buildings (107). That’s not the bottom line, he argues. What we need is a scorecard for processes and activities. We need to keep track of things like the number of conversations with pre-Christians and the number of people being trained and developed according to our goals and vision. This is preparing for the future.

Reality number six: the rise of apostolic leadership. The church has had a number of leadership models: holy person, shepherd, wordsmith, manager, CEO. The model for the postmodern future is apostolic. We need people willing to try anything if it means reaching more people with the gospel (126). Apostolic leaders are all about kingdom growth. It is their top priority in all things (127).

Kudos

Having given the general lay of the land, let me mention several kudos and concerns. First, the kudos. There are several points and emphases I appreciated in this book.

- Making a good church member does not necessarily make a good evangelist. That’s true. We are kidding ourselves if we think evangelism automatically happens just because we have committed church goers.
- Church involvement does not automatically produce disciples. Every pastor knows this is true. Some people are super-involved in church programs and events, but never seem to mature in their faith.
- We must recognize that we have a culture in our church (every church does). No church will be able to feel culturally comfortable for everyone, but if we at least realize our church has a “feel” to it that will help us begin to think about how we might be perceived as unwelcoming to certain kinds of people.
- I was glad to hear McNeal affirm his belief that no one comes to the Father except through Jesus (143).
- I agreed with many of McNeal’s criticisms of church growth methodology and business technique. I appreciated his call for service and sacrifice over style and self-preoccupation.

- We need to think how we can free our people up to serve God outside of church. This is one of McNeal's stronger points. Pastors especially have a tendency to think that serving the Lord equals serving on church committees. It can mean that (and I wish McNeal had allowed for this more graciously), but we don't want our people to think that having a neighbor over for dinner is keeping them from real ministry because they are away from church that night.
- Most importantly, McNeal is right to argue that we must have a gospel that is "go and tell," not primarily "come and see." The church has spent an inordinate amount of time figuring out ways to lure people to church. We've only succeeded in making the church more like the world and actually winning few people to the Lord. We need to go into the world where non-Christians are. McNeal has a contagious passion for getting out of our pews and doing something for God and with God in the world.
- In general I find that many people who read McNeal or hear him come away with the basic message: "The church needs to get out into the world and do something. We don't just exist for ourselves. We need to go and serve others." That's a great take home message.

Concerns

There are also a number of concerns I have about this book. Let me mention six of them.

1. McNeal exaggerates. To some degree, I don't mind authors and speakers using hyperbole (Jesus did after all), but a few of McNeal's points are too grandiose to be taken seriously. According to McNeal, we are entering a new epoch of human history called the postmodern age (5). Unless the church in North America makes big changes (and fast), we are facing "sure death" (119). Even more amazingly, McNeal opines that the realities in this book "represent tectonic shifts in the ethos of the spiritual quest of humanity" (xviii). *Tectonic* changes in the *whole ethos of humankind's quest for God?* This is pretty heady stuff. Surely, this is a bit over the top. True the world is profoundly different than it was in 1950 (2), but then again it was profoundly different then as compared to 1900. And the world will be profoundly different fifty years from now. It's good to notice how things have changed, but the cries of "change or die" grow stale when you hear them every ten years.

2. McNeal paints a simplistic picture of history. It is very in vogue these days to bewail the evils of modernism. The modern world assaulted God and drained all mystery out of life and the universe, McNeal tells us (6). Modernity wanted to wring from the universe its secrets and expose its inner mechanisms (53). God took a beating during modernism, was taken of a circulation and relegated to religious ceremony (54). This is too simplistic to be helpful. Assuming the Enlightenment is the beginning of modernism for McNeal, it's just not true that God was relegated to religious ceremony for three hundred years. What about Edwards, Wesley, the Great Awakening, Moody, Billy Graham? We all need to take a deep breath and stop bashing modernism, or postmodernism for that matter. The distinctions between the two isms, where they are real, provide both opportunities and obstacles. No time period has been a golden age for the church, and no epoch has been an unmitigated disaster. That's why it frustrates me to read McNeal's claim that our modern approach to spirituality has been adopted from "Kantian metaphysics." Therefore, according to McNeal, we focus on the Bible because the thing-in-itself

(God) is really beyond us. Compare this, McNeal urges, with the medieval mystics who had personal intimacy with God (55). But are we really to believe that most of our churches study the Bible because we are influenced by Kant and therefore believe God to be unknowable? Isn't it more charitable, and accurate, to think that Christians study the Bible so they *can* know God personally, not because they can't? After all, we search the Scriptures because they bear witness about Christ and lead us to eternal life (John 5:39).

Similarly, McNeal's reconstruction of the first century world is naïve. He argues that institutional religion had collapsed in the first century, clearing the way for an upsurge in personal spiritual search for God and salvation (16). Jesus, then, tapped into this disillusionment and offered an intimate relationship with God stripped away from religion. But the first century was not tired of institutional religion. The Romans had temples and officials and empire-wide rituals. And Jesus did not offer a relationship without religion. That sounds nice, but Jesus worshiped in synagogues, used a sacred text, kept the law, and his followers quickly developed creeds, hymns, and offices for the fledgling church. "Spiritual but not religious" is a cliché of our time not to be read back into other ages. The first century was not identical to spirituality in your local Starbucks.

3. *The Present Future* displays a number of inconsistencies. McNeal bemoans the influence of business culture in the church, but he loves the idea of executive coaching, taken right from the business world. That doesn't make the idea bad, but why not call it discipleship? Likewise, McNeal advocates selflessness and sacrifice, but then he expects the church to cater to learners who will decide what they want to learn, when they want to learn, and how they want to learn (85). People don't want the church telling them what to do, McNeal argues, so we should help people find the jobs that bring them the highest sense of satisfaction and contribution (46). But don't we all have to roll up our sleeves at times and do the unlovely, unlikeable stuff we don't feel gifted in?

I also found it strange that with all the talk of community, McNeal is eager for customized worship experiences where people can look at a collection of crosses, or move a pile of stones to symbolize releasing a problem to God, or go to another station to draw and paint, or find a leader for intercessory prayer (89). Is this not the absence of community and the height of individualism? It's also ironic that at the end of the day many of McNeal's prescription for our new world sound very familiar: look at generational differences, study your community, help people with life skills (like parenting, cooking and sewing), and relationships (blended families, marriage and family issues), and health concerns (exercise, nutrition, pharmaceutical awareness) (79-80). These aren't bad ideas, but it's the same stuff we've been reading in churchy books for fifteen years.

And I don't think this is what young people are looking for anyway. I think they want more transcendence, not more help with sewing. Younger generations, in and out of the church, want to know theology, not exercise advice. At one point, McNeal urges church leaders to go to "school" all the time, which means studying "postmodernism, generational cultures, visioning, communication, organizational behavior and development, leadership development, team building, apologetics, and futuring, just to get started" (117). I'm not opposed to people studying these things. They have their place. But I can tell you it's not what I need more of as a church

leader. Most of this stuff is peripheral to ministry, and we are confused if we think it is central. I need to know about the Trinity, the atonement, the gospel of Mark, the book of Hosea, fellowship with God in prayer, and my Greek Bible more than I need to study team building and futuring. And I truly believe our people want this from us too. They want a man who has been with God and drinks deep of his word, not experts in cultural trends and sociological studies (cf. Luke 24:32).

4. McNeal's view of church is shallow. All throughout the book I wish he could have made his good points without getting his digs in at the church at the same time. I'm all for examining our church culture, releasing God's people into our communities, doing spiritual formation, and inviting apostolic leadership, but why do these things have to mean that I am against the church as institution, or rail against the idea of membership, or deride educational classes in our church.

McNeal's analysis of the church needs more depth. Of course, club members sounds bad, but let's not forget "member" is a biblical category. And while McNeal may not mind the idea of "members" who belong to several churches at the same time (115), what does this do for accountability, submission to authority, and pastoral responsibility over the sheep? How is any of this possible with Christians floating around from church to church? What's more, McNeal leaves the door open for churchless Christianity, painting the institutional church as ancillary to God's larger plans for the kingdom.

McNeal often paints church concerns in the worst possible light. "Member values," he explains, "are all about church real estate, church programming, who's in and who's out, member services, member issues (translated: am I getting what I want out of this church?). Missionary values are about the street, people's needs, breaking down barriers, community issues (translated: am I partnering with God's work in people)" (65). No doubt, some members are this bad. But what if the sentence went this way: Members care about church buildings not because they are the end, but as a means to an end, that ministry can happen there. Members care about church programs because programs make sure kids are cared for in the nursery, our children get educated, and the heat stays on. Members care about the holiness and orthodoxy of church members because churches should reflect the character of God in his truth and purity. Members care how other members are being cared for because they love each other as the body of Christ. I'm sure McNeal would not disagree with these statements, but why always put the church in such a negative light? I also imagine that McNeal believes in preaching, but why refer to the exalted role of the pulpit in Protestant churches as "wordsmith-educator"? Isn't heralding a biblical mandate and the role of the preacher deserving of something less lame than "wordsmith"? I was also sad that McNeal ran right past "shepherd" and "preacher" as ministry models on his way to "apostolic leadership" as if those first two were as culturally as manager or CEO. All in all, McNeal, makes some good points about the church, but there is too much imbalance along the way.

5. The purpose of the church is largely reduced to one thing: community transformation. This point is repeated several times, but it is never substantiated. All Christians agree that the gospel has social implications. Most probably agree that community transformation is a good thing. But where do we see Paul talking to his churches about transforming their communities? It may be implied in passages about the cosmic Lordship of Christ or living good lives among the

pagans or praying for the king, but the concerns of the New Testament seem to have little to do with community transformation.

But community transformation seems to be everything for McNeal. Here's a sampling of the activities the missional church should consider: participate in food distribution; help people find employment; offer parenting classes; start a community contribution center; help inner-city residents with issues of poverty, drug abuse, and education; partner with the YMCA; begin classes for literacy and math; help people with car repairs and financial help; run family movies; and organize soccer and baseball leagues. This is the sort of kingdom work the church needs to be about. And who wants to argue with these ideas? Not me. I like them. I hope our church might be able to do a few of them. But are these the main activities of the church as church? If this is *the* purpose of the church (participating with God's redemptive work as he saves the world), aren't we making ourselves redundant? There's nothing uniquely Christian about anything on the list above.

And it's worth pointing out that McNeal's notion of community transformation is quite narrow. His missional vision is largely in the realm of social services (I don't use the term pejoratively), but what about transforming the laws of a community or the public morality or the pop culture or the media or the academic institutions? McNeal's vision of the church is akin to Niebuhr's "Christ the Transformer of Culture", but the cultural transformation only includes the basic issues of helping people make it in life. This is not a bad thing at all, but a decidedly narrow vision of community transformation.

More importantly, what's missing from McNeal's theology of the kingdom is conversion, regeneration, faith, and repentance. We must not think the kingdom of God is primarily a new order of society. That was the mistake of the Jews in Jesus' day. They did not understand that you must be born again to enter the kingdom of God (John 3:5) and without holiness no one will inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor. 6:10). McNeal doesn't like the civil religion in church culture, but if our missional, kingdom purpose means we excel in social services, what's left besides a civic religion? He decries that the church has become all moralism and politics, but what's left when your message of the kingdom is about human development and community transformation? If the purpose of the church is to partner with God in changing the world, and that change, if I am reading McNeal correctly, consists mainly in changing our communities, won't the church inevitably spend most of its time and efforts in politics, activism, and humanitarian relief? These things have a place, but are they really the lost mission of the church?

Besides, doesn't it count for something that individual Christians are involved in all of these areas already? Isn't that the work of the church through its members? To be sure, more can and should be done, but aren't many Christians already involved in salt and light activities as they run their business according to Christian principles, serve the poor through Community Mental Health, and serve as public school teachers? Or does the church as church need to start soccer leagues and have tutoring services to be a real agent of community transformation? And if the church is supposed to do all these things as church, won't we be asking for huge church commitments again?

Please don't misunderstand me, I am not against community engagement. It would be easy for me to pick on McNeal's list and not actually do anything myself to help people in my neighborhood. That would be wrong. But my concern is that the vision behind words like "missional" and "kingdom" often ends up (1) overlooking what individual Christians are already doing, (2) looking a lot like the Social Gospel and (3) reducing the church to a doer of good, non-controversial deeds (no mention of pro-life concerns as important to community transformation) like every other humanitarian organization. But what makes the church unique is its commitment, above all else, to knowing and making known Christ and him crucified. True, the biblical storyline is creation, fall, redemption, and recreation. But the overwhelming majority of Scripture is about our redemption, how God saves lawbreakers, how sin can be atoned for, how rebels can be made right with God. It seems to me that proclaiming this message of redemption is the main mission of the church, even more than partnering with God to "redeem" the world through community transformation.

And what about proclamation? I'm not sure what McNeal actually thinks about evangelism. McNeal has said in his live events, "Your job is to bless people; that's the covenant. Don't have an evangelism strategy--have a blessing strategy." This sounds nice, but we must not forget the blessings of the Abrahamic covenant are only for those who have faith in Jesus Christ (Gal. 3:9). And let's not forget that the Great Commission compels us not to transform our communities but to teach people everything Jesus commands. We can't truly bless people unless we evangelize, and we aren't obeying Matthew 28 if we only work to fix flat tires and help folks balance their budget. I'm all for serving, but we shouldn't apologize for having a strategy to verbally share the gospel with others.

On a related note, McNeal makes the surprising claim that Paul's approach at Mars Hill was flawed. Paul's evangelistic strategy in Athens was a bomb, McNeal argues. Paul had spoken eloquently, but without success. So post-Acts 17, Paul adopted a new approach, based not on superior reasoning, but on superior living and loving (61). This is simply untrue. Paul reasoned with kings and governors and traveled to a number of places after Athens in which he evangelized the crowds with words and logic and persuasion. I want to think that McNeal is just encouraging us to serve as well as bear verbal testimony, but his de-emphasis on theology and the news of the gospel starts to sound like the old liberal mantra of "deeds not creeds," or the confused aphorism "preach the gospel and use words only when necessary." I wish McNeal had made clearer the necessity of verbally telling people the gospel and calling people to faith and repentance in Jesus Christ.

6. This leads to my final criticism. I am unclear as what McNeal thinks is the gospel. He probably could sign off on a very good theology of the gospel, but I don't hear it anywhere in the book. And in a volume about reaching out to the unchurched this is a big disappointment. I see clearly from McNeal that we are supposed to join in God's redemptive work in the world, but I see little about Christ's finished work on our behalf. If the emphasis is on our work for God, rather than God's work for us, we will end up giving people law and not gospel.

McNeal's description of the gospel is fuzzy at best. We are to tell the world about God and convince the world of his love (14). The movement Jesus launched was about a "personal life-transforming experience" (17). We are to have conversations "about the great love of our lives"

(42). “The Bible is the story of God’s determination to woo human beings with his heart so he can transform them with his love and partner with them in his redemptive mission in the world.” (81) The first disciples shared with the world their “relationship with Jesus” (82). Philippians 3 is about going from a legalistic zealot to have an intimate relationship with God (61). “When the kingdom comes, people will finally realize their full potential as beings created in the image of God” (73).

It’s possible to put a good face on all these euphemisms, but this is not a clear gospel. I can’t recall anything in the book about substitutionary atonement, or justification by faith alone, or the necessity of faith and repentance, or the utter inability of man to save himself, or the centrality of the cross and resurrection. Even allowing that this is not a theological book per se, I still would have liked to hear McNeal describe our evangelistic message as something more than a life-transforming experience or an intimate relationship with God. Again, I’m assuming that McNeal believes we are sinners in need of grace, and that Jesus’ death paid our debt and propitiated the wrath of God, and that we must repent of our sin and trust in Jesus alone for our salvation. I want to assume this about McNeal and many others I read these days, but I wish I didn’t have to assume it. I wish the glory of Christ, the offense of the cross, and the necessity of conversion were more explicitly stated and more clearly central.

There is a danger in much of the missional literature that the gospel of God’s grace toward sinners gets swallowed up in urgent calls for world redemption and cultural transformation. There is a danger of centering our churches on adopting schools and offering parenting classes instead of the cross. There is a danger that we find our unity in doing good missional deeds for our community and not in the good news gospel. There’s a danger our Christianity becomes all imperative and no indicative, all about what we need to do with God and little about what’s God’s done for us. Confusion about the gospel is a huge problem today, and it’s one I find exacerbated rather than alleviated in *The Present Future*.