

Pastor Stef's Book Review – January 2018

It is easy to reduce reality to our own experiences. Have you ever been in a conversation with someone and said something like, “According to the latest scientific journal, over 90% of people diagnosed with prostate cancer survive.” Only to have them respond, “Oh, I don’t know if I believe that, I have a friend at work whose son’s boss had an uncle who died of prostate cancer.” It’s as if one’s experience, even when quite removed, somehow overrules the larger facts.

The same applies to people’s ideas about church. “All Lutherans are hypocrites because my neighbour is a Lutheran and she appears to be a hypocrite.” “All Catholics worship idols because I saw statues in a Catholic church.” “All Baptists are angry fundamentalists because I grew up with a grandpa who was like that.” Even ideas that the church is dying is limited to certain congregations or parts of the world, certainly not to the larger reality of the whole world.

It is for these reasons I make it a discipline to read widely and historically and to make sure that I am accessing credible sources. (i.e. You should always be wary about the health benefits of *Oreo* cookies when it comes from the manufacturer of *Oreo* cookies).

One of the best scholars of church history today, especially in the field of Evangelicalism is **Mark Noll**. In 2011 he and author **Carolyn Nystrom** released ***Cloud of Witnesses: Christian Voices from Africa and Asia (2011)***. The book contains 17 short biographies of now deceased Christian leaders from Africa and Asia in the last 200 years. However, unfortunately only three of the 17 are women due to patriarchal views both religiously and culturally. Of the 17, three of them are from South Africa, two are from West Africa, two from East Africa, three from India, one from Korea, and six are from China. The leaders are an eclectic bunch from a variety of Christian branches with some of them being quite weird (at least, according to me) and not really fitting in anywhere. (Although I realize how “weird” some of the people God used in the Bible were). I’d love to hear people’s opinions on the likes of William Wade Harris and Sundar Singh.

Noll and Nystrom also introduce us to many who endured severe persecution with a few even suffering martyrdom. The book will also challenge our attempts to put God’s people into neat categories of “good guys” and “bad guys”. For example, out of Christian conviction some, like Yao-Tsung Wu supported the Chinese sanctioned *Three-Self Government* churches while others, like Wang Mingdao were against them and became part of the underground church movement.

The stories of these brothers and sisters from around the world are inspiring, uncomfortable and absolutely necessary for the church to see what God is doing beyond our own backyard. Hopefully it will also save us from unhealthy stereotypes and diagnoses like, “All _____ are like _____ because I know a guy who knows a guy who knows a guy who says so.”