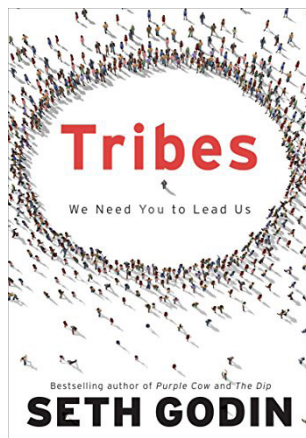


Tribes: We Need You to Lead Us

By Seth Godin. Penguin Publishing Group, 2008. 152 pages.

Reviewed by William Connor

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A graduate of Tufts University and Stanford Graduate School of Business, Seth Godin is an entrepreneur, leadership and marketing guru, and author known for his blogs and various published titles.¹ Godin defines a tribe as “a group of people connected to one another, connected to a leader, and connected to an idea,” such that “a shared interest and a way to communicate” qualifies a group for tribal identity (1). He highlights the idea of relational reciprocity as tribes and leaders need one another, while leadership fulfills a tribe’s desire for connection, growth, and change (ibid). Godin writes for those “who choose to lead a tribe,” as modern leadership is easier than ever with

1 Some of Godin’s published titles include *Purple Cow* (2005), *The Dip* (2007), *Linchpin* (2011), *The Practice* (2020), and *The Song of Significance* (2023). More can be learned at his personal website (sethgodin.com) and The Famous People site (thefamouspeople.com/profiles/seth-godin-2833.php).

venues for broad, immediate communication and influence—leadership is now a choice (5, 8).

While not from a Christian perspective, *Tribes* informs disciple making and cross-cultural leadership. It gives perspective to why workers might establish a business as mission (BAM) presence in our respective host countries or audaciously live as “extreme users” of our visas.² It lends credibility to “filtering for the faithful” in church-planting movements, and informs our need to communicate the gospel with cultural relevance.

This short, quick read resembles a chapter-less string of interwoven blog posts that engage themes familiar to missional leadership such as identity and belonging, faith and innovation, the status quo and leading change, communication and influencing people, passion and vision, movements and motivation, and resistance and perseverance.³ While I found these topics informative, nothing piqued my interest more than “the heretic.”

“Heretic” is a striking term. It generates strong emotion and triggers post-traumatic stress. As a natural reflex, folks in ecclesial and missional circles balk at the word, and for good reason. It invokes thoughts of false teachings in faith circles, unorthodoxy in religious traditions, boat rockers, red-flag raisers, and recipients of justified Old Testament stoning. Yet Jesus was a kind of heretic in his time and context, and they killed him for it!

Godin uses some form of “heretic” or “heretical” fifty-nine times in *Tribes*. “Heretics are the new leaders,” he says,

The ones who challenge the status quo, who get out
in front of their tribes, who create movements. The
marketplace now rewards (and embraces) the heretics.
It’s clearly more fun to make the rules than to follow

2 I speak here in design-thinking terms.

3 The book has no formal chapters, but rather a long list of subheadings, which are listed in the Table of Contents.

them, and for the first time, it's also profitable, powerful, and productive to do just that (11).

What is “Heresy”?

Merriam-Webster defines heresy as, “Dissent or deviation from a dominant theory, opinion, or practice” (2023). The *Illustrated Dictionary of the Bible* defines it as, “false doctrine, or teaching which denies one of the foundational beliefs of the church, such as the Lordship or deity of Jesus” (Lockyer 1986, 475). In the New Testament, heretics deceived the church with false claims (2 Cor. 11:13) and included Gnostics who denied the deity of Christ (1 John 2:22; Lockyer 1986, 475). Godin also notes the Council of Trent in 1515 which prohibited the consumption or possession of heretical books, the penalty being excommunication (84).

It is important to recognize the difference between heretics in Scripture and the secular business heretics Godin discusses. In faith circles, religious heresy is a serious charge that called for death in Old Testament times and in some cross-cultural contexts today. There is a difference between pushing to change fundamental tenets of a sacred faith and challenging the status quo of outdated systems and traditions with innovation and justice.

“Heretics” in *Tribes*: A Synthesis

The “heretic” in *Tribes* inspires further discussion. Throughout his book, Godin considers the heretic related to various terms: status quo, leverage, fear, contemporary heretics, risk, and the need for leadership.

Heretics Challenge the Status Quo

Martin Luther challenged the status quo (49). Such leaders take risks when others want to see them fail (42), know on what they can't compromise (79–80), make strong commitments (10–11, 49), and cause a

shift in mindset (10–11). They may experience satisfaction and happiness in their work (10–11, 49, 69), but may experience isolation and fear (69).

Heretics Leverage Change

Nowadays, heretics who form tribal connections can lead groups to reach their goals with ease (11–12). In 1967, Jim Delligatti leveraged his role as a McDonald's franchisee by inventing the Big Mac, which went global within twelve months and benefitted the entire company (75). However, modern times do not require a well-positioned franchise owner or corporate executive, but empower grassroots leaders who lead change (75).

Heretics Must Be Fearless

Fearlessness captures the quality of a successful heretic (42). When challenging the status quo, such fearlessness mitigates the potential of sacrifice, and loss of reputation and creature comforts (42). Drive and purpose override fear (42–43).

Heresy Requires Faith

Without faith, heretical leadership is suicidal (79–80). Godin says, "Heretics must believe" (49, emphasis original). Steve Jobs believed. He didn't live for the paycheck but challenged the status quo, dared to be great, and was "truly present" (49). In rock-climbing terms, kids who learn the "dyno" technique jump from one hold to the next. They learn that the technique is more about cultivating faith and less about strength and skill (79–80).

Persevering for Culture Change

It takes faith and perseverance to lead change, and such change relies on the emergence of a new culture to sustain and define it. It's breaking free from old religious systems and forming new ones (82–84, 130). Outside-the-box thinking creates new boxes (82–83). Heretical leaders

need a tribe of like-minded people and resources to sustain their faith toward change (82–83). Change agents must persevere amidst the doubt of competent, successful people who are skeptical about the viability of new ideas, such as Microsoft’s early opinion of Google and Facebook (92). Godin writes,

What’s hard now is breaking the rules. What’s hard is finding the faith to become a heretic; to seek out an innovation and then, in the face of huge amounts of resistance, to lead a team and to push the innovation out the door into the world. (130)

The Time is Now!

Heretics are today’s leaders (72). According to Godin, the cost of being a heretic today is minimal compared to the days of old. He says they are no longer martyred but elected to office, take their companies public, find fortune, and are celebrated (69–70, 108).

Heretics Take Risks

Back to rock climbing, Godin refers to Chris Sharma who didn’t invent the dyno jump but has pushed it forward. It was “risky” and “controversial” at first; now others have adopted the technique (76–77). Chris fits the stereotype of a typical heretic—a risk-taking loner who does absurd things, risks his life, and fails often (77–78). Obe Carrion is another risk-taking rock climber who decided to just run up the wall during a competition. By doing this, he bypassed early challenges of the climb that befuddled other climbers—he “leaned into” the problem and it went away (78). The risk of challenging the status quo these days is minimal—have faith, cast your vision, and go for it—and “people will follow” (108).

Contemporary Examples about Heretical Leadership

Godin describes several examples of contemporary heretics. In one example from the music business, Godin notes that competent music

industry leaders lacked the initiative to hire change agents with the vision in hand to lead the transition from CDs into the future—the ideas were there but nobody pulled the trigger (92–93, 95–96). A second example involves Jerry Sternin who went to Vietnam to solve a hunger problem. He found women whose babies were thriving and gave them a venue to share their wisdom with others. Instead of solving an inside problem with an outside solution, Jerry leveraged the thriving heretics of the bunch who already had the answers and gave them a voice. The problem was alleviated internally (133–34). Other examples highlight empowerment, trying new things for wider influence, and risking honesty.

Interaction and Response

I wrestle with the term “heretic” because it invokes historical punishment for those who deviated from orthodox Christian thinking. I disagree with Godin who says those days are gone. While it is true that through today’s business culture and modern technology, heretics can amass a following, fellow Christians are facing deadly persecution in isolated pockets around the world because of their deviant religious views. I do not want to make light of this reality.

In my thematic synthesis of *Tribes*, I have focused more on the heretical leader than on the important theme of tribes, due to its critical relevance to our work. Godin’s heretical leader informs how cross-cultural workers lead on the field and engage unreached people toward following Christ. As “missional heretics” in our contexts, God has called us to challenge the status quo, live in faith and fearlessness, persevere, seize the day, take initiative, and empower others as we collect and connect with tribes of people who share our interests in advancing God’s kingdom.

Jesus was a missional heretic who fearlessly challenged the status quo (John 10:22–42), took the initiative to gather a group of followers (Matt. 4:18–22), invested in his followers (Luke 22:7–38) and empowered them to carry on a shared vision (Matt. 28:18–20; John 21:15–25). Before Jesus

gave his life as a missional heretic (John 18–19), John the Baptist gave his life for the same shared vision (Mark 6:14–29). After Jesus' ascension, Stephen bore the ultimate temporal reward (Acts 7) as did James the brother of John (Acts 12:1–3). Modern-day examples include Graham Staines and his sons in the late 1990's along with others around the world throughout history who have similarly shared in this fellowship of Christ's sufferings (Phil. 3:10).

Other biblical heretics who may not have experienced death for their heresy, but met successful outcomes, include Abraham who by faith followed the Lord's instruction even though he did not know where he was going (Heb. 11:8–10), Jacob who seized the day and snatched Esau's birthright (Gen. 25:29–34; 27:1–46), Joseph who persevered (Gen. 37–50), Rahab's risk (Heb. 11:31), Elijah's fearlessness with the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18), Daniel and his friends who remained obedient despite the threat of death (Dan. 3, 6), and Solomon's innovative request for wisdom (1 Kings 3:1–15). Coupled with Godin's reflections, these biblical examples give us a foundation for leading change in our tribes and for recruiting harassed and helpless people looking for a shepherd (Matt. 9:35–38).

Cross-cultural workers are not unlike Godin's heretic. We assume roles and identities in our missional contexts according to our calling, training, and skill sets. BAM heretics take intentional, persevering steps to establish and sustain a legitimate presence in a country of service. They seek to maintain visa integrity while blessing a community with jobs and services while also being kingdom salt and light. True BAM is that slow burn, the little bit of yeast that can significantly influence a local culture for Jesus but requires hard work and patience.⁴

4 Other workers acquire business visas without the skills or drive to run a business, which makes them "extreme users" of business visas in a way not intended by the issuing authorities. Yet they take that risk and may face tensions of identity and scrutiny. Other gospel-minded workers are "extreme users" of tourist visas, pushing the limits of visa terms to make permanent residence.

One church planting concept that feels heretical to me is sometimes called “filtering for the faithful.” The idea is to sift through groups of Christian leaders and invest only in those who consistently practice activities learned in CPM trainings. I have wrestled with the practice as it elevates the evangelist and apostle, ignores the giftings and callings of other faithful leaders, and minimizes the spiritual gift of pastor-teacher. Yet, a missional heretic might make such stone-hearted decisions in the same spirit that Jesus said to wipe the dust from your feet of those who do not welcome you (Luke 10:10-12).

Gone are the days of transmitting the gospel through colonial structures and superior postures. Now are the days of humble incarnations, learning postures, and relational engagement. Missional heretics who learn about their receiving culture before imposing our theological worldviews may meet resistance. Uninformed skeptics may naturally assume we are engaging in extreme forms of contextualization and are compromising the integrity of the gospel. Therefore, it is imperative that our methodologies employ a robust hermeneutic and critical contextualization that avoids erecting conduits for syncretism and false teaching (Hendricks 2007; Hiebert, Shaw, and Tienou 1999).

Conclusion

Tribes informs disciple making and cross-cultural leadership in various ways. Godin’s “heretic” resonates with Jesus’ life and ministry and other biblical examples. It also gives perspective and credibility to practices such as BAM, “filtering for the faithful,” and the need for humble, culturally-relevant communication.

Several questions remain. What about our brothers and sisters from Global South cultures, where standing out as a heretic will get a person hammered down quickly? How does shame, honor, and patronage play into this conversation? How do heretics leverage missional change and kingdom advancement in communal cultures? How do we motivate those stuck in the status quo to join our tribes or lead tribes themselves?

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