

MIDWESTERN BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

*WHO STOLE MY CHURCH?: WHAT TO DO WHEN THE CHURCH YOU LOVE TRIES TO
ENTER THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY*

A BOOK REVIEW

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BY

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MacDonald, Gordon, *Who stole my church?: what to do when the church you love tries to enter the twenty-first century*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2007; \$21.99; 248 pages.

Biographical Information

In 2011 Gordon MacDonald was named as the Chancellor of Denver Seminary. Previously, he earned a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Colorado and later a Master of Divinity from Denver Seminary. In 1979 MacDonald was awarded an honorary Doctor of Divinity by Barrington College, which merged with Gordon College in 1985. In 2011 Denver Seminary also awarded an honorary Doctor of Divinity degree to MacDonald.

MacDonald served as a pastor for more than forty years in five different states. He pastored Grace Chapel in Lexington, Massachusetts, in two different seasons of his life. Together those seasons lasted over twenty-one years. Grace Chapel honored MacDonald by naming him Pastor Emeritus. He also served as co-editor of *Leadership Journal*, a publication of Christianity Today. MacDonald formerly served as the chairman of the board for World Relief Corporation. As an author of more than two dozen books,¹ MacDonald offered an insightful perspective for this book, based on his background, years of service in church ministry, and various experiences in other organizations.

Synopsis

From a pastoral perspective, Gordon MacDonald set a goal to provide hope for what many churches experienced in the twenty-first century as they navigated a shift in methodology that impacted multiple generations of church members negatively. In his preface, MacDonald

¹ Converge Northwest website, https://www.convergenw.org/files/nw/gordon_and_gail_macdonald_bio_info..pdf
Denver Seminary Department website, <https://denverseminary.edu/about/departments/member/1225351/>

disclosed that the title for this book, *Who Stole My Church?* sprang from a conversation with a man who “felt betrayed by the church he had invested in for most of his adult years” (vii). The fictitious story is told from the vantage of a pastor, as he addressed a group of older adults that were disgruntled because of the changes in their church.

The reader is immersed into the journal of the pastor as he recalled the details of an important year in the life of his transitioning church. A “Discovery Group” was formed by the pastor after a proposal to change the name of the church was not passed in a business meeting (9). The pastor recorded the meetings he had with fifteen long-term members that formed the “Discovery Group” and discussed why the church had considered changing its name, worship styles, and other methodologies of ministry (xxi).

The tension in the story is founded on misunderstood distinctions that existed between “five different generations” within the church (51). The “Discovery Group” gathered and discussed the tension and their convictions. As a means to enlighten the members of the “Discovery Group,” the pastor introduced them to a group of High School students that were part of a youth worship team. Respectful relationships developed between the “Discovery Group” and High School students, which served as an important illustration of acceptance that could be found, despite generational differences.

The pastor also introduced them to several perspectives about human behavior and the process of embracing change. He taught them about the history of worship and the value of “need and opportunity” that create a “vision” to fulfill the “need” (80-1). The “Discovery Group” was also introduced to an evaluation tool called the “Diffusion of Innovations” that caused them to evaluate their willingness to embrace change. The “Discovery Group” meetings proved an

efficient means for the pastor to help the entire church embrace elements of change that were needed for the church to become more effective in the community.

Critical Evaluation

MacDonald wrote *Who Stole My Church?* as a fictional story to identify what could happen to actual churches that experience transitions. He intuitively developed the characters with insight and connected their stories with the story of a church in tension as culture shifted in the twenty-first century. He communicated that his goal was to “deal with the subject from the perspective of some of the people who are powerfully affected by change – the dear people in the pew who have to live with, and even support, the new ways” (ix). Therefore, the reader is immersed into the story to learn how change can be accomplished.

MacDonald also carefully personalized the story. He placed himself as the narrator and included his wife, Gail, in a supportive role that offered insight into his pastoral perspective. Consequently, MacDonald communicated a strong sense of the potential reality of the characters and situations, as it was obvious that years of pastoral ministry afforded MacDonald skills and insight as he developed the story.

Being a work of fiction, MacDonald did not present a list of steps or principles to be followed. Instead, MacDonald applied a different method as he taught. He subtly identified the necessity for people in churches to sympathetically relate to one another. He masterfully developed the characters, their back stories, and related them to relevant current issues that churches face, so the reader learned the value of building sympathetic relationships in the real world.

MacDonald included a section at the end of the book called “Points to Ponder” (229). The “Points to Ponder” addressed each section of the book: the preface, the introduction, and the chapters. The points are intended to be discussed as a group so that a richer understanding of the value of sympathetic relationships within a church body are developed. It is clear that MacDonald intended for the reader to consider the many facets of human behavior and their impact on a church as people struggle with changes in the church.

It is important to note that MacDonald introduced “*The Diffusion of Innovations*, by Everett Rogers” (170). The pastor gave a brief overview of “*The Diffusion of Innovations*” and challenged the members of the “Discovery Group” to evaluate their place on a “bell curve” (170-7). He highlighted a statistic and a few terms that set up key concepts to evaluate a willingness to change. For instance, the pastor stated, “Rogers suggests that there will be about 2.5 percent of the people” who are “innovators,” “people who love, absolutely love, change” (174). The pastor then described other groups that are identified by Rogers and defined terms like “early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards” (175-7).

Through the remainder of the story, the characters evaluated themselves based on Rogers’ terms. Although MacDonald did not say as much, “*The Diffusion of Innovations*” became the point by which characters were enlightened to their entrenched positions against change in their church. As the characters evaluated themselves according to Rogers’ terms, their conversations became more transparent, which increased the willingness of most to change. Utilized in this way, “*The Diffusion of Innovations*” was presented as an effective tool to be applied in real-world conversations as a catalyst for change. Unfortunately, the principles of “*The Diffusion of Innovations*” were underdeveloped in the context of this fictitious work and were an oversimplified application of the information.

Conclusion

MacDonald wove some important truths into this book for the benefit of a pastor or church wrestling with change due to shifts in culture. He delivered on the prominent message that people struggle with change and need their perspective to be understood if they are going to be willing to embrace change. Though the perspectives MacDonald gave were not exhaustive, they offered a good overview and effective starting point for discussion by the reader.

Additionally, the introspective remarks made by the pastor concerning his fears, insecurities, and thought processes offered helpful discussion points. In other words, MacDonald identified what most church members never understand their pastor to be thinking and feeling.

It should be noted that MacDonald is a good student of Scripture and history. He wove Scripture into the work and thus provided insight that was sound biblical counsel for real world issues. He understood important historical elements of the church, especially in the area of worship and offered a valued perspective to the struggle churches experience in “worship wars” (91). Consequently, MacDonald illustrated the inevitability of change through a historical and contemporary perspective and simultaneously identified key biblical principles to guard the process of change.

Who Stole My Church? was not intended to be an instruction manual that provided steps and principles to help a twenty-first century church in transition. The strength of the work is found in how MacDonald, from a pastoral and biblical paradigm, addressed human behavior in light of unavoidable change. The fictitious characters, situations, and perspectives are specific enough to be a good representation of most churches and creatively engaging to encourage dialogue for a group of readers. Therefore, it would benefit a group of people in a church to read it and together consider the “Points to Ponder” in careful conversation.