

Northern Landmark Missionary Baptist

News and Views of Interest to the BMA Movement

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“Blue Like Jazz” - Emergent Church Spirituality

BOOK REVIEW

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“Blue Like Jazz - Nonreligious Thoughts on Christian Spirituality” by Donald Miller, published in 2003, is advertised on the cover as a “New York Times Bestseller - More Than One Million Copies Sold.”

The Christian Broadcasting Network has said, “**Donald Miller is a best-selling author and sought-after speaker on the Christian circuit. His 2003 memoir ‘Blue Like Jazz’ (Thomas Nelson) has become one of the most influential books on Christian spirituality in the last decade.**”

The book carries the endorsement of Brian McLaren, today’s leading Emergent Church theologian.

This is not a book of Emergent Church theology as such - for the latest thinking on that subject, the reader may want to consult the book “Velvet Elvis” by Rob Bell, which was reviewed unfavorably in the April, 2009 issue of this paper.

“Blue Like Jazz” is a book about Emergent Church spirituality, as represented in the rambling, stream-of-consciousness autobiographical reminiscences of the author. He spends a good part of the 242 pages gloating about what a wonderful time he had drinking, smoking, doing drugs, using foul language and ogling pictures of naked ladies. For the most part, he does not make it clear whether these experiences took place before or after his conversion, or whether these activities are something to be proud of or to feel guilty about.

To his credit, he admits in theory that we have some things in our lives that need to be repented of: **“I think every well-adjusted human being has dealt squarely with his or her own depravity. I realize this sounds very Christian, very fundamentalist**

and browbeating, but I want to tell you this part of what the Christians are saying is true. I think Jesus feels strongly about communicating the idea of our brokenness.” (p. 23)

Unfortunately, Miller does a poor job, in a book supposedly about Christian spirituality, of letting us know what sins he thinks we should be “broken” about. He gives the impression that almost anything is permissible in the life of the emergent Christian.

On page 7 he gushes about the joy he experienced as a child when he perused the pages of a porno magazine for the first time: **“Before I had requested a reason to live, one had been delivered: naked women.”** Does Miller now see that appreciation for porno as a permissible thing or as something to be repented of? A good editor would have insisted that Miller explain himself on that issue. He never does.

On page 32 Miller brings up the possibility that the Genesis creation story might not be taken literally: **“Without the Christian explanation of original sin, the seemingly silly story about Adam and Eve, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, there was no explanation of conflict. At all. Now some people process the account of original sin in the book of Genesis as metaphor, as symbolism for something else that happened; but whether you take it metaphorically or literally, this serves as an adequate explanation of the human struggle that every person experiences.”**

Miller never tells us whether he takes Genesis “metaphorically” or “literally.” Perhaps that is for the best.

On page 79 Miller tells us **“I was a fundamentalist Christian once.”** He equates fundamentalism with no television, pipe smoking, or music, and with daily Bible reading, memorization and prayer.

For Miller, emergent spirituality includes living in the inner city (in his

case, Portland, Oregon) and feeding the so-called “poor.” I have no problem with the part about living in the inner city, but I have a big problem with feeding the poor or “homeless,” since Miller admits that the people they are so sanctimoniously feeding are actually drunks, or winos. He does not deal with Paul’s teaching about not feeding those who refuse to work (2 Thessalonians 3:10) or the law of Moses stating that the wino lifestyle is under God’s curse and to be punished by the death penalty, Deuteronomy 21:20-21. I don’t perceive any special merit or “brownie points” to be gained with God, by subsidizing the wino lifestyle that God says is under His curse.

On page 131 he deals with the fascination of the Christian Right with the Republican Party: **“Another thing about the churches I went to: They seemed to be parrots for the Republican Party. Do we have to tow [sic] the party line on every single issue? Are the Republicans that perfect? I just felt like, in order to be a part of the family, I had to think George W. Bush was Jesus. And I didn’t. I didn’t think that Jesus really agreed with a lot of the politics of the Republican Party or for that matter the Democratic Party. I felt like Jesus was a religious figure, not a political figure. . . . I felt like, by going to this particular church, I was a pawn for the Republicans. Meanwhile, the Republicans did not give a crap about the causes of Christ.”**

Miller may have a bit of a legitimate gripe here. 2003 was the year that Bush invaded Iraq, and some fundamentalist churches at that time demanded total, unquestioning support for Bush and for his war against a country that had no weapons of mass destruction, no yellow-cake uranium, and no connection whatsoever with 9/11 or Al-Qaeda.

The disillusionment of Miller and his college friends with Bush and his Iraq war is understandable. But after reading "Blue Like Jazz," I am not convinced that the Emergent churches were any more tolerant of supporters of Bush and the war, than the fundamentalists were of those who opposed them. By Miller's own admission, the Emergents were just as guilty of mixing religion with their own polarizing brand of politics.

On page 133 he endorses a church in Seattle with a pastor he identifies as "Mark the Cussing Pastor" (clearly a reference to Mark Driscoll). **"I loved the community he had put together. I felt like I could breathe for the first time in years. . . . It is true that Mark said a lot of cusswords. I don't know why he did it. . . . Even though Mark said cusswords, he was telling a lot of people about Jesus, and he was being socially active, and he seemed to love a lot of people the church was neglecting, like liberals and fruit nuts."** This would have been a really good place for Miller to discuss the condemnation in James 3:1-12 of people who bless and curse at the same time. But no, Miller doesn't bring it up.

On page 193 Miller makes it clear that emergent spirituality includes tithing, saying **"10 percent would be a good place to start."** I am with Miller on that one, but the example he gives is of a tither who uses foul language and hardly ever attends church. I don't believe that the practice of tithing in itself is sufficient to make up for an obvious lack of basic spirituality in one's life, and I regret that Miller would give the impression that it does.

On pages 224-225 Miller says he enjoys the company of the immoral college students at Reed College, more than the company of church people, because at church somebody might make fun of a visitor behind their back. So he would rather hang out with the fornicating, drug-tripping college students. He makes no mention of how Christ loved the Church and gave Himself for it, Ephesians 5:25, or that the Church is the pillar and ground of the truth, 1 Timothy 3:15. Since some people at church are less than perfect,

he would rather chill out with his hippie friends at college.

This book is not recommended. It has some good insights and ideas, mixed in with all the confusion. A discerning fundamentalist could read this book to get an idea of how we are perceived by emergents, hippies, dopers and other trendy counterculture types. But we probably already knew that they had written us off as just a bunch of "squares" and old fogies.

The "Christian spirituality" presented in "Blue Like Jazz" is not much different from the self-indulgent immorality of the hippie crowd and the party animals at any state or secular private college. It should be a cause of concern that more than 1,000,000 copies of this book are in circulation out there, teaching young Christians that it is acceptable for them to indulge in a worldly, "beatnik" lifestyle that has always been rejected not only by fundamentalists but by decent Americans of all faiths.

That so many people are buying and reading a book like this, and taking it seriously, is cause for concern for the future of Christian spirituality. Be afraid - be very afraid.

What Other Reviewers Say About "Blue Like Jazz"

"What is disturbing about Miller is his lack of biblical understanding (he admits that he has never read the Bible through, reads the Bible most often out of duty and is usually bored, and goes long stretches of time without scriptural input, pp. 80, 175). His spiritual turning points inevitably come through movies, secular literature, lectures, encounters with people, or God 'speaking' to him and others (pp. 48, 85, 136, 230) - but virtually never from the Word.

... He lavishes praises on freeloading, pot-smoking, homosexual 'hippies' who love unconditionally as they steal food from the rich and give to the poor (themselves and him) (chapter 18). Miller makes it abundantly clear that he loves to smoke and drink and finds it somehow amusing and authentic that his pastor is a prolific curser. It is the hippies, drug addicts and Unitarians

who have taught him love, not the Bible or evangelical Christians.

... Miller uses not a single biblical quote or reference and only in passing mentions scriptural situations as he purports to lead us toward an authentic encounter with God. It is for this reason that he can sing the praises of one of the most depraved college campuses in the world (by Miller's own admission) while telling us, **"I had more significant spiritual experiences at Reed College than I ever had at church."**

"Miller would have us disregard the guidance of Psalm 1, *'How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the path of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers,'* and replace it with his own counsel because this is his 'experience.' ... It is not Scripture which guides Miller's thoughts but situations that seem to work for him and appear to be in agreement with his own experience." - **Pastor Gary Gilley, Southern View Chapel, Springfield, Illinois.**

"Since the author embraces a postmodern style, he does not provide his reader with an interpretive framework. Was it wrong for him to get drunk and smoke pot while he was leading his high school youth group? Is the story of his friend's conversion evidence of the failure of the 60s' drug culture or her parents being inconsistent hippies? The reader is left to discover such answers on his own.

"Don wants to invite the reader to authentic Christian spirituality, but he's not really sure what it looks like. He can only report back what he's experienced - and it's been a confusing trip. This means that some of his readers will walk away even more confused, but more resolved to get another tattoo, another piercing, grow those dreads, attend another anarchist protest, or say another profanity. They will learn that watching 'South Park' is not so bad, having crushes on lesbian pop stars is cool, and that smoking pot is an ambiguous moral question. Likely, right now someone in your church is reading 'Blue Like Jazz' or some similar book. It will resonate with them in style and content - it is cool and Christian. And it is extremely

„unhelpful.” - **Shane Walker, 9 Marks web site.**

“Blue Like Jazz: Non-Religious Thoughts on Christian Spirituality’ (2003) is a harsh rant against biblical Christianity. The thesis is that the Christian faith is vague and non-resolving and lacking in boundaries like jazz and that the believer should be a free spirit, having the liberty to follow his own impulses and live pretty much as he pleases without ‘rules’ and ‘dogmatism.’ This dangerous book is very popular and influential. It has sold over 1,000,000 copies and can be found in places like Family Christian Stores and the Southern Baptist Convention’s Lifeway Christian Bookstores. ‘Blue Like Jazz’ is basically a manual for rebels.” - **David Cloud, in Q Timothy.**

“Donald Miller (one of the leaders in the Emerging Church) like John Lennon wants us to use our imaginations to fire up Utopian sentiments that just happen to line up with Marxist ideals. . . . Donald Miller’s view makes certain assumptions. . . . It assumes throwing money, food and/or medicine at the ‘problems on earth’ will fix most of those problems. It assumes all human problems result from poverty and need. It assumes Miller knows more than Jesus Who said, ‘The poor you will always have with you.’” -**Don and Joy Veinot, in Midwest Christian Outreach Journal, Winter, 2008**

“When Miller says that ‘Christian spirituality’ cannot be explained, he means that solid, unchangeable biblical doctrine and theology do not exist. When Miller says ‘Christian spirituality’ can only be ‘experienced,’ this is referring to mysticism. That can be substantiated when Miller says, ‘**You cannot be a Christian without being a mystic**’ (p. 202). He has echoed mystic Karl Rahner’s words who said ‘the Christian of the future will be a mystic or he will be nothing.’” - **Lighthouse Trails Research Project.**

“Miller dispenses with all philosophical argument about God on

the basis of his personal feelings. It is an epistemological nightmare of the highest order, but, oh, so clever. The man should not be taken seriously. That he is, is a testament to our decline as a church and a nation.” -**Douglas Groothuis.**

The Responsibilities of a Deacon

By Jerry Fulton, editor

Baptist Progress

It is rare that a reader asks me to include an article on a particular topic in Baptist Progress. However, a reader recently wrote me requesting that I publish an article that clarifies the responsibilities of a deacon. I am obliged to explain the role as best I can from my understanding of Scripture.

Most scholars believe that Acts 6:1-7 is a reference to deacons. If so, and there is no reason to believe otherwise, the Book of Acts is the first book of the Bible that speaks of the responsibilities of deacons.

To be clear, I am a fan of the office of deacon. It is one of 2 offices of the church mentioned in the New Testament. The other office is the office of bishop (pastor). If the office is used properly a deacon can not only be a tremendous help to his pastor, but a wonderful asset to the local church.

However, more than a few good men have been ruined by being made a deacon. Perhaps these men were never properly taught the biblical role of a deacon. Perhaps, upon being elected and ordained to the office, these men became puffed up with pride elevating themselves instead of seeing the proper role of a deacon is to serve.

There are men with a desire to serve the Lord in some way in the church, but the moment they become a deacon, they begin to seize power and authority that do not rightfully or biblically belong to them, and to which they are not entitled. Some deacons accept the office but then fail to honor their responsibilities to the church. Still, I would hope the great majority of deacons are men who faithfully accomplish those things for which they have been ordained. They know and God knows.

ARE DEACONS NEEDED?

Due to men having abused the office of

deacon, many pastors and congregations have decided against recognizing the office within the church. Some go so far as to teach that deacons are not needed today. In making their argument, they refer to the church at Jerusalem (Acts 2-6). They contend that the Jerusalem church was large with members being added daily. Some have estimated the church to have from 20,000 to over 100,000 members. They argue if a church is going to have deacons, then the church must be as large as the one was in Jerusalem - a church that had need of men who would serve tables.

Of course, anyone familiar with Scripture knows that the apostle Paul wrote to the saints, bishops and deacons at Philippi (Philippians 1:1). Was the church at Philippi as large as the church at Jerusalem? Surely not. Furthermore, in 1 Timothy 3:8-13, Paul listed qualifications for any man who would hold the office of deacon. If there had been no need for deacons after the ordeal in the Jerusalem church then there would have been no need for Paul to give qualifications for deacons in the pastoral epistle.

WHAT IS THE BIBLICAL ROLE OF DEACONS? Before attempting to explain the role of deacons, it is necessary to understand what a deacon is not according to Scripture.

DEACONS ARE NOT PASTORS. Only the pastor has been chosen by God to be the undershepherd of the church. The pastor is the only one authorized by God’s Word to rule (stand before) the church. The pastor is the only one authorized to feed and shepherd the flock and the pastor is the only one who will give an account to God for the flock.

DEACONS ARE NOT THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS OF THE CHURCH. It is incorrect to refer to a church’s deacons as “the deacon board.” They are not a board! Deacons have no right to dictate the church’s direction and decide all church business. In my opinion, a church should not have a chairman of the deacons. The word “chairman” indicates that there is a board. Instead, I admire those churches that recognize the eldest deacon as the senior deacon.