

Pastor Stef's Book Review – December 2016

For the past couple of months I've been reading the book *Onward* by Starbucks founder Howard Schultz. The book is essentially the story of how Starbucks survived the 2008 stock market crash. During my time reading *Onward* I happened to find a book at *Value Village* by Leonard Sweet called ***The Gospel According to Starbucks (2007)***. Back in college I read a few of Sweet's books and so I was familiar with him. I always found him to be full of creative ideas even though I never cared much for his writing style – (too many acronyms for me). But for a couple of bucks, and because of the book *Onward*, I thought I'd give it a try.

The Gospel According to Starbucks takes a look at how Starbucks has created the kind of loyalty and community it has with its customers and then asks if there is anything we can learn from this as a church. Sweet focuses on four things and (wow, big surprise here) he lists them under the acronym E.P.I.C: Experiential, Participatory, Image rich and Connective.

When you go to Starbucks you are paying for more than just a coffee. You are paying for an experience. Everything from the layout, the furniture and the aroma is meant to immerse you into Starbucks' culture. But Starbucks is also participatory, in that you can custom order your drinks with hundreds of different combinations and you can even personalize the very cup you drink out of. Add to this Starbucks website, which is continually asking their customers for their thoughts, advice and opinions. Starbucks is also Image rich with its logo that everybody recognizes right down to the colours it chooses to paint its walls. And Starbucks is about connecting and meeting up with other people, either in person or in a good book, either after work, during work or at any other time. Their barista's are even trained to know your name and your personalised drink if you are a regular customer. In other words, what *Cheers* was to the last generation, Starbucks is for this generation. And back when *Cheers* was popular people in the church we're asking the same question, "Why do people find more community and connection at the bar (now coffee shop) than they do in church?"

There is a lot I agree with in Sweet's book as well as a lot I struggle with. Yes, people want experiences, they want to be participants, they are driven by what they see, and they want a place to connect, but at the same time they want them on their terms. Places like Starbucks learn those terms and then deliver at high capacity. But that is also what makes their people customers. And the danger with the church patterning itself this way too uncritically is that it ends up only producing consumers. The church has to ask how we help people connect and participate in ways they *need* to, not just how they *want* to. That is tougher to deliver. And what happens when Starbucks can't deliver? People move on to *Tim Hortons* or *Second Cup*. Here, too, we can see many parallels with consumer church.

But critique is easy. It is a lot more difficult to offer solutions. And Sweet has always been one to experiment and try to look at new approaches. I may not always agree with him and may even think some of his ideas can only feed into a bigger problem, but at least Sweet, now at age 65, is stepping out and risking and engaging culture with the gospel rather than just being a critic hiding away in some "holy" huddle. I just wish he would lose the acronyms!