

**A Review of**  
***They Like Jesus But Not The Church***  
**by Dan Kimball (Zondervan, 2007, 271 pp)**

I found *They Like Jesus But Not the Church* by Dan Kimball to be a helpful complement to the well-known Barna Institute publication *UnChristian* by David Kinneman. The Barna Institute book provides us with statistical analyses of young people's disconnect from mainline Christianity. Kimball's book provides us with anecdotes that put a human face to the statistics.

The focus of *They Like Jesus* is on the same issues that Kinneman identifies. The topics discussed from pp. 73-209 are:

- The church is an organized religion with a political agenda.
- The church is judgmental and negative.
- The church is dominated by males and oppresses females.
- The church is homophobic.
- The church arrogantly claims all other religions are wrong.
- The church is full of fundamentalists who take the whole Bible literally.

Kimball's approach to these issues is to interview young people in settings outside the church. His research methodology is more like a focus group than a random sample survey. As the pastor of a growing congregation, Kimball recognized that he had begun to live within the Christian bubble, so he made a concerted effort to open conversations in the public square. One of his major pleas is that Christians converse openheartedly with their unchurched neighbors and colleagues, probably forcing themselves out of their comfort zone as he had to do. He concludes the chapter on "Why I Escaped the Church Office" saying:

Are you in the prison of the Christian bubble? Have you become comfortably numb?...  
Are you planning your escape? People who like Jesus are waiting on the outside to meet you. (p. 48)

The phrase "people who like Jesus" opens up a major theme of the book. He found in his conversations that people were attracted to Jesus, basically seeing him in their own image: "The pop culture Jesus is the loving, hypocrite-hating man of peace who taught us not to judge others." (p. 55) At the conclusion of the book, Kimball addresses several criticisms of his approach and evaluation of this pop culture view. He admits that it is grossly inadequate and narrow, but "we should celebrate their interest in him and use that as a springboard to engage them in conversations about who he really is." (p. 256)

In order to do that, though, we need to be respectful and open. We need to gain people's trust. We need to see ourselves in a foreign mission field, learning the culture and expressing the call of Christ in ways and terms that the unbelievers can understand. "Hear their thinking and understand their hearts," he urges. (p. 260)

Kimball gives examples from his own parish where they have tried to organize and present in ways that make outsiders comfortable. His congregation intentionally attempts to incorporate and harness the energy, creativity, and cultural relevance of young people. He tries to avoid the image of the know-it-all preacher by using dialogue in his sermons. He accommodates their desire for personal prayer time by occasionally having only prayer stations instead of corporate worship on Sunday mornings. He explains traditions of the church and its ancient liturgies when he uses them.

One plea that Kimball makes relates well to our Lutheran theological tradition. He says that people want to learn about Jesus, and Lutheran theology is deeply Christ-centered. Besides “Solus Christus,” we also have “Sola Scriptura,” and people want to learn what the Bible says. They don’t want someone forcing personal opinions or political issues on them. They want to become better people, more Christ-like. As one interviewee put it, “it feels more like they are trying to shame you and control you into their way of thinking... rather than it being about becoming more like Jesus and a more loving human being.” (p. 104)

Kimball is an evangelical pastor, so he is at great pains to relate his concerns in ways that do not compromise the faith. In the section on Fundamentalism, he argues that we should all be fundamentalists in the classical sense, basically adhering to the doctrines of the Creeds. However, we should be respectful, humble, and open on other matters. Kimball takes this approach on issues like the role of women in the church, infallibility of Scripture, evolution, homosexuality, other religions, etc.

Kimball points out that people today get information on Christianity and other faiths from many different sources. No longer is the church’s interpretation of truth the dominant one. We must understand the other viewpoints, and we must address them intelligently. For example, Kimball several times mentions his struggle with the scholarly interpretation that the basic narrative of Jesus’ birth, life, death, and resurrection is a repetition of ancient Egyptian, Greek, Roman myths. Anybody who watches TV or reads general works on religion has seen this viewpoint. Do we know it, and are we able/ready to address it, he asks.

Kimball advocates that churches and pastors must become much more intentional and thorough in their teaching ministries. Members must learn how to interpret Scripture in all its complexities, not just gather isolated passages to use as ammunition. They must understand and appreciate other religions, not just dismiss them as demonic. “The Bible says it; I believe it; that settles it” just won’t do anymore. Too many Christians “don’t know why they believe what they do.” (p. 202) They certainly can’t then explain or defend it to others. We need to do the hard work of understanding our faith in terms of the questions of our day.

Kimball urges that people are hungry for Christians to make sense of the faith. “I see attraction and even relief when they hear rational and heartfelt reasons for having some core theological beliefs.” (p. 206) Kimball begins the next-to-last chapter with this great question: “If you were ever to go to a church or return to a church, and if you could shape it, what would that church look like?” (p. 213) He summarizes the view of the outsiders: “We want to be taught the Bible to learn about Jesus.... Give us the opportunity to ask questions... We want a learning environment, not a watered-down lecture....” (p. 223)

In the eloquent expressions of some interviewees (pp. 224-25):

- “Make church a book club with soul.”
- “I want (church) to be like a family... where you are all looking out for each other.”
- “I wish the pastors and leaders were like baristas or bartenders.”
- “I want the church to be diverse and to accept diversity and love diversity.”

In conclusion, Kimball summarizes his message to the church to offer a humble apology and an informed apologetic. (p. 250)

Clearly, the book is a great one for a discussion group. It is written for Christians to discuss together, but one could also envisage doing it in a more community forum such as a coffee house, neighborhood discussion group, campus ministry, or book club. What a humble, openhearted way for Christians to learn and share.

Especially in such a forum, one of the great strengths of the book is the numerous discussion questions at the end of each of the chapters. They are incisive and challenging. A few examples:

- “If you were raised outside of the church..., do you think you would like Christians? (p. 35)
- “Does the rising interest in the pop culture Jesus excite you.... or do you see it as a threat....?” (p. 59)
- “Imagine a stranger visiting.... What would (he) observe that would clearly point to Jesus? (p. 95)
- “How do you think people in your town would describe your church?.... What are you known for?” (p. 113)
- “How would visitors know that your church respects females and gives them a voice in the life of the church?” (p. 135)
- “How would the average person in your church explain why they believe Jesus is the only way to salvation?” (p. 186)
- “What specific stumbling blocks can you list that prevent people from ever reaching the point of stumbling over the gospel?” (p. 244)
- “Do you feel optimistic about those who like Jesus but not the church?” (p. 254)

Kimball’s plea is that we feel optimistic and prepare to engage them intelligently and joyfully.

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