

ONWARD:
CRITICAL RESPONSE

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Dr. Glenn R. Kreider
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by
Jenny R. Rone
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CRITICAL RESPONSE TO ONWARD

Everyone has an opinion about how things are to be done, but these days, with social media and media in general, opinions are constantly pushed at us as more than just opinions. It is easy to get pulled into the banter and arguments that stem from all the viewpoints being tossed around us. The church is no exception. Since Jesus left us and ascended to heaven, we have been left with the question of how we are to do this thing called church. As I approached this assignment, the fact that a book on Starbucks was on the list intrigued me. I decided to see what Howard Schultz, the chairman and CEO of the most recognizable coffee shop in the United States, had to say that might be applicable to the question of the church.

Schultz's Thesis

In *Onward: How Starbucks Fought for Its Life without Losing Its Soul*, Howard Schultz tells the story of how he returned as Chief Executive Officer to Starbucks, the company he helped establish and grow into a global enterprise. In the book, he documents his journey, and the journey of Starbucks, starting with why he returned as CEO and how he led the company back to its true identity in the midst of crisis and a changing world.¹ In a memo to the Starbucks leadership in 2007, Schultz pinned, ““We desperately need to...get back to the core and make the changes necessary to evoke the heritage, the tradition, and the passion that we all have for the true Starbucks Experience.””² He adds, “I could not allow us, or myself, to drift into a sea of mediocrity...”³ Although, Schultz does not outrightly say so, this is a leadership memoir, a

¹ Howard Schultz with Joanne Gordon, *Onward: How Starbucks Fought for Its Life without Losing Its Soul*, (Emmaus, PA: Rodale Books, 2012), xiv.

² *Ibid.*, 25.

³ *Ibid.*, 25.

collection of leadership principles delivered through the context of his story to guide Starbucks back on course. However, he does say that he hopes the book is “informative and that it inspires others to consider the untapped potential within their own organizations as well as within themselves.”⁴

Schultz’s Argument

Schultz captures his audience’s attention with great story telling. In the course of five sections, he recounts the three year history of his process to re-engage leading Starbucks through a season of multiple challenges and repairing cracks in its foundation. He begins the book with a section he entitled “Love” and dives in with chapter one, “A Beverage of Truth.” Here he paints the picture of his vision of “inspiring the human spirit” by taking “the ordinary...and giv[ing] it new life, believing that what we create has the potential to touch others’ lives because it touched ours” — “a lofty mission for a cup of coffee.”⁵

In the next chapter, “A Love Story,” Schultz shares about his passion that drove him to create Starbucks. He tells of his dream to create more than coffee, to “take something ordinary and infuse it with emotion and meaning, and then we tell its story over and over and over again, often without saying a word.”⁶ Schultz describes his heart to create community for those inside and outside of the company. He calls it the “third place,” a social, but personal environment, beyond home and work for people to connect.⁷

In the next several chapters that round out section one, Schultz explains all the parts that were setting the stage for Starbucks to be in a dangerous place and how his commitment to his dream and passion for what the company should be drove him to call attention to the

⁴ Ibid., 314.

⁵ Ibid., 4.

⁶ Ibid., 12.

⁷ Ibid., 13.

problems, change the status quo, and ultimately return as CEO. He points out things that caused the company to drift away from its mission and identity and to focus primarily on growth at the expense of purpose and heart.

In the second section, “Confidence,” Schultz moves through describing the process of him taking the reigns again. He refers to the shared history between him and the company as “A Reservoir of Trust” giving him credibility to speak into the changes that were needed, calling everyone back to their shared mission and vision, and providing a relational history that could stand the weight of change.⁸ In this chapter, he gives the three strategic initiatives he had as he returned as CEO: “fixing the US business, reigniting emotional attachment with customers, and making long-term changes to the foundation of the business.”⁹ Another confidence factor was gaining “A New Way to See.” In this chapter, Schultz shares about the benefits of seeing through the eyes of an outside consulting firm which helped the organization identify who they are and what they need to be about so they could skim off the bad habits and stay on mission.

Schultz shifts into some philosophies about leading in the midst of difficulties with strategies like “Playing to Win,” “Elevating the Core,” “Get In the Mud,” “A Reason to Exist,” and “Beyond the Status Quo.” In these chapters, he continues to tell his story but imparts to the reader leadership tactics. In “Playing to Win,” he uses the launch of the new a consistent, balanced daily brew (eventually called Pike Place Roast) to demonstrate the “renewed effort to play to win as opposed to playing not to lose” or “acting out of ...fear of failure.”¹⁰ Schultz uses “Elevating the Core” to show how Starbucks removed what they were doing that was not true to their identity and moving toward new initiatives that would reinforce who they are as a company and expand their mission, such as removing breakfast sandwiches and ditching the year to year comparisons, while engaging the owner of the Clover coffee brewer.

⁸ Ibid., 56.

⁹ Ibid., 66, 100.

¹⁰ Ibid., 82, 85.

Another leadership principle comes from “Get In the Mud” where Schultz says, “‘When you start a business, you do not operate from a lofty place, because you cannot afford to.’ ... It is so vitally important that we get back to the roots of the business, that we get back in the mud.”¹¹ In “A Reason to Exist,” he describes sharing his passion and vision with his next tier of leaders so that they own the vision and are empowered to lead others because they believe in the purpose, too.¹² He points out that the “emotional connection” of his employees to the company is one of their highest values because their experience overflows to the customer.¹³ From there he tells about moving more toward better engaging the customer beyond the norm in “Beyond the Status Quo.” And in “Bold Moves,” he seeks to overcome obstacles like why the customer is coming in less without losing the humanity of the company.¹⁴

Schultz continues to use the story as his frame work to tell of the transformation of Starbucks and share leadership principles. He walks through the “Pain” involved in the journey as well as the “Hope” that came with the beginning of the turn around and “Courage” to walk the new course. In each of these last three sections, he outlines how he and Starbucks returned to the core of the identity of the company, developed a strategic, concise plan to get back on track and implemented that plan allowing for them to spontaneously respond to road bumps as they came along.

Evaluation

I chose Howard Schultz’s *Onward: How Starbucks Fought for Its Life without Losing Its Soul* because I was intrigued by the title and curious to see why it was on a suggested reading list for an ecclesiology class at Dallas Theological Seminary. I appreciate how Schultz presents

¹¹ Ibid., 98.

¹² Ibid., 104-5, 110.

¹³ Ibid., 104-5, 117.

¹⁴ Ibid., 104-5, 136.

the book as an unassuming narrative of a three year history of his journey to steer Starbucks back on its correct course, one based on the company's identity and heritage while engaging the future and a changing culture. I love a good story and this book proved to be a quick read for three hundred and forty plus pages. I value his short, concise chapters and plowed through them eager to get to the next.

The endorsements for the book paint it as a “the single most important book on leadership and change for our time and for every generation of leader.”¹⁵ However, if it is to be viewed as a leadership guide, the principles and action points are lost in the story and left with a lot of room for interpretation since they are only given in a context that applies directly to Starbuck's story.

About halfway through the book, I was struck with some confusion about why I was reading this book for this class, a class on ecclesiology and sanctification, and how in the world I was to write a paper on it. I could easily pick out Schultz leadership principles masked within the story, and then, I was able to see how those could apply to church leadership. As I continued to read, I began to see a connection between how the church has gotten off track, forgetting its first love and its true identity, as Starbucks had. Drawing connections to the church, I began to think of the connection between where the church is now compared to where it began and viewing that through Starbucks' journey. The controversial title “The Church According to Starbucks” gave me my direction.

Application

“The Church According to Starbucks” is a look at the similarities between the church and Starbucks, particularly from 2007 through 2009. Where Schultz begins his story is with an established, well-known company that was about something other than what most of the world, or outsiders, knew it to be about. It had become a growth monster, just another fast food chain

¹⁵ Ibid., back cover. Quote by Warren Bennis.

that offers too many things on its menu to do any one thing well, and a coffee shop that couldn't make a decent cup of coffee. All the things that Starbucks had been founded on and should drive every decision it made were forgotten. The founder Howard Schultz returned to get the company back on track.

My first thought is how the church can be viewed an established, well-known “company” that has gotten just as off track. I could not help but to make the connection of Jesus returning to re-organize, restructure and get the church back on track as Schultz did for Starbucks. As Schultz demonstrated, the passion and vision of the founder is truly unique. I can see a correlation in some ways as to how the church has forgotten its identity and is not making decisions based on that. In some places, it's very clear to see churches making decisions about how to be the church based on pressures to conform to the culture around it. In America particularly, there are a lot of churches that have fallen into bad habits and old rituals making them out of touch with the people on the outside. There are other churches that have gotten so sucked into being like the culture that they serve a watered down version of the gospel message and Jesus.

Several parallels come to mind in how Schultz assessed the situation and implemented changes that I think can be helpful for the church. So how would I define the church?¹⁶ I think the Church is the community of people who belong to God as His family¹⁷ because they identify with and are united with Jesus Christ in his death, burial and resurrection and are in-dwelt by His Holy Spirit.¹⁸ Because God is Spirit and His people are in-dwelt by His Spirit, the Church is spiritual, transcending physical buildings, locations, denominations as well

¹⁶ This is a synthesis statement I wrote for my doctrinal statement assignment for this class.

¹⁷ All scripture notes are cited from The NET Bible (*NET Bible*. N.p.: Biblical Studies Press, 2001.); Gal. 3:26; Eph. 2:19-20.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, Acts 10:44-47; Acts 11:15-18; Rom. 6:3-5; 1 Cor. 1:2; 12:12-13.

as cultures, race, gender and age.¹⁹ The Church is under the authority of Jesus Christ.²⁰ The Church, as a relational entity, relates to God by worshiping Him,²¹ relates to its internal community by building up one another to be more like Christ,²² and relates to the world around it by showing and telling the message of Jesus Christ.²³ The Church is given gifts from God enabling it to accomplish its relational mission.²⁴ An individual believer cannot grow in maturity, holiness and Christ-likeness without living in the community of the Church.²⁵

Another parallel between Starbucks and the Church is each individual church as one of the stores under the parent company. Just as Starbucks had drifted away from its identity and mission, each store reflected the inconsistency of not just the product it was delivering, but the inconsistency in the experience it was creating. In a lot of places, there are churches that don't have a consistent message of the gospel or of who Jesus. This is much like the inconsistent espresso shot at Starbucks up until February of 2008.²⁶ The church, like Starbucks, has a history of being a "third place space," a place outside of home and work where people could come to connect and experience community.²⁷ Schultz even describes what Starbucks offers as something that "fulfills a universal need."²⁸ It sounds like Starbucks is being offered as a replacement for the church, not just in terms of providing community, but also in terms of fulfillment. He even

¹⁹ Ibid., Matt. 16:18; 28:20; John 14:16-18; Gal. 3:28; Edmund Clowney, *The Church: Contours of Christian Theology*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 28-29.

²⁰ Ibid., Eph. 5:24; Col. 2:10.

²¹ Ibid., Rom. 11:36; 15:5-6; 1 Cor. 6:20; 10:31.

²² Ibid., Rom. 12:4-8; 1 Cor. 12:25; Eph. 4:11-13.

²³ Ibid., Rom. 10:14-17; 2 Cor. 5:20.

²⁴ Ibid., Rom. 12:4-8; 1 Cor. 12:12-14; Eph. 4:11-13; 1 Pet. 4:10-11.

²⁵ Ibid., Eph. 4:7-16.

²⁶ Schultz, *Onward*, 3-7.

²⁷ Ibid., 234, 251, 270, 278, 305-6.

²⁸ Ibid., 306.

gives a quote that paints the Starbucks experience as kind of church experience and says that it has to be about more than just coffee.²⁹

Schultz points out how Starbucks in their US stores we seeing a decline in visitors.³⁰ Similarly people are coming to church less. Schultz points out that Starbucks is about humanity over the institution, the individual over growth, and being right over being cool, but had gotten away from those things.³¹ The church in some ways seems to have fallen into the same trap. Schultz said had come to believe that all they had to do was to show up to be successful and that growth had become their primary goal so much so that it had become a “carcinogen.”³² In some churches, the focus on growth has led to a decay in the structure because it has forgotten its identity and mission.

Given that we do live in a fallen, broken world and the church is divided up into denominations and independent churches all over the world, I can see applications of Schultz’s principles on the local level. When he brought in the consulting firm SYPartners to help their leadership gain a new way to see things, I immediately thought of the church consulting firm Auxano.³³ I work for Fellowship Bible Church of Rutherford County in Murfreesboro, Tennessee and a few years ago we hired them to help us see ourselves in a new light. Like SYPartners, Auxano helped us remove what is not a part of who we are, refocus on our unique identity (within the whole of the church), and establish values that would allow us to stay true to our identity.³⁴ These helped us to define what we need to do that was consistent with the why behind it.³⁵

²⁹ Ibid., 163.

³⁰ Ibid., 133.

³¹ Ibid., 135-6, 156, 159.

³² Ibid., 153, 159.

³³ Ibid., 72.

³⁴ Ibid., 90, 104, 106.

³⁵ Ibid., 115.

As stated previously, the mission of the church is, as a relational entity, to relate to God, to her internal community, and to the world around her. A major connection I found is how Starbucks mission “to inspire and nurture the human spirit one person, one cup, and one neighborhood at a time”³⁶ is similar to what the church is supposed to be about. Schultz defines what that looks like in terms of more than just the coffee. He describes the environment he wants to create as a “haven,” “always full of humanity” and the various relationships with the insiders and the outsiders as authentic, caring, connected, accountable, and welcoming.³⁷ Should not these things be true of the church as it relates to God, to those inside the community and to those outside of the community: a haven in a fallen, broken world, embracing our humanity as image bearers of God, creating environments and relationships that are authentic, caring, connected, accountable to truth and welcoming to all?

Schultz says: “At the very heart of being a merchant is a desire to tell a story by making sensory, emotional connections.... Ideally, every Starbucks store should tell a story about coffee and what we as an organization believe in” and then “authentically replicate that experience hundreds upon thousands of times.”³⁸ I am reminded of Bonhoeffer saying, “Our salvation is ‘external to ourselves.’ I find no salvation in my life *history*, but only in the *history* of Jesus Christ.”³⁹ The church is called to tell His Story the best way we know how. But since it is His Story and told in the power of His Spirit through the church, the experience of an authentic encounter with Christ can be repeated thousands, millions of times.

“The Church According to Starbucks” is a catchy title and there are some similarities between Starbucks and its journey and the church and hers, such as a mission to engage the human spirit, to create an environment for people to connect and to provide a haven from the world outside. However, the church has an identity and a purpose that is spiritual because she

³⁶ Ibid., 111.

³⁷ Ibid., 112.

³⁸ Ibid., 273-4.

³⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Christian Community*, (New York: HarperOne, 1978), 54. Italics mine.

belongs to the God of the universe who is Spirit. The identity and mission of the church are far above and beyond what a manmade entity like Starbucks could be compared. Where Starbucks seeks to be a “third place space” for people outside of home and work, the church is the *first place space* because it is the people of God in-dwelt by His Spirit living in community as we were created to be in the very beginning.⁴⁰ “True worship comes only from spirits made alive and sensitive by the quickening of the Spirit of God.”⁴¹

⁴⁰ Cf.: *NET Bible*, John 1:14, 17; 3:16; 4:24; 14:6; 1 Timothy 3:15. Italics mine.

⁴¹ John Piper, *Desiring God*, (Colorado Springs: Multnomah Books, 2011), 82.

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