

Gaining by Losing: Why the Future Belongs to Churches that Send. J. D. Greear. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015. 256 pages. \$19.99.

If you are a pastor or church leader, this book will challenge you to change the scorecard for how you measure success in ministry. J. D. Greear, senior pastor of Summit Church in Raleigh-Durham, NC, argues convincingly that the true metric is not our seating capacity but our sending capacity. Greear calls churches, no matter their size, to return to the New Testament emphasis on making disciples and unselfishly sending them out to reproduce more disciples and new churches—rather than gathering them, counting them, and keeping them. To see global gospel advance and churches multiplied, Greear contends, churches must be willing to generously give away their resources—their leaders, people, money, time, and giftedness.

For local churches in North America to faithfully fulfill their Great Commission calling to reach our continent and the global nations for Christ, we need thousands of new churches—and the God-prepared leaders to start them. In *Gaining By Losing*, Pastor Greear uses the inspiring testimony of his own church to demonstrate how committed churches send out trained teams of their best people to parent daughter churches, thereby sharing in the passion, presence, and purpose of Christ, the Great Commissioner. He argues on clear biblical grounds that healthy churches are sending and planting churches—and that healthy Christians are going Christians. Every church and every Christian is born to reproduce.

The author is no arm-chair theoretician; nor is he a careless exegete. Greear has a Ph.D. in systematic theology from Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary where he is also a faculty member. His doctoral dissertation focused on the correlations between early church presentations of the gospel and Islamic theology. Greear has also authored three other published books. Under his visionary leadership, Summit Church has been transformed from a plateaued 40-year-old traditional Baptist church of 350 people to become a dynamic, growing multi-site church. Summit has impacted not only its own city but over the last twelve years released and sent out over 650 of its

own people—many of them recent college graduates whom they have mentored to join church planting teams. Amazingly, Summit has now planted twenty five domestic churches and ninety international churches (116).

The book is split into two parts. Part one explains why churches should send and discusses some of the sending challenges. Greear shows that (1) all Christians are under gospel obligation (Rom 1:14); (2) the God of the Bible is a sending God who sent his best into the world to rescue the lost (forty-four times in the NT Jesus is referred to as “sent”); and (3) all believers, as followers of Christ, are thus called to be “sent ones,” to be on mission with Jesus (John 20:31). Rather than viewing an elite special class of “super-saints” as “missionaries,” sending churches are convinced that “all of God’s people are commanded to go” and thus “all of God’s people are sent” (34). Greear sums up his position on the importance of mission with a quotation from Charles Spurgeon: “Every Christian is either a missionary or an imposter.” He also points to Christopher Wright (in line with other evangelical missiologists of our day), that *the church was formed by God and exists for his mission*. Greear adds, “Without the [Great Commission] mission, a church is not a church; it’s just a group of disobedient Christians hanging out” (38). Then, having laid this solid theological foundation, Greear, in the rest of this first section, tells the story of how their church came to these core motivating convictions, journeying, often painfully, toward becoming a city-focused, gospel-driven, and Great Commission-shaped sending church.

Part two, the bulk of the book, lays out and describes *ten keys*, or “*plumb lines*” which have shaped Summit’s church ministries. Using Scripture, anecdotes, and insightful illustrations, Greear demonstrates how any congregation can develop a sending culture and strategy. This reviewer believes these tried-and-proven principles, if properly understood and contextually implemented, could revolutionize the way churches do mission(s), enabling churches to see the Great Commission accomplished in this generation.

Devoting an entire chapter to each principle, Greear shows how to build a missions ethos that pervades the entire church and

suggests many practical ways churches can implement each principle. This reviewer will seek only to briefly summarize these ten Great Commission plumb lines. First, to develop a sending culture, moving people from selfishness to generosity, leaders must teach their people that the church's mission is *rooted in, sustained and motivated by a deep and passionate understanding of the gospel* (57-67). Second, they must teach the Great Commission as not merely a calling for some but an enduring mandate for all; this assumption that "*everyone is called,*" challenges "ordinary believers" to use their "secular" vocations to strategically advance the mission of God and enables church leaders to empower and mobilize many for local and global missions (69-81). Third, sending churches must balance being *both attractional* ("Come and see") *and missional* ("Go and tell"); they must seek to grow *both deep* (in the gospel) *and wide* (in the mission), becoming churches that are *both faithful and fruitful* (83-99). Fourth, aiming to *transform an audience into an effective army* of sent-ones, the church must become "not [just] a group of people gathered around a leader, but a leadership [development and empowerment] factory" (101-17). Fifth, the sending church is one that "makes visible the invisible Christ" in their community by not only proclaiming but *powerfully demonstrating the gospel* through changed lives and intentional (not random) acts of kindness and community service (119-31).

Greear's sixth plumb line is the core conviction that "disciple-making is the central component of the Great Commission" and "ought to be the standard by which we should judge *every* ministry in the church." Thus, the metric for any ministry's success is whether it is producing reproducing disciples and raising up its own leaders from within the assembly (133-48). Seventh, is the conviction that "every [staff] pastor is our missions pastor" and thus every ministry of the church "should be leading people into God's global mission" (149-59). His eighth: churches pursuing a sending culture are moving toward becoming multicultural, seeing *racial reconciliation as a fruit of the gospel* and teaching their people to "live multicultural lives, not just host multicultural events" (161-77). Ninth, sending churches challenge would-be disciples to be risk-takers;

corporately they are willing *to take great risks* as they sacrificially, and by faith, invest their best people and resources in gospel ventures and church planting (179-89). Finally, leaders of sending churches are constantly seeking to birth and cultivate missionary vision among their people; in so doing they build corporate momentum for needed change in order to reach more people far from God (191-200).

Gaining By Losing concludes with two very practical appendices which, in my opinion, are worth the price of the book. The first shares steps for setting up an *effective international missions strategy* for the local church, suggesting eleven helpful building blocks. Among other things, this appendix argues that short-term mission trips are not a waste of time and shows how they can be beneficial when teams go to assist, catalyze, and empower nationals, allowing them to set the agenda (200-19). The second appendix shows how to develop a *“domestic” church planting strategy*. It describes *why* church planting is “paramount in the mission” of God and should “occupy a large portion of our sending portfolio.” To recruit planting teams, Greear believes that church leaders should take the initiative to “call out” qualified harvesters rather than merely “call for” volunteers. He also argues that multiplying churches will develop a leadership pipeline in order to cultivate church planters and teams from the harvest rather than to import them from other ministries (221-38). This reviewer believes every North American pastor would profit greatly by reading and applying these two very practical appendices.

In the closing section of this review, I’d like to highlight what I see as the main strengths and weaknesses of this book.

Strengths

There are at least four strengths to this book. First, it is clearly *gospel-centered*. A point of the book is that the gospel is central in the Christian life and in church planting/missions. Greear argues, “The gospel is not just the diving board; it is the pool” (57). With Tim Keller, he believes that the gospel is not just the A-B-Cs of Christianity; it is the A through Z. God’s people are best motivated

toward a spirit of generosity and sacrifice not by guilt or greed (two commonly used tools of some preachers) but by grace (60-61). “Believing the gospel,” Greear writes, “leads to becoming like the gospel. Those who go the farthest and give the most are most aware of how far Jesus went and how much he gave up to reach them” (66). Throughout the book, Greear shows many practical implications springing from passion for the gospel.

Second, the book sets forth a *sound ecclesiology*. Greear comes from an independent Baptist background and is convinced that the local church is plan A in God’s Great Commission purposes. He challenges pastors and churches to take the lead in global and local missions, not being overly dependent on denominational structures or parachurch groups. He calls for churches to keep the main thing the main thing (making disciples) and so set up discipling and leadership training strategies (pipelines, pathways). He rightly advocates church-based mentoring residencies to fully prepare key harvest leaders and church planters—not relying too heavily on the academic institutions.

Third, this treatise reflects a *balanced missional perspective*. Greear states over and over that churches must be evangelizing and making disciples at home and abroad. Believers must never forget that both Christians and churches need to be outward focused to survive, grow and send. Greear’s premise that everyone is called to be a missionary in their own setting would challenge lots of pew sitters to become more active in the Great Commission. His reminder that our ecclesiology should be a good mix of “missional” and “attractational” is vital to keep churches healthy and capable of reproduction. I appreciated Greear’s emphasis on how the church is a place for believers to gather and be equipped for the mission of Monday-Saturday. He points out that of the forty miracles recorded in Acts, thirty-nine happen outside the church walls. His conclusion: the main place God wants to manifest his power is in the community (94-95).

Fourth, *Gaining By Losing* is *eminently practical*. Books about being missional are prevalent today but, in this reviewer’s opinion, are often quite theoretical and idealistic. They frequently rely on undefined terms and lofty concepts without

digging into “how.” I appreciate Pastor Greear’s contribution because he deals not only with the biblical/theological foundation but also shares suggested ways to implement and contextualize his recommendations. Greear’s use of real stories and ministry experiences at Summit Church helps readers get a real-life picture of how one might put these ideas into practice in an actual church setting. Another really practical component of this book, as already noted, are the appendices, which share detailed steps for developing international missions and domestic church planting strategies.

Weaknesses

Faulty Exegesis: There were a few places where I felt Scripture may have been misinterpreted or misapplied. One of Greear’s foundational verses for the book is John 12:24; in the introduction, he writes about a “principle of the harvest,” how the seed that dies is ultimately a picture of what must churches do—die to her own selfish ambition. Contextually, however, this verse seems to speak about the seed of Christ and the fruit (the salvation of souls) of his substitutionary death (cf. John 12:23). Though I don’t necessarily disagree with the principle Greear is advocating, I’m not sure this is the best text to base it on. I also did not see the connection of churches being attractational from Exodus 19:5–6 and 1 Peter 2:9–11; 3:15 (86, 87). These texts seem to be more about going out than about our drawing in seekers. There are few other debatable passages but these are the exception and not the norm in this book; overall I felt Greear handled Scripture well.

Calling Confusion: My second critique of this book is the at times confusing discussions on the subject of Christian calling. Greear’s fourth chapter focuses on the “myth of calling” and argues that every Christian “has at least two major callings”—the call to use their “secular” vocation “for the glory of God and the [gospel] blessing of others” and the call to make disciples in obedience to the Great Commission. Thus he challenges his people and readers, “*Whatever you’re good at [vocationally], do it well for the glory of God, and do it somewhere strategic for the*

mission of God" (75, emphasis his). While I am in agreement with this last statement and understand his intent to motivate lay ("ordinary") believers to "live sent" and use their God-given skills to advance the gospel globally, my concern is that Greear may be undermining the still-needed role of the vocational frontier missionary whom God has called to take the gospel to unreached people and places. Greear does a good job of establishing from both Scripture and church history that the Christian faith spread rapidly in the first century primarily through the witness of "normal" Christians—not because of those in "full-time" vocational ministry such as the apostles. He believes, and I tend to agree, that "the question is no longer *if* we are called to leverage our lives for the Great Commission, only where and how" (78). While there is a sense in which all believers are "called" to be on mission with Christ because of the clear command of the Great Commission, that reality in no way nullifies the specific calling (desire, enabling, gifting) a sovereign God still gives to some to cross barriers of culture, ethnicity, and language with the Good News and to plant new churches where Christ is not known and named (Rom 15:20). While there are NT examples of people in missions who did not have dramatic, specific callings (as Greear rightly points out)—such as Phillip, Timothy, Priscilla and Aquila—Scripture is clear that the Lord of harvest does call out some from the life of a missional church to be full time sent ones (Acts 13:1-2). My concern is that Greear's focus on helping "regular believers" in the local church "recover the understanding that they are called to the mission and shaped by God for a specific role in that mission" (78) may minimize the vital role of the frontier missionary church planter and the unintentionally undermine the historic classical understanding of missionary calling. The truth is, finishing the Great Commission task in our lifetime will require the full involvement of *both* God-called vocational missionaries *and* obedient marketplace ("tent-making") lay people who are bi-vocational.

Strong Statements: A final small critique I have of this book is that at times, in his zeal to build his case, Greear seems to overstate his arguments and unintentionally puts his readers on a guilt trip. I realize Greear states he is seeking to avoid the guilt-

trip aspect of Great Commission ministry, but I still at times sensed it. For example, he writes, "...You can't really call yourself a follower of Jesus if you don't see yourself as sent" [a missionary] (p. 34). And "When is the last time your sacrifices for the mission made someone question your sanity?" (p. 59). Or "Failure to risk our lives to the fullest potential for the kingdom of God is as wicked as the most egregious violations of the laws of God" (p. 181). By the end of the book it felt like Greear was saying that all churches/Christians who do not do mission in an all-out, pedal-to-the-metal, risky way are grossly sinning.

Bottom Line: Despite these few concerns, I heartily recommend this book to those who want a better understanding of why and how churches should be sending-focused. This treatise is a gospel-centered, compassionate, and bold call to lead churches to fulfill the Great Commission faithfully. It is encouraging, equipping, and motivating. Be ready to be challenged to pursue a sending mindset in your life and church.

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