

book reviews

Under the Influence: How Christianity Transformed Civilization

Alvin J. Schmidt

Grand Rapids, Michigan:
Zondervan, 2001

[CHRIST] CLIMBED the high mountain, He captured the enemy and seized the booty, He handed it all out in gifts to the people (Ephesians 4:8 *The Message*).

Alvin Schmidt's *Under the Influence* serves as specific and powerful commentary on this text and its context—Ephesians 4:1-16. As the apostle Paul in these verses looks ahead, down the aisle of history, anticipating the impact God's people, faithfully taught and led, would make on the culture around them, so Schmidt looks back up that same aisle two millenniums later to evaluate that impact. Both writers agree that the grace of the Lord Christ working through love cannot help but transform everything it touches. Thus, down through the centuries, faith working through the Savior's love has:

- Amplified the worth of the unborn, the newly born, and children.
- Created conditions in which justice and liberty can thrive.
- Elevated the dignity of marriage and sexuality.
- Transformed the freedoms and self-determination of women.
- Revolutionized attitudes toward the sick, the dying, the weak, the poor.
- Accented a vocational view of work and its significance.
- Provided fertile soil in which science, music, literature, art, and architecture could flourish.

Christianity has indeed transformed civilization, as Schmidt's subtitle claims! Chapter by chapter, overwhelming evidence supporting this contention nearly bludgeons readers into the admission that without the work Christ began and his Christians have continued (Acts 1:1), civilization as we know it would not exist.

No doubt aware of the charges of triumphalism that could easily attach to his work from both academic and theological quarters, Schmidt contextualizes his theses, meticulously documenting them with impeccable sources and carefully attributing the motivation for

the contributions of Christianity to authentic faith in the physical resurrection of the Lord and the forgiveness that flows from his cross and open tomb.

Chapter by chapter, specific facts tumble so rapidly from the pages that reading becomes almost tedious. We begin to feel we've heard it all before. But many of us, indeed perhaps the vast majority of us, have not! And that seems to be Schmidt's very point.

Our society suffers from a collective amnesia in regard to the seed from which the garden of our civilization's compassion, our freedoms, our scientific advances, and our artistic endeavors have sprung. Forgetful of their source, we have fallen little by little into the trap of believing we can continue to harvest the fruit that springs from a sanctified Christian worldview while neglecting the plant that bore it. Painful lessons will likely follow in the wake of this experiment. That is the first take-away from Schmidt's work.

The second challenges all who like to think of ourselves as servant leaders. As we consider the bold and imaginative approaches Christians in other eras have invented and executed to address the needs of the societies in which they lived, so their zeal and creativity should surely rally the same passion and ingenious action in God's people today. Touched by the love of Jesus and empowered by his resurrection, we see and seize opportunities to serve by leading. Service, in and of itself, is important. But only servant leadership will continue the world-changing legacy left by those who have gone before us. May those who come behind us find us faithful!

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Don't Sing Songs to a Heavy Heart

Kenneth Haugk

St. Louis, Missouri:
Stephen Ministries, 2004

KENNETH C. HAUGK is a pastor, clinical psychologist, and the founder and executive director of Stephen Ministries, an organization that trains lay members of congregations to help their fellow Christians in times of crisis.

Don't Sing Songs to a Heavy Heart is written from the perspective of his previous education coupled with insights, hunches, and observations made during his wife's struggle with cancer. The subsequent research project which he undertook to validate his personal impressions involved more than 4,000 participants and resulted in this book dedicated to helping one to become better equipped to walk with people through their valleys of grief.

Dr. Haugk points out that most people really do desire to help rather than hurt their friends and family members when crisis enters their lives. The obstacles that turn well-intentioned actions into painful experiences are numerous. First, most people really desire to fix the *problem* but instead try to fix the *person* by offering solutions to help this individual get past or over the grief. He also indicates that people do not want to face or experience the pain, so they may encourage others to deny theirs, setting up an impression that their pain is either unacceptable or unusual. These actions are hurtful in that the person either experiences additional trauma or tries to deny rather than work through it.

Correctly admonishing us that we are incapable of changing or healing people, the author frequently reminds us that God is the only one capable of that action. What we can do is be with our suffering loved ones. We can listen to them as long as they want to speak. We can cry genuine tears of mutual grief with them. We can sit with them in silence, just letting our presence speak to them of our care and concern. We can bring examples of God working in our own lives to help us when we felt lost and alone. We can even encourage their expressions of anger at God with the acknowledgment that God is indeed in control.

The author offers practical suggestions such as: remembering that people need to rest instead of being inundated by phone calls; recognizing the importance of learning when and how humor can be helpful; and knowing when and which words from God to use at different times. The power of listening rather than talking is offered as an extremely important part of helping rather than hurting. Though a relatively short book, *Don't Sing Songs to a Heavy Heart* is full of good advice and frequent biblical references as well as a reminder of how hurtful clichés are. A reader may already be aware of some parts of the author's presentation. Still,

it is a book written from both the head and the heart, with a passion about a subject that can come only through experience.

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**Transform your Church with
Ministry Teams**

E. Stanley Ott

Grand Rapids, Michigan
William Eerdmans, 2004

CHURCH WORKERS, whether pastor, deaconess, teacher, or director of Christian education, have a common struggle: making volunteer work in the church meaningful for the volunteer. Committees meet once a month, discuss a few issues and go home. A common frustration for the volunteer is that little is accomplished and there is little connection to fellow committee members. Stanley Ott's book, *Transform your Church with Ministry Teams*, attempts to give the professional church worker or lay leader a new perspective on volunteer work. He focuses on philosophy and theory behind volunteer organizations, transitioning these ideas to ministry teams, and nurturing ministry teams through Bible study and fellowship.

The first portion of the book deals with the principles behind the traditional committees and the philosophy behind ministry teams. At first glance, we might be inclined to dismiss ministry teams as a traditional committee thinly veiled with new terminology, but Ott disagrees. He distinguishes ministry teams from traditional committees in that ministry teams include spiritual nurturing and fellowship as part of their purpose for existence. They do not neglect their ministry purposes, but strive to be equally focused on the tasks and the people.

The balance of task and process does not become completely clear until the third section of the book. The primary distinction that Ott makes between traditional committees and ministry teams is the nurturing characteristic

that is foundational for a team. He dedicates the final three chapters to this topic and provides a helpful model for team fellowship and discipleship that can be used in any situation.

In the middle portion of the book, Ott provides many suggestions and insights to developing ministry teams. As a veteran pastor, team coordinator, and author, he has remarkable qualifications in developing teams and fills this section with anecdotal stories and reflections on his personal experiences. He is decidedly optimistic about the transition process including the recruitment and development of leadership for the teams and identification of team members. The text includes practical methods for skeptical readers to quietly integrate into their ministry without completely restructuring a more resistant congregation. Among his quiet integration tactics are modeling ministry team principles by paid and professional staff of the congregation. Ott suggests that the staff is the first place to initiate the transition.

The book is geared specifically towards those who are ready to make the transition from traditional volunteer committees to a ministry team emphasis. Readers that are interested in developing a volunteer service that extends beyond completing tasks and contributes to personal and spiritual development can draw from Ott's models and experiences. If the reader is well read on the topic of ministry teams, Ott's book could seem to be a mere repetition of the other literature on the topic. However, his analysis of this particular aspect of volunteer work is clear, concise, and potentially helpful to any church worker or lay leader who serves on or with committees or wishes to develop new ministry teams.

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