

Blue Like Jazz

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Donald Miller's *Blue Like Jazz* might be difficult to put down once it is picked up and its pages flipped open. Or at least it might be difficult for Christians who chafe in traditional churches and long for the passion and life they feel in music and poetry to be infused into Christianity. Miller's book is compelling, relatable, moving, and (dare it even be said?) authentic. He takes a faith that often feels rigid and makes it feel beautiful and real. It is not surprising he is a *New York Times* bestseller. Aspects of the modern church that are true in many cases are critiqued, and people might see themselves in Miller's portrait of himself as an often confused sinner. These things must be examined, however, with a critical look at Miller's underlying theology and the purpose of this book.

Blue Like Jazz begins with Miller talking about his childhood and the way this shaped his perception of God. His father was distant, so God (the *Father*) was distant—a problem shared by the many people coming from broken homes today. Miller wonders “Why would God want to call Himself Father when so many fathers abandon their children?” (4). He strikes at an aching question, and yet does not provide an answer, something that might be said to characterize much of his book: questions, brokenness, confusion, but no real answers.

Most of the book is composed of stories and somewhat rambling, often poetic or perhaps ridiculous thoughts, which makes for an absorbing read. Miller chronicles his first encounters with sin and guilt, beginning with lies and moving into porn. “Religion” seemed a safe place compared to this; he figured it could “get me back to normal so I could have fun without feeling guilty or something” (8).

These early beginnings might help explain the subtitle of the book: “Nonreligious Thoughts on Christian Spirituality.” Miller makes it clear that he saw religion as a system that he fit into without actually having any kind of personal relationship with God. Yet, it is here that the first clue about the necessity of discernment when reading this book begins to show up. *Why We’re Not Emergent (by two guys who should be)*, which is written by Kevin DeYoung and Ted Kluck, helps provide a good lens. DeYoung writes that “In emergent circles, spirituality is hot and religion is not.” This is because “Religion is all about certainty and sanctity, while spirituality, or faith, lives in inquiry and fluidity” (106). The first few pages of *Blue Like Jazz* demonstrate that Miller is coming from a church background he deems as negative—a strict, perhaps not gospel-centered church that has led him to create a dichotomy between religion and spirituality. This kind of background and thinking is relatable; many Christians probably want to run from the idea of “religion” and into the grips of something much more fluid and personal. The difficulty comes in where this kind of thinking might actually cause one to end up.

Miller would seem to work with false dichotomies that undermine traditional churches. “The goofy thing about Christian faith is that you believe it and don’t believe it at the same time” (51). This seems to be because Miller does not think his faith can be explained. It is not “rational or scientific” (54). Belief is something that just happens. “I have a radar inside me that says to believe in Jesus” (57). But what does this mean? Miller pits the rational and the real against faith. He says, “I don’t believe I will ever walk away from God for intellectual reasons. Who knows anything anyway?” (103). His main idea seems to be that Christianity is not something explainable or reasonable; it is something you *feel*. To know God is to experience him. De Young critiques this kind of thinking, saying that emergents’ “idea of knowledge is so provisional and lacking so much confidence (because the only other kind of knowledge in their minds is cold,

linear, and infallible) that it's hard to imagine actually and accurately knowing God except as we experience Him (36). Miller's ideas that separate the intellect and mind from the heart assurance and even experience of Christianity place him with a foot in the door of emergent thinking.

One of the key components of emergent thinking is that it "undermines the knowability of God" (De Young and Kluck 35). And Miller climbs right onto this boat as he emphasizes letting go of rationality in order to worship God. "Too much time is spent trying to chart God on a grid, and too little is spent allowing our hearts to feel awe. By reducing Christian spirituality to formula, we deprive our hearts of wonder" (205). Miller wants to separate knowledge about God from love and worship of Him, as though knowing someone will, by necessity, kill all feeling for that person. He fails to see the wholeness of the Christian faith: the beauty of studying and knowing and responding in awe and worship.

Miller wants to emphasize the mysterious, experiential side of Christianity (the heart and the passion, the confusion and the doubt). "I don't think you can explain how Christian faith works either. It is a mystery. And I love this about Christian spirituality. It cannot be explained, and yet it is beautiful and true" (Miller 57). De Young says, "The Christian faith *is* mysterious. But when we talk about Christianity, we don't start with mystery" (37). Miller undermines doctrine and God's knowability for the sake of what he sees as breathing life into Christianity. But getting rid of truth, especially the truth found in Scripture that is worth "charting," is throwing the baby out with the bath water—it leaves no *foundation* for the awe, love, and beauty that should characterize Christianity.

In spite of this, Miller does have some valid critiques of the church and he does not completely forego all foundational theological claims. As he reflects on churches he had been to, he says, "I felt like both churches came to the table with a them and us mentality, them being the

liberal non-Christians in the world, and us being Christians” (214). Miller sees the separation (from “the world”) mentality many churches are wading in. The root of this, he alludes to, is self-righteousness. “There was love in the Christian community, but it was conditional love. Sure, we called it unconditional, but it wasn’t. There were bad people in the world and good people in the world. We were raised to believe this. If people were bad, we treated them as though they were either evil or charity” (215). He urges Christians to love because they are called to love and serve others and not because someone deserves it or fits into their ideal model for humanity.

Miller also calls out the hypocrisy in the church by exposing his own hypocrisy. He talks about coming to understand “that what I believe is not what I say I believe; what I believe is what I do” (110). He goes on to explain that as much as you think you believe something, until it affects and changes the way you live your life, you probably do not truly believe it. Miller has witnessed and experienced hypocrisy and he writes encouraging people to live and walk with Jesus, although, once again, it does cause him to emphasize *living* more than *believing* at times and to water down Christ’s mission for his church to acceptance, love, and social justice.

One of the most refreshing aspects of Miller’s book is his honesty about sin. In his second chapter, he works through realizing what it means to be human, and finally having to come to grips with the fact that “I am the problem” (20). His own heart, he sees, is the problem. We have “a sin nature” and perhaps, he implies, each person is capable of being a murderer or a rapist because of this nature (16-17). In his chapter on redemption, Miller admits, “Because of sin, because I am self-addicted, living in the wreckage of the fall, my body, my heart, and my affections are prone to love things that kill me.” He sees that “my natural desire was to love darkness” (77). Unfortunately, he pretty much leaves it here. He recognizes that you cannot love the right things apart from God, but, as with most of the topics in this book, the subject ends with

the end of his story. He does not talk about the power of the Gospel or what redemption really is and there are absolutely no Scripture references. He is clearly uninterested in trying to convince anybody of anything, which is partly why this book is so enjoyable (nobody is pointing their finger at you), but no truths about Christianity or Christ are expanded on past Miller's own personal experiences. The things he thought and said are assumed to be enough. And they make the book relatable, but they do not provide any answers. They leave you wondering what the Gospel is, why he really needs it, what it does. Why is it worth dying for? Why does it cause (command) you to love others?

In the end, Miller's collection of thoughts and stories are funny and interesting. He uses analogies like "Sexy Carrots" to describe the complexities of Christianity (or "Christian Spirituality") and presents them in a way that might actually have adamant non-Christians interested in reading about it. But, even as he points out true things about the church, he is often very negative towards traditional Christians and seems to over-spiritualize Christian faith, leaning away from doctrine and knowable truths. He does not want to communicate truth to his readers. He wants to tell a story—his story—and pour out honest reflections and confusions onto paper. He wants people to experience faith as he's experienced it, and for a lot of people, that is probably all they want. That does not mean it's enough.

Works Cited

DeYoung, Kevin and Ted Kluck. *Why We're Not Emergent (By Two Guys Who Should Be)*. Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2008. Print.

Miller, Donald. *Blue Like Jazz*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003. Print.

