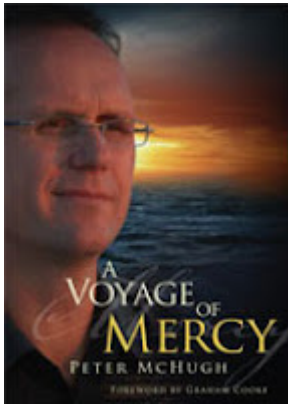


Review: A Voyage of Mercy



Peter McHugh was a speaker at a conference I attended a few weeks ago at Careforce Church in Mt. Evelyn, Vic. Speaking to an audience with a high number of church leaders he tackled the issue of resisting the performance bias of today's culture.

The topic scratched an itch for me. I have had my fill of leadership programs that over-emphasise KPI's and precise vision statements above the more spiritual (and therefore substantial) aspects of leadership. But that's not what I heard from this pastor of a successful pentecostal church (CCC Whitehorse). I was impressed with how he spoke of his own journey in leadership and his conclusion that brought his spirituality back to our identity in God.

So I bought his book, *A Voyage of Mercy*, which is largely autobiographical. Having noted that by any human and ecclesiastical measure, he "began so well" his ministry, he portrays a crisis he faced with respect to his ministry performance that caused him to re-evaluate his faith and his calling.

"I did not see God's power and presence in my congregation and I was not aware of these things being an ongoing reality for other church leaders and their congregations. I was no longer prepared to bring my theology to the level that justified my experience... I wanted to live out a faith that was incarnate in me, no longer living as someone educated way beyond my level of obedience. I longed for a greater awareness of, and appreciation for, the freedom and transformation that were won for me on the Cross." (Pages 38-39)

And so he invites us:

“Let’s go on a journey together. We’ll explore the impact of our response to a performance based culture. We’ll look at how this response can produce and feed fear and insecurity in us. We will then examine how this affects the way we live our Christian lives.” (Page 37)

And let’s us know where we are going:

“I have found that the answer to the fear and insecurity I am describing, with its attendant works based, or achievement theology, is found in experiencing the complete acceptance of God.” (Page 41)

The journey touches on issues of family-of-origin (“hard work avoided bad grades and brought affirmation I was seeking” – Page 48) and the presence of an insidious gospel of “justification by works” in church culture. He unpacks the resultant performance mentality and characterises it with a gospel of acceptance:

“Internally a conflict can exist between the importance of God and His place in our lives and a desire for more, bigger, better and breakthrough to meet the unquenchable thirst for significance. Pick me. Notice me. Listen to me. Spend time with me. Include me...

“...performance is concerned with... having to deliver... competition... striving... ideas of God rewarding and punishing... wrestling with shame and guilt because failure is my responsibility...

“...acceptance is concerned with... God is love... being adopted... our inheritance... rest... the pursuit of who He is, who we are in Him and our response to what He has done and is doing.” (Pages 62-63)

I find some personal resonance here (An “unquenchable thirst

for significance.” Ouch.)

The journey concludes by showing how this gospel of acceptance impacts “our view of God.” For example, it is refreshing to see someone apply the concept of intimacy with God to leadership!

“To be intimate with God is to place our total confidence and trust in someone we can’t control but who is good and kind. It is being in love with God not just the idea of God. It is like learning to float where we have to let go of the side of the boat. We have to stop standing on the bottom, stop trying to tread water, and stop lifting our head to see where we are going. The performance based mind-set in our inner secret kingdom cannot do this.” (Page 93)

Most of the remainder of the book is taken up with his own personal testimony. This is a little less helpful as we are required to exegete the author as well as consider the principles. There are points of resonance (“Numbers make a difference in the way we are accepted, honoured and treated” – Page 114) and snippets of wisdom despite it becoming a little self-serving and cathartic. Chapter 7 which contains the journal of his time through his crisis and escape from a performance mindset is too long.

The book ends prophetically, challenging church culture to not simply ape the performance bias of the surrounding society. He poses questions such as “What if... church culture is addictive and co-dependent?” and applies some of the principles alluded to. These are some challenges worthy of consideration.

I am glad I read this book. It is refreshingly different to the sort of literary fare that is often put forward in leadership circles. It scratches some of my own frustrations.

There are some niggles with the book along the way. He handles Luther’s view of “justification by faith” in a sloppy way, for

instance (page 52). And the book is too personal which reduces it's impact, allows the prophetic punch to be pulled, and gives those who need to hear it an "out" by considering it simply to be "Peter's story."

The main frustration I had with the book, however, was a personal gripe. As I was reading it I couldn't help thinking "It's easy for him to say – he already is successful." His previous performance has given him a place of influence as he heads up a large church – an influence that means that when he writes a book, people will read it, and he will be invited to speak at conferences. Where is the assistance for the up-and-coming pastor, the young gun just off the starting line who has only a small voice and upon whom every expectation of performance is loaded? The principles are not invalid – that young pastor also needs to learn to rest first in the gospel. But this book is post-crisis catharsis, not a pre-crisis encouragement.

I came across a snippet in a Peter Jensen sermon once that said this:

Only through the death of Jesus Christ on the cross can there be forgiveness and redemption; only by abandoning all attempts, even religious attempts to win God's approval, can I gain access to him. Then I cast myself upon him for his mercy and forgiveness. Here is an experience, the experience of confidence in the presence of God, not based on anything good in us, but entirely on what is good in him and what his has done for us through Jesus.

At the time that small word moved me to tears and encouraged me immensely. I'm glad Peter McHugh has encountered the same truth and is seeking to lead others to it.

