Book Review

Steven Emery-Wright


With regularity social media buzzes with posts about the decline of youth attendance in worship services across the US and UK. These posts often revolve around one particular study of qualitative data often missing the voices of the actual young people who worship weekly.1 Building upon his doctoral research, Steven Emery-Wright seeks to address the decline of youth attendance in the Methodist Church in the UK by surveying the attitudes, theology and desires surrounding worship in four Methodist churches in Southwest England. To this research, Emery-Wright adds the views of the attenders and leaders of national youth events providing a snapshot of current experiences of youth in worship.

Describing his methodology, Emery-Wright states, “A qualitative approach was employed that addressed specific contexts, relationships, experiences, and the meanings worship participants gave to symbols and concepts within worship settings.”2 Providing an “inductive understanding” of youth and worship, the author’s topic and research integrates two emerging fields of study—sociology of youth religion and worship studies. His unique contribution is important as most works in the field of youth worship are either of a broad socio-religious contribution such as Religion and Youth or are of practical nature as in Ward’s dated Worship and the Youth Culture or Flannagan’s Distinctive Worship.3

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Section One of the book indicates that many young people are leaving the church in the UK due to the lack of meaningful worship experiences. Emery-Wright’s research reveals that young people desire corporate worship that relates to their culture. His work reveals that some feel traditional worship fails to communicate young people’s passion for God. Many youth who attend national youth events and experience meaningful worship return to their own church to clergy-led worship that feels inauthentic. Responding to these issues, Emery-Wright presents a “conversational contextualising methodology” based on “incarnating and naming the presence of Christ in the young people’s culture.” In his view, young people should be empowered to become collaborators in the planning of weekly worship.

Section Two focuses on youth’s views of specific acts of corporate worship such as song, sermon, prayer and Holy Communion. According to the author, young people desire meaningful services with space to pray, interactive preaching and contemporary worship songs that unite them with their peers and God. Additionally, he highlights that those surveyed often feel that the formal liturgical setting of Eucharist is inauthentic and desire Holy Communion in an informal youth gathering. Interpreting his research, Emery-Wright acknowledges that youth find worship meaningful when it is authentic, interactive and encourages fun with their peers. Young people desire worship to be related to popular youth culture but also recognise that the overall concept of attending church for worship is anti-cultural in contemporary British society. The author concludes this section discussing young people’s view of God and the role of adults, including parents and church leaders, in corporate worship.

In Section Three the author begins by engaging the desires of youth in his studies with critiques of popular culture in music, prayer and preaching presented in works such as Dawn’s *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down*. Emery-Wright argues that young people are not passively engaging with popular culture but allowing some aspects of culture to be challenged. The author also analyses young people’s most commonly used metaphors for God: Father and Friend. After discussing the strengths and weakness of these metaphors, Emery-Wright presents Holy Communion as an experiential way for young people to relate to God without the linguistic challenges.

In the final section, the author investigates how worship can form and strengthen the Christian identity of youth when fun is encouraged, experience is not neglected and liturgy is contextualised. In the concluding critique of various models of engaging youth in worship, Emery-Wright presents that the

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