

Finding the Groove

Finding the Groove: Composing a Jazz-Shaped Faith by Robert Gelinus uses jazz to look at theology in a new way. Gelinus applies principles from the music and performers to how we approach Christianity. Influenced by Ralph Ellison, who said that American life is "jazz-shaped," Gelinus contextualizes jazz and Ellison's philosophy to give us a metaphor for faith.

The author emphasizes the traditions of the faith, the community of faith, and spiritual disciplines. Gelinus argues that like jazz, as we understand the tradition of the Christian faith and find our voice within the ensemble or community of faith, we have freedom to improvise. As an example, Gelinus shows us Jesus improvising on the gospel by telling the good news in different ways to different people with a sensitivity to their felt-needs and personalities (e.g. the woman at the well and Nicodemus). This also falls in line with the principles of contextualization, as shown in Paul's proclamation of the gospel in Athens, using Athenian religion, philosophy, and poetry.

His strongest section is on the community of faith, which he compares to the jazz ensemble. He writes, "What if we experienced church like a jazz ensemble (listening to the beat of the image of God in each of us), and what if community meant that you and I felt connected, not only to those that we can see, but also with those who have followed (in past generations) and have yet (in future generations) to follow Jesus?" (p. 83). This kind of community (1) forces people out of their comfortable spaces into the mess and influence of others, (2) gives a place for the past and future generations of believers, groups often forgotten, and (3) performs together to show the world Christ's love.

Another strength is his dealing with pain, which he compares to blues music. Gelinus argues that jazz doesn't remove or smooth out the pain but redeems it. As Christians, we cannot ignore or smooth over the pain of life but enter into it and work through it, recognizing that this isn't how it should be and moving it toward redemption by embracing it.

Gelinus moves between Scripture, stories of twentieth- and twenty-first century Christians, and the lives and music of jazz musicians. His message and theology are influenced especially by Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther King, Jr. Some of his writing reads like a cadence, reverberating with the rhythm of jazz. A few sections, however, are bland. Occasionally, Gelinus' theology is blurry (i.e. regarding his talk of our destination being heaven rather than a whole earth redemption, his ideas of God revealing his personal will for our lives, and speaking of Jesus' physical body in the past as if that is different than his body today), but these ideas don't affect the message of the book, which encourages us toward a vibrant Christian life.

He also affirms the third-way thinking popular today. To Gelinus, third-way thinking is the groove between two tensions and leads us into a creative tension. While I agree with his point that paradoxes in the Bible give us the opportunity to discover our Creator in new ways and find many aspects of third-way thinking helpful, especially as we seek unity in the Bible so that together as the Body of Christ, we may serve his kingdom and show his love to the world, third-way thinking must be approached carefully as it sometimes shuts down good conversation rather than allowing two sides to continue to refine and challenge each other.

Overall, Gelinus' book is a good read for those who feel stuck and need a fresh, creative approach for the faith. It's an easy read, but it challenges Christians that like musicians who have practiced for years, we are expected to work and train hard so that we may minister. In other words, Christianity is not static nor comfortable. This book is a great addition in the areas of discipleship and spiritual formation.

Review by Heather A. Goodman