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BOOK REVIEW

Sustainable Faith in a Radical, Restless World **by Michael Horton (Zondervan Publishing)**

by Lucas V. Woodford

Author Michael Horton notes the folly of letting culture set the tone for the ministry of modern North American churches in contrast to more traditional churches where the Gospel is ordinarily proclaimed, delivered and administered through Word and Sacrament.

WHAT'S SENSATIONAL ABOUT THE ORDINARY? How can the average sell? What's extraordinary about the normal? Our culture, and the church that allows itself to be positioned by it, says, "not much."

Our culture constantly looks for the next big thing, is always selling something new and is ever lifting up radical, epic and revolutionary ways of life. Therefore, the cry of some in the Church today is that new, radical, epic and revolutionary ways of ministry must rise to the top too if the Church is to be successful. Christians must become superstars by selling everything for Jesus. Celebrity pastors need to lead the way to the next big thing. Super (modern-day) apostles need to be over the top and always at it for Jesus, and contentment is to be shunned like the plague. As a result, tricked-out, emergent, everything-must-change, hyper-missional, extraordinarily ambitious and audacious Christians and their churches have become the modus operandi in much of North America.

True, ordinary isn't fancy, isn't flashy, has no bells and whistles and doesn't sell. However, author Michael Horton reminds us that the ordinary means of grace is precisely how Christ has worked for some 2,000 years to bring the extraordinary gifts of the forgiveness of sins, the promise of the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting to people bruised, beaten and battered by their sins and the sin of the world.

Full of wisdom and ever winsome, Horton takes

the reader through the challenges facing the North American church today — letting the culture set the tone for the life and ministry of the Church. He explores the over-sensationalized church with all of its law-oriented demands and juvenilization and points her back to the beauty and the joy of the ordinary manner of her existence, where the extraordinary message of the

Gospel is routinely, regularly and ordinarily proclaimed, delivered and administered through Word and Sacrament:

'Why do we seem to think that churches need to imitate the perpetual innovation of Microsoft instead of the patient care of a good gardener? Chasing the latest fad for spiritual growth, church growth and cultural impact, we eventually forget both how to reach the lost and how to keep the reached.' — Horton

Why do we seem to think that churches need to imitate the perpetual innovation of Microsoft instead of the patient care of a good gardener? Chasing the latest fad for spiritual growth, church growth and cultural impact, we eventually forget both how to reach the lost and how to keep the reached. The ordinary means of grace become yesterday's news. Like pay phones, so we are told by the emergent entrepreneurs, ordinary churches may still be around here and there, but nobody uses them. In olden days believers may have gathered

for 'the apostles' teaching and the fellowship ... 'the breaking of the bread and the prayers,' but that was before iPads. In past generations, Christ's fruit-bearing vines may have been tended with daily family disciplines of catechism, Bible reading and prayer, but with my schedule? And to say that the apostolic method of church growth — in breadth as well as depth — is preaching, teaching, baptism, the Lord's Supper and accountability to elders is likely to

provoke the response: ‘are you serious?’¹

Horton insightfully tracks how the evangelical church has gone from understanding the “ordinary” to demanding everything be “extraordinary;” how “ambition” was historically and biblically always a vice (and sin), but has now been elevated to a virtue; how “contentment” was always a biblical virtue but has now been made into a vice (of mediocrity); how the “contractual” American mentality and way of life has replaced the “covenantal” biblical mentality and way of life; and how “passing away” is the preferred mode of speaking rather than talking of the death and resurrection. All these ordinary ways of talking about and proclaiming the Good News have been remade and replaced.

But make no mistake about it: Horton is clear that ordinary does not mean mediocre.

In fact, far from throwing a wet blanket on godly passion, my goal is to encourage an orientation and habits that foster deeper growth in grace, more effective outreach and a more sustainable vision of loving service to others over a lifetime. This is not a call to do less, but to invest in things that we often give up on when we don’t see an immediate return. The fact that ‘ordinary’ has come to mean mediocre and low expectations is a sign of the problem I want to address.²

Always focused on the next big thing, movement or fad in the Church, Horton says the Church actually fails to focus on the truly next big thing — the second coming of Jesus. Until Jesus returns, Horton reminds us that the ordinary things like catechesis (catechism) and liturgy (hymnal), Word and Sacrament are part of the wonderful ordinary way that faith has been passed on and taught for centuries and invites the reader to celebrate the ordinariness still today. Sadly, what is often given up on is the “ordinariness” of the Good News itself, namely, that Jesus Christ came to atone for the sins of the lost and the found; that Baptism is a gift of God’s grace; that the Lord’s Supper gives the forgiveness of sins. When these ordinary means just don’t seem to be doing what we think they should be doing in the right now, at this moment, immediate demands of our time, they are abandoned for something more flashy, more relevant and more radical.

However, Horton takes joy in lifting up the ordinary message that so many Christians find as inadequate:

The power of our activism, campaigns, movements, and strategies cannot forgive sins or raise the dead. ‘The gospel... is the power of God for salvation,’ and, with Paul, we have no reason to be ashamed of it (Rom. 1:16). That is why phrases like ‘living the gospel,’ ‘being the gospel’ and ‘being partners with Jesus in his redemption of the world’ are dangerous distortions of the biblical message of good news. The gospel is not about what we have done or are called to do, but the announcement of God’s saving work in Jesus Christ. ‘For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus sake, (2 Cor. 4:5).’³

Amen to that! There are far too many well-intentioned but misguided methods, manners and techniques that in the name of innovation, accommodation and determination disparage the ordinary means of God at work through His Word and Sacraments, and yes, even in the liturgy, catechesis and the pastors of the Church. “They’re not enough,” we’re told. So something new must be invented and remade. However, Horton unequivocally, biblically and theologically demonstrates that they are indeed powerful and more than enough: “CNN will not be showing up at a church that is simply trusting God to do extraordinary things through his ordinary means of grace delivered by ordinary servants. But God will, week after week. These means of grace and the ordinary fellowship of the saints that matures and guides us throughout our life may seem frail, but they are jars that carry a rich treasure.”⁴

What is more, not only are they enough, but Horton also points to how the ordinariness of our daily lives (the ordinariness of our daily callings/vocations) is also something to be celebrated as part of God’s good creation and are, in fact, the means of maintaining a “faithful presence” to “enjoy our neighbors” rather than using them to achieve superstardom in the new ways of doing church:

It is easy to turn others into instruments of our ambition rather than loving them for their own sake, as fellow image-bearers of God. They become supporting actors — if not props — in our life movie. Loving actual neighbors through particular actions every day can be a lot more mundane as

¹ Michael Horton. *Ordinary: Sustainable Faith in a Radical, Restless World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 178–179.

² *Ibid.*, p. 28.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

well as difficult than trying to transform culture. Regardless of the role or place in society to which God has assigned us by our calling, we are content. Our identity is already determined by our being ‘in Christ,’ not by our accomplishments. The measure of excellence is daily love for our neighbors during this time between Christ’s two advents.⁵

Horton has provided an absolute gem for our times. As one who reads every new thing out there, this book was a breath of ordinary fresh air to fill my lungs. This book is a phenomenal and encouraging read! Before any pastor thinks he needs to start anew, joins the latest fad or hires a consultant, he needs to read this book. In fact, it is so good and timely that should be required reading for all pastors and aspiring pastors. Thank you, Michael Horton, for putting out such an important, needed and ordinary book!

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⁵ Ibid, p. 161.