

Example of a Book Review

What follows is an example book review for the book *Younger Evangelicals* by Robert E. Webber. (Used with permission by the writer, Siu Fung Wu, and first appearing in the *Pentecostal and Charismatic Bible Colleges Journal* – <http://pcbc.webjournals.org> April 2004. Slightly edited by Eastern College Australia). Comments about the review are in the column on the right.

Webber, Robert E. (2002). *Younger Evangelicals*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

Younger Evangelicals is a challenging and thought-provoking book. Although this book is primarily about a new development among the evangelicals, Pentecostals and Charismatics will also find it incredibly relevant. Lay readers and Bible College Students will all find it valuable reading.

Note in the introduction, the reviewer has already commented on who would find this book useful to read. Those kind of comments can emerge anywhere in the review.

The book speaks of an emerging generation of leaders, who seek to share the gospel in the postmodern world. Their longing is to see a relational, intergenerational, intercultural, committed Christian community that embodies the gospel in every aspect of daily life.

Some of the major ideas of the writer are being shared early in the piece.

Webber helpfully contrasts these 'younger' Christians with two previous groups of evangelicals, namely, the 'traditional' and the 'pragmatic'. The former was prominent in the post-WWII period (1950-75) and was characterised by rational apologetics and evangelistic rallies. The latter consists of boomers (1975-2000) whose focus was to answer people's needs with an emphasis on church growth, success, market-targeting, and strong leadership.

Good summary of Webber's material with clarifying explanations for the reader of this review.

The 'younger' evangelicals (2000 onwards; the twenty-somethings and the young-at-heart), however, have a very different approach to ministry. For them, Christianity is not so much about arguing that the Christian faith is reasonable or answering felt needs, but demonstrating Christ through the community of faith.

It is not hard to draw similarities between the traditional/pragmatic evangelicals and the Pentecostals. One wonders whether a group of 'younger' Pentecostals is emerging?

Here we see not just a summary of material, but the interaction and opinion of the writer of the review.

About one third of the book is devoted to outlining the thinking of younger evangelicals. Often their thoughts are contrasted with those of the traditional and pragmatic evangelicals. This makes the book challenging, provocative, but refreshing in many ways.

Here the writer of the review shares positive feedback about the reading experience and gives reasons for that.

Unlike the traditional evangelicals, who characteristically expressed biblical truths in propositional statements, younger evangelicals place a new focus on

More summary of Webber's material and main thesis.

sharing their belief through the 'stories' in the Scriptures.

Being part of the postmodern generation, younger evangelicals seek to communicate the gospel in their pluralistic culture. However, their thinking differs from postmodern philosophy. A prime example is that they believe in the existence of the biblical metanarrative, which many postmodern thinkers deny. Thus younger evangelicals are counterculture.

Further summary material: 'biblical metanarrative' should have been defined briefly in case the reader is not certain of its meaning. If such a definition was interrupting the flow of the review, it could be done as a footnote at the bottom of the page.

Webber is keen to demonstrate that these young leaders are no daydreamers, but committed practitioners of the gospel. About two-thirds of the book is written to describe the younger evangelicals in action.

Younger evangelicals do not particularly like the market-driven church style and party-like youth rallies of the 'pragmatic' predecessors. Nor do they enjoy the legalistic spirituality of earlier evangelicals. They prefer what is real, genuine and relationship-oriented.

They believe that leadership does not belong to those with charisma and power, but those who truly desire to serve. Instead of a hierarchical and top-down church structure, they prefer a 'circle of equals' leadership model.

Younger evangelicals have problems with traditional seminaries where rationalism dominates the curriculum. For them, true education 'forms character, wisdom, spiritual sensitivity, and servanthood leadership'. It is 'not only knowledge but knowledge embodied and lived out individually and in community' (p.171).

Good to see an actual quote from the book. A few others could have been justified throughout. More page referencing, even for indirect quotes, would have been useful to guide the reader to specific areas of the book more easily.

Webber is well known for his interests in the ancient church, and at times one wonders whether Webber is painting a picture of his own ideal church. For instance, Webber quotes websites, interviews, emails and publications extensively to demonstrate that there are many younger evangelicals around. But there seems to be no concrete figures to show how widespread the movement is.

Here we are seeing good interaction between the writer of the review and the author. Challenging the integrity of the findings, the motivation of the writer, and the credibility of the material is all good. Do it (as here) with respect and unemotionally. If you criticise any areas of the book, give wise reasons and reflections that support your criticisms.

Throughout the book Webber suggests that younger evangelicals want to return to the spirituality and practices of the ancient church. Incense, icons, candles and sacramental worship are frequently mentioned. The impression is that most of them look to the ancient church for insight into community living and spirituality. It is not sure whether this is a result of Webber's prior theological presupposition. What is likely is that there is in fact a degree of diversity within the movement where worship style and theological emphasis vary.

No doubt there is profound value and wisdom in the sacramental traditions and ancient church writings, and there is much to be learned from their spirituality.

But the idea of using icons and symbols to assist worship does sound like a *substitute* for the 30-minute contemporary worship that younger evangelicals reject - which may be the result of their reaction against mega-churches. What we need is healthy correction, not overreaction.

Despite the limitations mentioned above, Webber energetically and insightfully introduces to us what may turn out to be a movement that will shape the future of the church. The book masterfully describes the heart and mind of many 'younger' Christians in the Western church, who love the Scripture and desire to be genuine and sacrificial disciples of Jesus.

Many of the thinking and practices of the younger evangelicals are commendable and are indeed welcoming corrections to certain shortcomings of past and current church ethos. We should never ignore the zeal and vigour of younger Christians. What is happening among the evangelicals should not be overlooked by their Pentecostal and Charismatic counterparts. *Younger Evangelicals* is a most rewarding and refreshing read.

A positive comment in the midst of criticism is always wise.

Good concluding paragraph that wraps up the review and offers a reflective thought at the end. (Even though it is written about evangelicals, Pentecostals and Charismatics will get a lot from it too.)