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Don Miller & *Blue Like Jazz*

by David Dunlap

Over the past few years, Emerging church leader Donald Miller has become a significant voice for the Emerging church movement and, unfortunately, for many young evangelicals. Miller, a Portland, Oregon-based professional writer, has recently become much sought-after as a conference speaker and as a spokesperson for the post-modern Emerging church movement. He is a founding member of the fast-growing Imago Dei Community (emergent church) in Portland, Oregon. Recently, *Christianity Today* magazine featured him in a four-page cover article. The article lauds him, saying:

Miller is a bridge to an irreverent, bohemian world. His work is framed with bohemia—a road trip, a pint of beer, an occasional curse word—but filled with explicit longing for Jesus. He never takes on basic Christian tenets or evangelical priorities such as biblical authority or spreading the gospel...¹

Christian Best Seller: *Blue Like Jazz*

Donald Miller, age 35, is the author of the best-selling book *Blue Like Jazz: Non-Religious Thoughts on Christian Spirituality* (Thomas Nelson, 2003). With a touch of self-deprecating humor, Miller introduces his readers to many of the errors associated with the Emerging church. This book is considered by many to be the entry-level book for those interested in the Emerging church movement. *Christianity Today* reports that since 2003 more than 800,000 copies have been sold. Half of all sales have been in secular book stores and the rest have been through Christian book outlets. In spite of its criticism of Evangelicalism, this book has received rave reviews from evangelical leaders and leading magazines and journals. *Campus Crusade for Christ* purchased 65,000 copies to distribute in their "Freshman Survival Kits" on college campuses nationwide! Conservative, Bible-based Christians should be very cautious and spiritually discerning with this book. It is very likely that a young Christian you know is reading this book or has been encouraged to read it by a friend.

It is the opinion of many that this book is spiritually harmful, irreverent, and biblically unsound. Recently, author Dave Hunt (*The Berean Call*), Roger Oakland (*Faith Undone*, Understanding the Times, 2007), John MacArthur (*The Truth War*, Thomas Nelson, 2007), and Dr. Douglas Groothuis, professor of philosophy of Denver Seminary, have all sounded the alarm about the teachings of Donald Miller and *Blue Like Jazz*.

*"I never liked
jazz music
because jazz
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But that was
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this
happened."*

Don Miller

*—On the meaning of the his
book title Blue like Jazz.*

Some of the concern that many have with Donald Miller and *Blue Like Jazz* is better understood when one reads Miller's own explanation of Christian spirituality. This is Miller's post-modern version of Christianity that he would like his readers to embrace. Miller writes:

*For me, the beginning of sharing my faith with people began by throwing out Christianity and embracing Christian spirituality, a nonpolitical mysterious system that can be experienced but not explained.*²

Blue Like Jazz is the semi-autobiographical spiritual journey of Don Miller, in which he manages to mock and assault the core principles of evangelical Christianity at every opportunity: (1) He mocks the importance of evangelism; (2) He diminishes the the importance of inerrancy and inspiration of Scripture; (3) He displays an irreverent attitude toward Bible-based Christianity; (4) He slights those who are serious about Bible study; (5) He celebrates frequent drinking of beer and attendance at bars; (6) He applauds cursing/foul language, i.e. "cussing pastors"; (7) He dismisses worldliness as unimportant; (8) He supports the casual use of marijuana; (9) He encourages the practice of dating unbelievers.

Don Miller's Background

Don Miller was raised in Houston, Texas, in a nominally Christian home. His father left the family when Don was very young. He attended a Southern Baptist church, where he made a profession of salvation and later served as a youth leader. At this church, Don began to be dissatisfied with evangelical Christianity. He eventually settled in the Portland, Oregon, area, where he attends Imago Dei Community. (Popular Emerging church leader Rick McKinley, and Multnomah Bible College professor Garry Friesen, are prominent leaders at Imago Dei.) *Blue Like Jazz* was published in 2003; initially, sales of the book were slow. However, over time the book became more and more popular. Miller has written four other titles since *Blue Like Jazz* was published. Miller teaches a college-level class called "Gospel and Culture" each year at Summit College, outside Toronto, Canada.

Blue Likes Jazz's Teachings

Don Miller overplays the "Christianity-stinks-but-Jesus-is-cool" card a little too much. He and his friends set up a booth on the Reed College campus to apologize for Christianity. They asked people to express their hostility against Christians. However, in *Blue Like Jazz*, he wants to invite the reader to authentic Christian spirituality, although he is not really sure what it looks like. He can only report what he has experienced—and it has been a confusing journey! This means that some of his readers will walk away even more confused about true Christianity, but more encouraged to get another tattoo or piercing, grow those dreadlocks, attend another anti-Bush protest, or say another profanity. They will learn that watching *South Park* is not so bad, that having crushes on lesbian pop stars is cool, and that smoking marijuana is unimportant to God. Miller is confused about legalism and true obedience to Christ. The so-called *Blue Like Jazz* "Christian spirituality" seeks to conform so much to unredeemed contemporary culture that it fails to look anything like true New Testament Christianity.

"For me, the beginning of sharing my faith with people began by throwing out Christianity and embracing Christian spirituality, a nonpolitical mysterious system that can be experienced but not explained."

Don Miller
—from *Blue Like Jazz*

The Irrationality of Biblical Truth?

When Miller gets around to discussing biblical truth, he portrays it as a feeling or an experience that is real but not verifiable. Miller's half-hearted defense of Christianity to unbelieving friends noticeably avoids the use of Scripture or apologetics. An unbelieving friend tells Miller that she does not understand why he believes in God or why he insists she must also. He responds by saying:

"I don't know why, either...but I believe in God, Laura. There is something inside me that causes me to believe"(p. 53). He then compares it to "belief in Peter Pan or the Tooth Fairy" (p. 55), or the feeling of love, or the experience of beauty. It is "feeling"—a supra-logical sensation of beauty—that is the basis of his belief"(p. 54).

Moreover, Miller believes that claiming that the Bible speaks authoritatively comes across as arrogant and is a turnoff to those outside the faith. The Bible, according to *Blue Like Jazz*, is a good book, but just don't take it too seriously.

In *Blue Like Jazz*, Don Miller joins the Emerging church trend of popularizing vulgarity, worldliness, and cursing in the church. Obscenity seems to be a badge of honor among Emerging church leaders. Don Miller writes approvingly of his conversations with Mark Driscoll, of Mars Hill Church in Seattle, and Rick McKinley, now the pastor at Imago Dei in Portland:

Even though Mark said cusswords, he was telling a lot of people about Jesus, and he was being socially active...About the time I was praying that God would help me find a church, I got a call from Mark, the cussing pastor, and he said he had a friend who was moving to Portland to start a church and that I should join him. Rick and I got together over coffee. I thought he was hilarious...He said a few cusswords but not as bad as Mark.³

After attending Mark Driscoll's church (cussing pastor), Miller writes, "It felt kind of cool, kind of different. It was relieving" (p. 127).

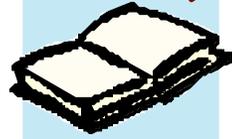
Silencing the Church's Prophetic Voice

Miller, like many Emerging church leaders, is sensitive to the alienation some in America feel toward the church. This alienation, Miller contends, results from the fact that unsaved people are spoken of as "enemies" and the objects of offensive politics. Rather, unbelievers are mostly good people who love and hurt and are trying to make sense of life. "My pastors and leaders were wrong," he says "Liberals are not evil"(p. 215). Miller would like Christians to stop voicing their opposition to abortion, homosexuality, pornography, and other cultural sins of the day. He opposes George W. Bush and the Republican party and argues that conservative Christians have made a wreck of the evangelical church. Meanwhile, liberal Democrats are noble and praiseworthy and should be supported as much as possible.

However, it should be noted that Christianity is not wrong simply because it is unpopular on the liberal college campus. In every age, Christians have been despised by the world. The world, under the sway of sin, has always interpreted our convictions as self-righteous. The world has always misconstrued our acts of charity and mocked our values. We should not expect things to change very much in the future.

"Don Miller is cavalier and glib about the rational foundations for Christian faith. This is ironic, given the tremendous renewal of Christian philosophy and apologetics in our day. True spirituality is a rational and biblical faith that tenaciously defends the objective, absolute, and universal truths of Christianity."

Dr. Douglas Groothuis
Professor of philosophy
Denver Seminary



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Conclusion

By speaking with the voice and longings of the "20-something" generation, *Blue Like Jazz* has become extremely popular with younger Christians. In his critique of the traditional church, Christian coolness becomes the ultimate core value of the church, while conservative evangelicalism is portrayed as out of step with post-modern culture, irrelevant, and deplorable. However, Miller is unable to distinguish between being relevant and being worldly. He is ready to abandon doctrinal faithfulness for cultural acceptance. Sadly, in the *Blue Like Jazz* world, the church's prophetic voice is silenced, biblical truth is mere intellectual arrogance, and evangelistic zeal is counterproductive. May the Lord rescue the church from such folly. C. H. Mackintosh (1820-1896), over one hundred years ago, described the heart of the problem of the *Blue Like Jazz* philosophy:

It is often urged, "We must present truth in such an aspect as will attract," when what is really meant is this, that truth is to be made a kind of variable, elastic thing, which can be turned into any shape, or stretched to any length, to suit the tastes of those who would desire to put it out of the world altogether. Truth, however, cannot be thus treated; it can never be made to reduce itself to the level of this world. It will speak distinctly, if its voice be not stifled. The attempt to accommodate truth to those who are of the world can only end in complete failure. There can be no accommodation. Let it stand upon its own heavenly height; let saints stand fully and firmly with it; let us invite sinners up to it; but let us not descend to the low and groveling pursuits and habits of the world, and thus rob truth, so far as in us lies, of all its edge and power. We may think to commend truth to the minds of worldly people by an effort to conform to their ways; but, so far from commending it, we in reality expose it to secret contempt and scorn. The man who conforms to the world will be an enemy of Christ, and an enemy of the people of God. It cannot be otherwise.⁴

Endnotes

1. Patton Dodd, "A Better Story Teller", *Christianity Today*, June 2007, 30)
2. Don Miller, *Blue Like Jazz*, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2003), p. 57
3. Don Miller, *Blue Like Jazz*, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2003), p. 133-134
4. C. H. Mackintosh, *Miscellaneous Writings, Jehoshaphat*, (New York, NY: Loizeaux Brothers, 1975), p. 341-342