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The Next Evangelicalism: Freeing the Church from Western Cultural Captivity

Soong-Chan Rah
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In his provocative map of the current religious landscape, *The Next Christendom*, religion writer Philip Jenkins pointed out that the future of the Christian religion lay not in the often wooden and lifeless practices of North American churches but in the dynamic and transformative religious communities of South and Central America and Africa. Jenkins challenging study raised significant questions about the ability of North American Christian churches to survive and to contribute to the religious lives of their constituents.

Rah, the Milton B. Engebretson Assistant Professor of Church Growth and Evangelism at North Park Theological Seminary in Chicago, takes Jenkins findings one step further. He challenges North American Evangelical Christianity to throw off the chains of its oppression-what he calls the “Western cultural captivity of the Church”-and embrace a multi-ethnic and diverse evangelism that reflects the churchs contemporary constituency. In an incisive book that is part theological reflection, part sociology of religion, and part evangelism, Rah, like a modern-day prophet, points to the individualism, materialism, and racism that form the heart and soul of white American Christianity. “The churchs captivity to materialism has resulted in the unwillingness to confront sins such as economic and radical injustice and has produced consumers of religion rather than followers of Jesus,” he writes.

Rah flies squarely in the face of Evangelical practice and belief by calling for Evangelicals to give up their cherished emphasis on individual sin and salvation and to embrace an understanding that the churchs responsibility is to eliminate corporate sin. Focusing on individual sin to the exclusion of the systemic sins of racism and classism is to be complicit in these corporate sins. Rah doesnt let megachurches or the emergent church off the hook either, but points to them as simply some of the most recent examples of the churchs captivity to Western, white culture.

Rah exhorts North American churches to recognize their captivity, to confess corporately the sins of racism and white privilege, to submit humbly to the spiritual authority of non-whites, and to unleash the gospel that preaches the self-sacrificial life of the followers of Jesus. Although many Evangelicals might consider Rahs message to be too confrontational, his book bores right to the heart of the issues at the center of a vibrant twenty-first-century Christianity.
HENRY L. CARRIGAN (April 14, 2009)

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