

BOOK REVIEWS

***Brave Cities: The Archaeology, Artistry, and Architecture of Kingdom Ecosystems*, by Taylor McCall and Hugh Halter**Paul D. Mueller¹¹ American Institute for Economic Research<https://doi.org/10.54669/001c.121764>

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Should church be a hobby or a way of life?

The authors of *Brave Cities* offer a “new” vision for the church emphasizing decentralization, informal relationships, enterprise, and community integration. The subtitle describes the kind of “kingdom” work Christians ought to do—understanding the history of a community, creating meaningful goods through artisanship, and building structures that support human flourishing. *Brave Cities* riffs on Augustine’s idea that the city of God exists within the cities of man. It describes where Christianity meets entrepreneurship meets urban renewal.

This book can be seen as part of the emerging church movement, which rejects many traditional forms of church structure and seeks to “rediscover” true Christian practice. The movement treasures authenticity and has been described by Brian McLaren in *A New Kind of Christian* and *A New Kind of Christianity*. It’s been popularized in well-known books such as *Blue Like Jazz* and *Praying Like Monks, Living Like Fools*.

In chapter 1, the authors argue that church planting is more art than science—and therefore that the overly programmatic and metric-focused church-planting movements misunderstand what is truly important. In chapter 2, they discuss how Christians ought to study the “archaeology, artistry, and architecture” of their cities and their communities. In chapters 3 and 4, they detail how Christians should build and serve in the marketplaces of their communities. In chapters 5 and 6, the authors argue for an informal, decentralized, family-centric ministry—one without formal roles or titles or paid positions. The final chapter concludes with warnings about the challenges of building brave cities and investing in the broader community.

McCall and Halter claim that their model of church, which integrates Christian living with entrepreneurship and urban renewal, is both more authentic and closer to the model Jesus lived than the Sunday morning gathering for worship, prayer, and teaching. Their alternative view of a

radically decentralized and noninstitutional church (which they term the “brave city” within larger cities) leads to interesting, and at times problematic, discussions of church membership, discipline, teaching, discipleship, and spiritual formation. Theirs is an innovative approach, but Christians ought to be somewhat skeptical of innovation. Traditions become traditions in part because of the recognized wisdom of particular practices. The suggestion that such practices should be overwritten ought not to be made lightly. McCall and Halter’s brave city model contains some good stuff, but is it really church?

McCall and Halter use the analogy of surfer culture versus surfer hobbyists with cheap blue surfboards from Costco to illustrate how their vision of church differs from the Sunday morning kind. In surfer culture “you were all in or you didn’t go in.... you couldn’t just try it recreationally” (xvi). Hobbyists, they argue, distort the surf community rhythms. They don’t know the norms. They are not deeply invested, nor do they build their lives around surfing. Many church-going Christians, like hobbyists, only turn out during good conditions. Such Christians tend to be interested in what they get from attending church, including feeling like they have fulfilled a spiritual obligation. But their work, recreation, and other habits have little to do with following Jesus or building his kingdom. They have the Costco blue board and show up when the sun is shining.

The authors take issue with the self-referential, myopic, and self-serving nature of many churches. Christians may give away far more money than non-Christians, but is giving to a church really philanthropic? After all, who benefits? Much of it goes to maintaining (or constructing) buildings and to paying pastors. McCall and Halter criticize these high “overhead” expenses that have limited impact on the broader community. For Jesus and the early church, there were no expensive church buildings. They were communities of people who met at various times and places, often within people’s homes. And there were not many “professional” or paid ministers of the Word—even many of the apostles still worked part time in trades.

The problem identified by McCall and Halter is that people’s lives are not very missional or very well integrated with ministry. Couple this with the fact that many, or even most, churches do not have an active presence in their neighborhood and local community and you can see why the authors feel frustrated with traditional church models and methods of church planting. To this Reformed Baptist, McCall and Halter’s emphasis on the importance of industry for Christians was refreshing—as were the pervasive examples of Christian entrepreneurial ventures throughout the book. The folks described by the authors clearly work hard, exercise creativity in the marketplace, and practice missional living rather than Sunday morning spectating. Further, these folks maintain that Christians should be deeply integrated in their local community.

However, McCall and Halter's disdain for traditional churches and church gatherings is too critical and pessimistic. Social science research clearly demonstrates the power of churches and of religion to preserve society, from greater levels of reported happiness to higher rates of marriage to lower divorce rates to larger families to lower anxiety. On almost any measure of well-being, communities of faith fare the best.

Brave Cities sets up a false dichotomy between thick relationships and missional living on the one hand and clear institutional church meetings, membership, and gatherings on the other. Although Jesus did live out the gospel in every moment of life and preached the good news of the kingdom to the poor, the authors never mention or acknowledge that he almost certainly went to the synagogue every week. And after his death, Sunday gatherings were one of the most distinct signs of Jesus's resurrection and the truth of the gospel. Jews, after gathering on the Sabbath (Saturday) for over a thousand years, including through exile and occupation, began gathering in large numbers on *Sundays* after 33 AD when they embraced Christ.

Believers in the early church did not abandon weekly gatherings because they had something akin to brave city fellowship. Nor did they simply have loose informal affiliation or association. Early believers had a both/and approach to church and to life together rather than the either/or approach of *Brave Cities*. Membership in the body of Christ mattered. Early in church history, formal church membership played an important role in identifying Christians and building up the family of God. Gaining membership usually involved significant catechesis and sometimes lifestyle and career changes.

While overly formulaic and stodgy institutionalized church has many problems, informal and decentralized church has its own issues. How are brave cities connected to the past? Or to the church universal? Structure, routine, and tradition are important. So, too, are beauty and mystery in spaces specifically devoted to God. Although the authors have some radical, and sometimes problematic, things to say, they raise important questions. Why do we gather on Sunday mornings? Why do we have the worship services we do? Does our church matter to the local community? Are our lives deeply saturated with the mission of Jesus, and do we see our work and our relationships in the context of God's kingdom? Do we care about reaching the poor, healing the broken-hearted, and taking the good news of Jesus and the hope and restoration he brings to our cities?

Brave Cities can help us engage these critical questions even if we choose the both/and option: missional living *and* gathering Sunday mornings as the saints have done for two thousand years.

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