

*Second*, in Smith's "nonnegotiable anchor point" (chap. 2) he does not provide a balanced perspective of some points: (1) He discusses that God came to give life, not to take it away. He explores the loving act of God but does not give an explanation regarding human sufferings especially for those who believe in Christ. (2) Smith says, "we need not fear God" because perfect love drives out fear (1 John 4:18). However, he does not explain the apostle Paul's statement, "work out your salvation with fear and trembling." (3) Smith claims that "God is good news" for true Christians because everything about God is good news. However, he fails to describe that God is bad news for Satan and his followers. Christ is not only the Lamb, but He is also the Lion who overcomes Satan. (4) Smith emphasizes that Christians are Christ's friends and "we are not in a master/servant relationship. We're friends." However, Christ also asked His disciples to be His *doulos* (servant) and he called our "Father" God.

*Third*, Smith says, "God the Father is exactly like the Son" (p. 27), however, how far the 'exactness' goes and in what sense, Smith does not explain.

*Fourth*, Smith introduces a "let him go" theology (30-33). He believes God just 'let him (man) go' when he/they used their power of choice. So, when Adam chose to sin, God just let Adam go to sin. According to Smith, sin has natural consequences, similar to smoking which leads to cancer. He does not clarify more on what the sense or the meaning of the consequences are. Did Christ come only to bear natural consequences? What is the significance of Christ's resurrection if He bore only natural consequences?

In summary, Smith's book is a practical understanding of God and answers some of the curiosity about God (His divine attributes) and man (suffering and salvation). The reviewer recommends this book for a non-specialist audience, although there need to be more explanations, and for the student of theology for the sake of comparison of understandings about God, Christ, man, and the nature of sin.

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*The American Church in Crisis: Groundbreaking Research Based on a National Database of over 200,000 Churches*, by David T. Olson. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008.

David T. Olson, director of the American Research Project and director of church planting for the Evangelical Covenant Church, presents

comprehensive research on the state of Christian denominations in the United States. The title of his book "The American Church in Crisis," is engaging. Based on a national database of over 200,000 churches, it attempts to give "a snapshot of American Christianity" (p. 20). The content involves a four-stage process of assessment of American Christian churches such as "observation," "evaluation," "introspection," and "action." The research comprises basically three main branches of Christian denominations in the US: Evangelical churches, Mainline Protestant churches, and the Roman Catholic Church. The first and most extensive part of the book, under "observation," deals with asking research questions and collecting data. It brings forth the main contribution of the book, the demographic and spiritual topography of Christianity in America.

The question, "How many people attend a Christian church any given weekend," tends to be controversial. Olson examines basic religious polling data of weekend church attendance and disapproves of both the Gallup Organization reports and the Barna Research Group, which reports that 40-43 percent of Americans attend church each week. The author does not share this optimistic picture of the American church and proposes a more modest figure of 17.5 percent. The reason for this discrepancy, according to Olson, is the overreporting or the so-called "halo effect," which simply means that Americans overreport socially desirable behavior and underreport undesirable behavior. Another reason is the use of the label "regular participant." The American Church Research Project (TACRP) defines it as "a person who attends church at least three out of three eight Sundays" (p. 29).

For the second question, the author inquires whether the church kept pace with the 68 million new births and the 23 million new immigrants who have arrived in the United States since 1990? Again, the answer is negative. Given the overall trajectory of the American church in light of national population growth, Olson concludes that, "in no single state did church attendance keep up with population growth" (p. 37). Among the reasons for the decline in attendance he mentions the congregations' aging and a shortage of new churches. However, evangelical churches have some advantage in growth due to the active church planting, large churches (compared to mainline denominations), and higher birthrates.

Chapter four investigates the church's regional landscape by mapping the three major branches of Christianity according to their largest weekend church attendance in each of 3,141 counties of the United States. The author considers the population shifts as a strong influential factor for the growth or decline potential of its churches. For instance, in the northeast, the Roman Catholic church is declining significantly while evangelical churches grow faster than in any other region of the nation.

This is due to the Anglo migration to the southern states and a sharp increase in Asian, Hispanic, and other immigrant populations.

Chapter five analyzes six external and internal demographic features significantly effecting church growth or decline as follows: (1) *affluence* of the community in which the church is located, (2) *education* attainment of the church's community, (3) *age* of the church, (4) *size* of the church, (5) *gender* makeup, and (6) the church *location*. The research has shown that these six factors influence a church's growth factor. The fact that younger churches and growing churches have a balanced male-female ratio, while the older and declining churches have more female attendees, is a good case in point.

In chapter six Olson observes each of eight denominational families in the US to see where they are clustered in America and whether they are growing or declining in attendance percentage. The competitive environment of American culture as well as the denomination's missional vision culminate in a historic reshuffling of different breeds of the American church.

The second part of the book falls under the rubric of "evaluation." Here, the author performs the deeper analysis to explain the observations of the first six chapters. The three chapters of this section evaluate the data through the lens of closed churches, established churches, and new churches. The reason why many churches are in decline, according to Olson, is poor church planting. The research reveals also that by far the highest closure rates come from new churches while historical Christian denominations in America demonstrate a lower rate at the same time. However, this happens mostly due to a strong denominational organization that simply does not let those churches close their doors. The fact is that the lower the closure rate, the more likely the denomination is declining; the higher is the closure rate, the more likely the denomination is growing (p.124).

Olson submits that church health has a great impact on its growth. He suggests a simple visual model of a three-legged stool that represents the four critical elements of a healthy church: *spirituality*-reinforcement of the message and mission of Jesus, *chemistry*-a healthy family system and an attractive group personality, and *strategy*-a fruitful ministry in harmony with God-directed goals (pp. 137-138). Above all is the leadership "seat" which provides balance, strength, and stability for the virtual construction.

One of the most important factors of denominational growth is church planting. Here are some persuasive reasons to start new churches: In the long range perspective, new churches play an important role in passing faith from generation to generation since each generation seems to need their own new type of churches. New churches lower the denomination

age profile. They are more easy to adapt to cultural and demographical changes than those established long ago. Now, the sobering fact of Olson's research is that every church with less than a one percent planting rate (that is less than one new church for every 100 established churches) is declining numerically in attendance (p. 146). The reality of church planting among Christian denominations in the United States is unfortunate. A net yearly gain of 300 new-planted churches in America is far from keeping up with population growth comparing to the needed 3,205. At the same time many newly established churches do not survive the first 10 years. For the strong church-planting system, Olson suggests four building blocks: parenting (planting a daughter church), a high-quality pastor, an effective launch process, and coaching and support systems (p.151).

In the "introspection" Olson looks at the cultural changes in American society, which demand a new approach to mission. In the post-Christian world the church must renew emphasis on the message and mission of Jesus that is, to switch the focus from institutional maintenance to the people's needs, from monoethnic to a multiethnic ministry context.

Olson attempts to look at the future; what will happen with the church if the situation remains static, and the population continues to grow at the same rate? The American population will grow from the present 296 million to 336 million by 2020 causing a significant percentage decline in church attendance. To change this bleak future the church must strive toward both health and growth and recognize that church planting is essential for its survival.

The last section, "action," provides a spiritual foundation for church mission. Focusing on Jesus in Scriptures, Olson explores Jesus' message and mission and how it should be reflected in the church's life. Olson finishes his book with an optimistic prognosis: the church will be restored by the spiritual and supernatural act of God.

In my opinion, the book "The American Church in Crisis" is commendable and should be seriously considered. First, it represents solid comprehensive research on both the national and local levels. Not only does it explore the data, it also investigates the reasons for the appearing crisis and proposes a way for the church to thrive. Second, the book is relevant to the mission challenges nowadays. It makes significant contribution in analyzing and understanding external factors affecting church growth such as demographics, age, gender, and location. Lastly, Olson gives valuable insights for church planting issues from his own experience. In addition, the book is well organized and easy-to-read. Multiple sidebars, charts, maps, and graphs help visualize complex research findings in a practical way.

Yet, the book might be more valuable if the author could delimit the scope of his research to the first three parts of the book or elaborate more extensively on the “action” section, which in my opinion is not sufficiently grounded on biblical and missional theology. Also, exploring the extensive sample of 200,000 churches as the target research population, one might expect equal representativeness of all Christian denominations in America; yet, some fairly large protestant churches were not included in the research such as the Seventh-day Adventist church or the Latter-day Saints (Mormons) as well as other non-denominational Christians. The book does not mention the methodology the American Church Research Project followed in choosing the target population. Finally, the definition of terms missing in the book would be highly appreciated.

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