

Book Review

The Unauthorized Guide to Choosing a Church

Carmen Renee Berry

Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press/Baker Book House, 2003. 400 pages, \$18.99 US

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Carmen Renee Berry is a best-selling author and self-help teacher who travels the United States conducting seminars on relationships and mental health. Raised in a Christian home (Nazarene Church), she spent a number of her adult years skeptical about the value of the local church because of the imperfections she saw in it. The loss of a friend by suicide caused her to reconsider this skeptical path and led her back to a community of sincere (and imperfect) Christians with whom she found genuine friendship and spiritual nurture.

With an encouragement to the reader to have a spiritual connection, Berry presents this book as an “everything you ever wanted to know about a church but didn’t want to take the time to ask” resource. In common vernacular she identifies the doctrinal and praxis distinctives of each major denomination in the United States. Of particular interest is a “scorecard” on each denomination showing what branch of Christianity (Catholic, Orthodox, or Protestant), worship style, founding date, number of churches and members, contact information, to which member of the Godhead it has the greatest affinity, and what she calls “clout continuum” (that is the priority ranking of Scripture, tradition, and personal experience in the life of the national church). By the way, if you’re wondering how Pentecostals fare in Berry’s work, you will find a very warm and friendly description of what one would

experience in a local Pentecostal church, including glossolalic utterances.

Berry’s chronological overview of the Church from the birth of Christ to the present hits the high spots of Christian tradition, assisting the reader in developing a better historical perspective on the progression of the organized church. She also includes a timeline that visually depicts when each of the denominations developed, aiding the reader to see the overlap that occurs in the denominational development cycle. The addition of a glossary of terms helps the novice understand “churchese” terminology and serves as a reminder that the book is not written for the denominationally immersed. Ms. Berry offers a very pointed invitation for the reader to connect with a local church and promises that the book will tell them everything they need to know about how to dress when they visit, what the church’s religious symbols mean, and the limitations that each (and every) local church has because of the humans who comprise it. She even presents a faith survey in the first chapter that will assist the reader in understanding the shape or preferences of their own faith experience in order to connect with a local church that will affirm them.

The value of this book to the church leader is twofold. First, it will serve as a reference for interaction with the church leaders of your community, identifying the

points of commonality and distinction with them. Second, it will give you a snapshot of what your local church might look like to an outsider, and thus cause you to take another look at how you present your local church and its ministry to them.