

Smith, Gordon T. *Wisdom From Babylon: Leadership for the Church in a Secular Age*, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2020.

By Mike Mawhorter, DMN

The Church in North America is undergoing a seismic shift. Christianity has enjoyed a privileged place in society for generations, but that is changing. Christianity is becoming increasingly marginalized, ignored by a large and growing segment of society, and even viewed by many as a negative force in an increasingly secular culture. The church also has not escaped this shift to the secular: “unwittingly we have drunk the water and breathed the air; rather than Christianity maintaining a presence in a secular society, secularity has infiltrated the church.” (17)

How does the church shift to be faithful and effective in a society that is thoroughly secular, less receptive to our voice, and increasingly hostile? How do we prepare leaders who can effectively reach people for Christ and help them become mature, transformed followers of Jesus? What competencies will they need to develop and what spiritual dispositions do they need to cultivate? How should the church respond to culture? How does it take advantage of the new opportunities secularity brings? Where does it turn for wisdom?

Gordon T. Smith has written a helpful, hopeful and timely book asking the critical questions of how churches should respond in the current culture, and what it means to provide leadership for the church in an increasingly secular context. This book is well researched enough for use in an academic setting but is readable enough for a general audience. It would be an excellent resource for church staffs and boards, as well as denominational leaders. Especially helpful is a five-page bibliography: “Essential Reading List for Leading the Church in a Secular Age,” that is organized by topic.

Smith begins the book by describing the increasing secularity of society, where “religion is privatized, no longer occupying a privileged voice in the public square” (7). He believes that this growing secular mindset is the most significant development of the last fifty to sixty years. His primary focus is on the church in places such as North America, Australia and New Zealand, “those cultures and societies that are in the midst of the shift to a secular society (on the assumption that most of Europe has already made the shift)” (3).

Part One takes a novel approach to exploring this issue by first suggesting four possible responses to a secular culture. It then looks at four sources of wisdom from contexts where the people of God have been in the minority. It then goes back to apply that wisdom to the four responses initially outlined. Part Two moves the focus to the training of leaders for this changing reality by looking at the competencies and dispositions needed for effectively leading the church forward.

The first question that the church needs to address is how to respond to a thoroughly secular culture. Smith references Richard Niebuhr's five distinctive responses from his *Christ and Culture*: Christ Against Culture, Christ of Culture, Christ Above Culture, Christ and Culture in Paradox, and Christ the Transformer of Culture.

Inspired and encouraged by the five responses, Smith suggests four options for how Christians and churches respond to culture.

- The “Go Along to Get Along” response - where Christians accept the secularity of their culture and compartmentalize their lives into church activities and the rest of life, thus privatizing their faith.
- The Monastic Response - retreating as much as possible from the culture and building a wall of protection between it and the Christian community.
- The Culture Wars response - battling culture to try to preserve Christian values, principally through the courts, schools, and legislatures.
- The Response of “Faithful Presence” - choosing to be in but not of the culture, recognizing and leveraging the opportunities this new reality brings.

Chapters 3-6 explore four potential sources of wisdom to help inform the church's response, in particular sources of wisdom for those giving leadership to its cultural reality. These are all contexts in which the people of God were in the minority and either marginalized or threatened.

The first (Ch. 3) is wisdom from Babylon, Judah's exile and subsequent return to the land still under the control of the Babylonian and Persian empires. Smith notes that the experience of the people of Judah was different from the contemporary experience because the exile was traumatic and involved a forced migration from their homes. But there is much the contemporary church can learn from the exile

experience as a minority presence and from the writings of the prophets during that time. It demonstrates how it is possible to survive and thrive in a hostile environment. The consistent messages from the prophets that can help in our contemporary situation are the need to remember the glory of God who judges humanity and demonstrates mercy, the importance of sustaining a distinctive identity as the people of God, and the need to speak hope against the backdrop of lament.

The second source of wisdom (Ch. 4) comes from the Early Church, specifically the period from the death of the original apostles through the sixth century, during which time the church transitioned from a minority faith in a context of pluralism and paganism to official religion. Particular attention is given to Ambrose of Milan and Augustine of Hippo. Smith highlights three areas of wisdom from this period: learning how the church can engage society, speak truth to power, and seek the common good, initiate people into faith and the church through the catechumenate, and cultivate a trinitarian interiority.

The third source of wisdom (Ch. 5) looks at Historic Minority Churches, especially churches in places like Japan, China, India and Egypt, where they have wrestled with being a minority voice for centuries. In spite of significant diversity among historic minority churches, there are common lessons to be learned from them. The first is that they relate to other religions without defensiveness or demonization, intentionally taking a generous attitude toward their majority faith neighbors and working with them in seeking the common good. Second, they resist withdrawing from society and find ways to bring Christianity into the social, political, economic, and cultural arenas to promote healthy dialogue, seeking to be salt and light. Lastly, the Minority Church teaches us what it means to be a suffering church, without losing hope.

The fourth source of wisdom (Ch. 6) is Secular Europe, where the church has already gone through what other Western regions are currently experiencing. Smith focuses on three authors from post-Christian Europe: Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Jacques Ellul and Lesslie Newbigin. They emphasize that instead of retreating from the world, the church needs to find ways to coexist and thrive in a secular society, “foster a vibrant Christian maturity” (96), and participate in society while retaining its distinctive identity.

At the end of Part One (Ch. 7), Smith takes what can be learned from these four sources of wisdom and applies it to the four responses to secularity introduced in Chapter 2. Smith highlights positive and negative aspects to each response. He keys off Jeremiah's letter to the exiles (Jer 29), advising them to actively engage their society, seek the peace and prosperity of their city, pray for it, and seek the LORD with all their heart.

Part Two examines three capacities and dispositions that are needed to provide effective leadership in a secular society. First, Liturgical Leadership (Ch. 8) emphasizes corporate worship, engages the Triune God, and maintains the distinctive identity as the people of God. Second, Catechetical Leadership (Ch. 9), focuses on the church as a teaching-learning community, where every believer is led to grow. Third, Missional Leadership (Ch. 10), leads the church to reach out to their world through word and deed, as a means of God's redemptive grace.

Smith also considers two dispositions for leaders in a secular context. The first (Ch. 11) posits that to thrive in a secular society requires an ecumenical mindset. Smith sees more unified cooperation as a practical necessity. No congregation or denomination can do it all. Churches and denominations need each other. "This will require a theological formulation of what it means to affirm unity and diversity around a common confession" (159). And finally, Cultivating Interiority (Ch. 12) recognizes that grace and courage are needed to be present in the world. Living, working and serving the Lord in a constant state of flux requires the church to be anchored in the person of the risen and ascended Christ.

This book is insightful and a couple of concepts were especially thought provoking. In his chapter on Cultivating the Capacity for Liturgical Leadership (Ch. 8), Smith argues for locating preaching and worship "within the sequence of the historic church calendar" (121). For someone who has spent his entire life and ministry in a non-liturgical setting, the church calendar, aside from Advent and Lent, has never been significant for me. I was convicted by Smith's assertion: "It should strike us as strange when a church community gives more attention to Valentine's Day and Mother's Day than it does to Pentecost" (121). He argues that a calendar gives structure and orientation to life, and the church calendar centers God's people in the Jesus story.

Also thought provoking was Smith’s emphasis on restoring the catechumenate. He writes: “We urgently need to recover the vital place of catechesis – best defined simply as ‘religious instruction.’ This is not just any teaching but specifically teaching in the faith that fosters spiritual growth toward maturity in Christ” (55). Smith also argues that the “church can thrive in a secular world only if the Christian community is nothing less than a school of lifelong learning toward wisdom in Christ” (127).

While I wholeheartedly agree with both the need and the priority of lifelong learning in the faith, my concern is in instituting catechesis for initiation into the church. The New Testament church emphasized continued growth in the knowledge of Christ, but believers were immediately initiated into the church community through conversion and baptism, even when converted from paganism. Growth in grace and knowledge was a lifelong endeavor, but within the context of the church community. This seems most consistent with the concept of the church as the family of God. Newborns enter the family when most immature and vulnerable and grow to maturity within the context of family. The early church moved away from the New Testament model by instituting the catechumenate, where converts were expected to reach a certain level of maturity before being baptized and integrated into the church family. This may have provided some protection from error, but it could be argued that it also resulted in a loss of vitality. I would prefer to see converts brought into the church family as early as possible, while cultivating the emphasis on continual growth and maturity.

Wisdom From Babylon: Leadership for the Church in a Secular Age a valuable resource for effective ministry in a secular context. Smith’s approach of looking for wisdom from historical and contemporary settings where the Church finds itself a minority voice, then applying that wisdom to the contemporary response to culture is enlightening and helpful.

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