

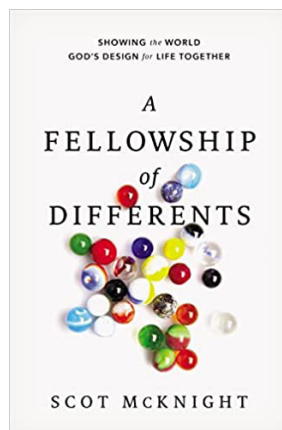
A Fellowship of Differents: Showing the World God's Design for Life Together

by Scot McKnight

Zondervan, 2014. 265 pages.

Reviewed by William Jackson

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If you want to read a book about healthy church without the latest church planting methodologies and lingo, then *A Fellowship of Differents* by Scot McKnight is the book for you. McKnight emphasizes the importance of the local church and how the church should shape the people within it (12). Throughout the book he asks, "What is the church supposed to be?" and, "If the church is what it is supposed to be, what does the Christian life look like?" (12). The goal of this book is to persuade the reader that the local church is meant to be comprised of a variety of people from different social backgrounds who are enthusiastic about loving one another and fulfilling Christ's mission in the Spirit's power (14).

McKnight is a world-renowned New Testament scholar and seminary professor at Northern Seminary in the United States.¹ His writing style is engaging, humorous, biblical, and deeply practical. McKnight has a passion for local churches being comprised of different peoples and viewpoints, something many American churches sorely miss out on (20). This is a goal which church planters could agree with wholeheartedly.

Summary of Content

McKnight introduces the book by sharing from his personal church experience as a child and teenager. He shares that his church primarily instructed its members on what not to do or believe in (12).

In contrast to his experience growing up, McKnight suggests the church should be like a perfect salad—full of different “toppings” thoroughly mixed together (14).² The apostle Paul’s typical house church would have had around 30 people from diverse backgrounds (skilled, non-skilled workers, slaves, owners, homeless people, women, men, young, old, migrants, and so forth; 14-15).

The following six parts describe ways the local church can be a successful fellowship of “differents.”

Part One: Grace

McKnight highlights that God the Father loves the Son and sent the Spirit to help us love one another (33). Romans 8:31–39 clearly states that God is for his people and that this social experiment called “the church” will be supported by God (36). Grace places us in the “mixed salad” with others and encourages us to live “in Christ” together (39), knowing that transformation is the slow work of grace spreading in his

1 <https://www.seminary.edu/faculty/scot-mcknight/>

2 This analogy will either confuse people or be entirely new to people who are not familiar with a lettuce-based salad common in America. In South Asia, this example would not be helpful, since “salad” typically means one to three cut up vegetables as a side dish alongside a main meal.

body (40). Believers must rely on this grace in order for the “fellowship of different” to thrive and be a shining testimony to others (40).

Part Two: Love

In typical McKnight fashion, he says that love is a great idea until you are put into a position to love someone unlike you (52). He highlights the fact that love is a rugged commitment which does not deny emotions but reorders them (53). Because God wants his church to be a fellowship of different, we must regularly love people unlike us (63). Paul demonstrated such love as he worked and labored with diverse types of people in planting churches (Rom. 16). Lastly, love shares resources with others. We are to serve the church generously not only through our finances but also through our time, emotions, and talents (79).

Part Three: Table

Jesus prayed his disciples would live in unity and be known for this by outsiders (John 17:21). McKnight highlights the fact that the American church deeply struggles with individualism which flows into the life of the church. We commonly ask, “What are MY gifts?” and “What is God teaching ME?” rather than asking collectively “What are OUR gifts?” and “What is God teaching US?” (91).

When we sit down at the table for a meal, we ought to accept each other’s differences and dwell upon our collective nature instead of our individual rights (95). In my time in South Asia, I have seen people eating at the same table as a display of honor to one’s guest as well as a symbol of peace between parties. Believers who previously have conflict will not eat together, but when the conflict is resolved between them, they are ready to partake in a meal together.

Table fellowship is seen in the Eucharist, the meal commemorating Christ’s death for our sins (99). In the Eucharist, McKnight points out, we worship God as we reflect upon the gospel, which should lead us to unity (103). This unity is something all believers need to be reminded of regularly.

Part Four: Holiness

Believers in this fellowship of differentials also pursue holy lives together. In the same way McKnight believes church members should be free from the bondage of sin, he believes all should be free from the oppression of discrimination against gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic status (141-142). He longs for the church to be a holy community that encourages each member to freely practice their God-given gifts. McKnight believes that if the church does not allow people to use their spiritual gifts within the church, such people are living in bondage. If we do not want people in bondage to sin, why should we ourselves put them in bondage?

Part Five: Newness

In the fifth section of the book, McKnight reminds us the church is to love our neighbor well while being free from cultural expectations placed on us (156). Distinctives of faithful churches include the following: they are Scripture-led (169), Spirit-led (170), mission-led (173), and lay-led (175). These kinds of churches are to be different from the governments in the countries they live in. They are to speak up in times of need and follow the rules of the land, and yet their main allegiance is to King Jesus. From my observations of churches in America and South Asia, such churches do exist. They are often resolute in their commitment to Jesus but gentle in their demeanor and influential among their neighbors.

Part 6: Flourishing

The concluding section seeks to encourage the church to flourish in a "salad bowl" fellowship of differentials (191). The only way to do this is to live by the power and direction of the Holy Spirit (192-193). One of my favorite chapters is "Pete the Mechanic," where McKnight talks about flourishing in the jobs God has given us (211). Too often people believe "real ministry" takes place only within the church, but that is not true. McKnight reminds us that through the tentmaking examples of Paul and others, the church was built. In a line that should be oft repeated,

McKnight says, “We are called to flourish in the life we’re given, not in the life we’re not given” (213).

Evaluation

McKnight’s book on the church is filled with simplicity and beauty. His calling to be a flourishing fellowship of different is one a polarized world needs to hear regularly. There are many areas where this fellowship of different could be especially challenging for church planters serving in contexts different from McKnight’s American church context.

Muslim / Hindu Mixed Fellowship

McKnight’s ideas might face challenges in contexts where Muslims and Hindus co-exist. For example, in the country of Bangladesh, most Christians are from a Hindu background and choose to use religious language Hindus feel comfortable with. For Muslims entering into such a church, this feels uncomfortable to them. Ideally, such Hindu Background Believers (HBBs) would recognize this and seek to live out Paul’s methods of contextualization in 1 Cor. 9:19–23. If one is church planting in this context, he or she should expect significant challenges integrating former Muslims and Hindus together. They would need extra prayer and thoughtfulness to see this flourish, especially in areas where one religion is the clear majority and persecution of other religious groups has been a norm. Building trust between the two groups will take considerable time.

High Power-Distance Cultures

It is true the early church saw a mixture of socio-economic groups worshipping together, but this does not mean it is not a challenge in high power-distance cultures today. Power distance makes it difficult for people to be emotionally and relationally close to one another if there are perceived distances between them (Hofstede 2010, 54). In South Asian MBB (Muslim Background Believers) churches I know, the poor and low-to-middle class people integrate more than the overall broader culture, which is more segregated. However, we often see leaders

in these mixed-class churches cling to power and fail to empower others “below” them. Often their followers do not have the freedom to question the leader’s decision, causing frustration among lay members in churches. Teaching on servant leadership and encouraging multiple leaders from diverse backgrounds in high power-distance cultures is necessary.

Homogeneous Unit Principle (HUP)

Church Growth theorists such as Donald McGavran have used the HUP as a term to describe church planting as most effective when working within one ethno-linguistic people group. This principle carries a lot of weight in missiological circles, but within the last decade, missiologists have argued for a more heterogenous approach to church planting (Corwin 2014), which McKnight tacitly approves of throughout this book. Because all ethnicities can fall into the sinful trap of believing they are better than others, a heterogeneous church could aid in ensuring no one ethnicity is the dominating group within a church. I think there is a biblical basis for church planters to work towards the type of heterogenous church McKnight describes (Rev. 5:5-7). If we should only focus on planting churches that are purely homogeneous, then it is ironic that missiologists sometimes emphasize multi-ethnic church planting teams. If we advocate for the latter, perhaps we should seek to plant heterogenous churches as well.

Relevance for the Practitioner

Church planters need to remember the basics of healthy church, and this book encourages us in that direction. Fellowship of Differents is useful for those seeking to be reinvigorated by a large vision for what the church can be. For those serving in areas where there are few to no believers, this book might have less immediate relevance. However, such frontier situations inherently require missionaries to build the kind of discipleship community McKnight encourages, one where people from different genders, ethnicities, and socio-economic backgrounds

can feel equally welcomed. Throughout the book, McKnight focuses on encouraging the lay person to love the diverse people(s) among them. In countries where one's social status carries significant weight, they will need to work especially hard to implement the lessons McKnight writes about. Thankfully, such a diverse group of fellow Christ-worshippers existed within the first few decades after Christ's departure to heaven (15).

People who are looking for either a church polity or the latest church-planting practices might be disappointed with this book. However, *Fellowship of Differents* is not meant to teach people how to run a perfect worship service on Sundays, what church government structure should be in place in a local church, or the roles of men and women in ministry. Instead, McKnight urges local churches themselves to work out these issues rather than prescribe them for all churches. This is a tremendously important lesson for church planters to teach those they are discipling and mentoring as they learn to lead their own local church.

Recommendation

I recommend this book as a source of refreshment for those who may be accustomed to reading "how to" church-planting books. It paints a simple picture of the beauty and simplicity of the gospel and the local church. Living a life of grace, love, and fellowship amid different people is a powerful testimony to the world.

One personal takeaway from this book is the importance of table fellowship—enjoying hospitality with others as a means of building relationship and bonds within Christ's body. A second takeaway is the need to empower others in the church, especially women and those in less privileged positions economically. Church planters need reminders to live out such biblical and practical principles in the various contexts they find themselves living in. Books like these remind me anew of the beauty of God's church, a community where different people gather to worship the living Lord Jesus.

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