

## BOOK REVIEW

# **Root, Andrew, and Blair D. Bertrand. 2023. *When Church Stops Working: A Future for Your Congregation beyond More Money, Programs, and Innovation***

Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press  
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Reviewed by Felix Eiffler

Andrew Root and Blair Bertrand wrote a book about the crisis of the Church in the West (especially in the USA). But their identification of the crisis differs from the way the ecclesial crisis in the West is mostly described: it's not primarily about shrinking Church attendance, reduced financial resources or a lack of innovative potential. To highlight those issues (attendance, money, innovation) shows a deeper problem of the Church in the West: it is deeply shaped by the secular age (Chapter 1). To think that a smart ecclesial innovation could help deal with the challenges the Church faces, reveals a secular approach to questions of Church development. The two theologians state that the call for effective ecclesial innovation is already over 50 years old but hasn't changed the Church much for the better. They "do not believe that the cure for the secular age is some kind of new sacred age. That ship has sailed" (13). The cure is also not to fight against secularism, because the danger lies in fighting secularism with secularism. Instead: "If you want a healthy church, you are going to need to imagine a cure that doesn't depend on the secular age" (13). A secular imagination that affects most areas of societal and personal life (and that also affects many churches) is acceleration, and with it comes efficiency. Root and Bertrand identify resonance as the opposite of acceleration (Chapter 2).

The authors suggest "Stop All the Having and Just Be" (Chapter 3). Part of being Church means waiting and this is the even deeper and older crisis of the Church: waiting for God: "A waiting church is waiting for God, waiting for the Spirit to move, and waiting to connect with God. Our crisis becomes the crisis of God's action. As we wait for God's action, we open ourselves to God's arriving by ministering to one another. In humility, we attend to our connections" (50). The church waits for God in

worship and prayer as means for resonance. The Church does this as a community and not as individuals: "This waiting is all about this moment with these people" (55). Root and Bertrand point to the book of Acts, where Jesus calls the Church to wait for God to act (Chapter 4). So, waiting and praying together is basically the essence of being church: "The apostles wait; God acts. ... The apostles act only because God moves them out of their waiting. Yes, they go and do things, and they lead others in doing things, but they always return to waiting" (70). And thus "The stars of this story are God and the world" (74). This removes the church from the center of attention and the position of initial action.

This waiting for God is described by Root and Bertrand as the real crisis of the Church (Chapter 5). Why? Because the Church waits for a living God, she cannot control but is completely depending on God. This is the central idea of the book and thus it is worth a longer quote:

*The real crisis is encountering a living God who is God. God is real. God is God, and we are not. To encounter this real God as humans constitutes a crisis. We've become so focused on the crisis of decline that we deny or push aside the crisis that we are broken and sinful people, a weak church, who are called to wait for the God who is God to act in our midst. We come to think that waiting for a God who is God to act in the world is not a crisis worth our attention. We come to believe that the crisis of encounter with this living God is not something worth capturing our attention. This misguided assumption is the real cancer! (88)*

According to the real crisis of the Church the important questions should be:

*How do we discern God's action? How do we help our people experience, know, and follow this living God who acts? ... How can we help our people encounter the living God in a secular age that blinds them to anything beyond the here and now? (88-9)*

Instead of writing a mission statement the authors suggest finding a watchword (Chapter 6), as a mutual task of a group of believers. A watchword is a "shorthand story of how these people in this moment have witnessed and encountered the living God in the world" (p. 108). A watchword is not static, but dynamic in the sense that it tells a story and helps to remember when and how God acted in a specific time and in this very place. Thus, it is not only about finding a watchword but also clinging to it (chapter 7). At the same time watchwords usually are limited to a certain time, space and group of people, because God and life move on, and a new word is needed. To find it, an ongoing listening is required (chapter 8).

The book makes a bold claim and offers a variety of reasons for it. Some are more profound and convincing than others: the theological reminder that the Church is a spiritual entity and not only a civic endeavor seems reasonable – especially in Western contexts. But a general statement may miss the specific circumstances and challenges of a certain ecclesial context. Although the book contributes a lot of helpful thoughts and insights for the Churches across the globe, it cannot deny its North American origin. This does not reduce the importance of its claims, but it is something the reader should be aware of, because the sketched out minor crises might be different in different contexts. Thus, the observation that the church is deeply shaped by secularism might be true for the Church in the West. Also is ecclesial decline first and foremost a Western phenomenon? Other contexts have other challenges, which the book is not referring to, such as limited civil rights for the Christian minority, discrimination or even persecution or corruption as well as inappropriate political entanglements etc.

In summary: the book offers its readers a critical perspective on the deeper layers of the current ecclesial challenges in particular (secularism) as well as in general (waiting for God to act). Consequently, the book is not only relevant for Western readers.

### **About the Reviewer**

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