

BOOK REVIEW

THE COLOR OF CHURCH: A BIBLICAL AND PRACTICAL PARADIGM FOR MULTIRACIAL CHURCHES

BY: RODNEY M. WOO

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Less than seven percent of congregations in the United States are multiracial, and Rodney Woo, pastor of Wilcrest Baptist Church in Houston, Texas, wants this to change. He contends that *all* churches should be reaching across racial and ethnic lines, and *The Color of Church* encourages congregations to move in this direction.

The Color of Church is a companion volume to *People of the Dream* by Michael Emerson. While the two books address the same general topic of multiracial congregations, they differ dramatically. In contrast to the sociological focus of Emerson's book, *The Color of Church* offers a biblical argument for multiracial congregations and gives extended attention to Woo's personal narrative and the story of Wilcrest. Woo's goal is not just to inform, but to persuade. Woo writes with a strong Southern Baptist accent, and this book will resonate best with an evangelical audience.

Woo's racial background and experience give him credibility in addressing his topic. He describes himself as a Chinese-American married to a woman of Mexican descent and has lived in a range of ethnic settings. The heart of his story is tied to his leadership of Wilcrest Baptist Church, which went from being ninety-nine percent Anglo when Woo began as its pastor to becoming a congregation in which forty-four nations are represented and in which no one racial group comprises a majority.

Woo develops a biblical and theological basis for multiracial ministry. Almost every page of this book includes scriptural citations and exposition. Woo engages

much more biblical material than the standard diversity texts like the stories of Babel and Pentecost, the tearing down of walls in Ephesians 2, the call for unity in Ephesians 4, or the equality of Galatians 3. Woven into the biblical sections are stories of Woo's journey with Wilcrest over a fifteen-year period and advice on addressing issues unique to multiracial congregations.

One strength of this book is Woo's development of a "theology of discomfort" as essential for fostering a multiracial congregation. Woo is so committed to this that he once announced to his congregation that the theme for the coming year would be the "Year of Discomfort." In Woo's words, "A multiracial congregation is by nature and definition a place of contrast; this moves us out of our comfort zones and forces us to trust in the God of all peoples" (49). While he is aware that he cannot ask people to move too quickly, he wants people in congregations to expect a certain level of discomfort; he is not interested in making comfort a primary goal of the congregation.

Another strength is Woo's discussion of the two key issues related to becoming multiracial: leadership and worship. Woo argues that multiracial leadership is required in order to validate a congregation's claim that it wants to be multiracial. Diverse leadership is not optional, it is crucial. In relation to worship, Woo discusses the dynamics of music styles, preaching styles, expressive versus quiet worship, language, and time perspectives in multiracial contexts.

Woo's understanding of cultural lenses is limited. Woo argues that because a multiracial setting challenges one's own cultural blinders, a multiracial setting makes it possible to have "a more pure preaching of Scripture" (164). While I indeed hope that each of us will become more aware of our cultural biases, I contend that there is no supra-cultural position we can attain from which to read and preach scripture purely—humans are *always* embedded in culture(s), and thus Woo's desire to "help protect Scripture from cultural bias" (164) needs to be more nuanced.

Woo uses the term “nonwhites” throughout his book. This term makes the racial category of “white” normative, and all other categories are defined in relation to that norm. All distinguishing terms or phrases have their limitations, but terms such as “people of color” avoid the problem of making Anglos the normative set.

Woo frames Wilcrest’s journey as a battle and uses the military idea of rules of engagement to describe aspects of that battle. At one point he talks about “how to use force effectively to accomplish the mission objectives” (164). Given the suffering incurred by people of color in this country as a result of the use of force, as well as Jesus’ model of non-coercive engagement, I find Woo’s language here highly problematic.

These quibbles aside, the stories in *The Color of Church* inspire hope for what can be. The implementation strategies and biblical work provide rich material for congregations to discuss as they seek to reflect the diversity of God’s kingdom.

Rob Muthiah is Professor of Practical Theology and Director of Field Education at the Graduate School of Theology, Azusa Pacific University, Azusa, California

