

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Canadian Journal of Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_cjpc 01.php

Kevin Lewis O'Neil, *City of God: Christian Citizenship in Postwar Guatemala* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010). Pp xix + 278. \$24.95.

This book is yet another contribution about Guatemala's socio-political and economic situation, and religious configurations since the end of the civil war. O'Neil examines the impact of religious affiliation on citizenship construction and formation. He focuses on the ways Neo-Pentecostals in Guatemala (specifically the El-Shaddai communities) respond to the challenge of citizenship. In doing so, he counters the notion that neo-Pentecostalism functions as a neutralizing opium, preventing its adherents from "more militant" social and political engagement. The paradox, he explains, is that neo-Pentecostal activities display systematic, intentional, and calculated actions that foster the formation of citizens, while at the same time limiting the avenue through which they can act.

In six carefully delineated chapters, O'Neil looks at five particular neo-Pentecostal beliefs and practices (cell groups, spiritual warfare, fatherhood, charity, evangelism), and how these conspire to produce citizens and function as cultural technologies for the production of particular kinds of citizens.

In the first chapter O'Neil locates his work within the larger field of citizenship studies. In Guatemala, he claims, neo-Pentecostals confront enormous obstacles due to the destructive effects of the prolonged civil war (1954-1996), and the present state of social unrest, gang-related crime and violence, femicide, extreme poverty, and unfettered racism. This is the con-

text within which neo-Pentecostalism continues to thrive, and where the creation of specific kinds of citizens takes place. O'Neil convincingly argues that citizenship is an ever-present concern for Guatemalans in general. Drawing on critical cultural sources (e.g. Bakhtin, Foucault, Arendt, and Rose) he shows how at various levels of government, popular political strategies conspire to place the weight of civic responsibility upon the shoulders of the population, while at the same time exempting themselves from addressing the needs of the populace. This emphasis on citizenship is also found among neo-Pentecostals where they exemplify how religious faith fosters civic responsibility: religious faith connects directly with building a better country.

In the second chapter, O'Neil addresses El Shaddai's cell group structure. Through these groups participants keep each other accountable by fasting, prayer, and conscience evaluation. They exercise a form of self-government and mutual policing, which must be properly recognized as citizenship activity. These activities take place at the level of the individual, and show the fundamental connection of religious affiliation and citizen engagement and activity.

Spiritual warfare is the topic in the third chapter, which is viewed as the responsibility of every believing Guatemalan citizen. For El-Shaddai members, street gangs, rampant violence, alcoholism, and spousal abuse are manifestations of the negative destructive influence of evil spirits across the nation. Mayan spirituality is depicted as having diabolical influence. Believers battle against the spiritual forces of evil in or-

der to create the conditions for a country free of satanic influence and for its conversion.

Fatherhood and its connections toward building a greater Guatemala is the preoccupation of the fourth chapter. O'Neil unmaskes the careful inscription of paradoxical patriarchal cultural structures baptized by literal interpretations of the Bible. While spousal abuse is rejected, the submission of women is enforced. While males are viewed as the authority figures of the home, women are keenly active in the preservation of the structures. The present state of national disarray is the result of a generation of males who failed in their responsibility as fathers. According to O'Neil, neo-Pentecostals challenge men to affirm their responsibilities over their homes, and to shoulder the weight of the entire nation. Fatherhood becomes a cultural mechanism of control at the level of citizens.

El Shaddai's relation to the indigenous people is the subject of the fifth chapter where O'Neil focuses on the practice of charity. Charity does not mean justice. Here, it means the preservation of ideas and attitudes about the indigenous person that echo Spanish colonial times. The indigenous bear a long history of discrimination and racism, and continue to be portrayed as undeveloped and uncultured, infants worthy of charity. Citizenship takes center stage as evangelization is articulated as crucial for the fulfillment of their civic duty. The improvement of the nation lays in their ability to express love for the indigenous while seeking their conversion.

In his final chapter, O'Neil discusses world evangelism. He distinguishes between global Christian-

ity and internationalism. "Global," he writes, assumes that Christianity is spreading everywhere in the same way. In reality, Christianity is spreading throughout many places in the world, but also skips many others. The connections are really among different nations where neo-Pentecostalism is an expression of transnational and translocal Christianity. Guatemalan neo-Pentecostals do not dissolve national differences. They seek to change the world by changing themselves and their country. They are citizens of the world because they are citizens of Guatemala.

In his conclusion, O'Neil expresses his disappointment for how Guatemala's forms of government and El-Shaddai communities undercut the destructive and violent history of civil war and indigenous genocide. The army, which carried out the vast majority of the violence, continues to be the model for militant Christian living. Thus, citizenship does not mean a critique of the present social structures that condemn the majority of the population to physical danger, poverty, or lack of basic necessities.

Several problems exist in this book, however. Despite O'Neil's skillful sensitivity, his study perpetuates dominant Eurocentric notions of citizenship. He is correct that citizenship studies must take seriously the role of religion in the formation of citizens. His insights lose force as he ignores the cultural nature of cell groups and other activities, and how these provide a sense of belonging, relationship, and community that people would not have otherwise. He gives no reasons why people feel attracted to neo-Pentecostal churches. Furthermore, he does not identify the historical connections of these groups to classical Pentecostalism.

And he does not acknowledge the profound dominance of U.S. evangelical cultural by way of literature, approaches to liturgy, and music. These issues must be addressed in order to better understand the development of neo-Pentecostalism in Guatemala and throughout the world.

Reviewed by Néstor Medina
Regent University