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BREAKING THE MOLD

By Greg Wiens

An iconoclast is a nonconformist. A dissenter. A radical. A rebel. It literally means “image breaker” in Byzantine Greek, and refers to a movement in which activists would destroy the religious icons of the orthodox church in protest to its dogma. In Gregory Berns’ book *Iconoclast: A Neuroscientist Reveals How to Think Differently*, an iconoclast is defined more broadly as someone who does something that others say cannot be done. Berns applies his expertise in neuroscience to analyze historical examples of iconoclasts to determine how they accomplished great feats, created revolutionary movements and broken the mold placed on them by society.

Berns does not accept that past and present iconoclasts are simply exceptionally gifted or blessed. He says the iconoclastic brain is hardwired differently from the average person’s, and thus alters three of their major brain functions: perception, fear response and social intelligence. *Iconoclast* explores the physiology behind each of these three major brain functions. It is fascinating stuff, albeit technical at times.

PERCEPTION

Though an iconoclast may see the same physical world the rest of humanity, their take on that world is markedly different. Berns explains how the brain combines physical information and experiential information to form perception, uses preconceptions to file new information into familiar categories. It takes much less energy for the brain to operate this way, and the brain always seeks to conserve energy. Iconoclasts, however, continually find novelty in their surroundings. They do not categorize too hastily lest they miss important information.

FEAR RESPONSE

When a new opportunity is perceived by the brain, it may trigger a fear response, borne out of uncertainty or desire to avoid ridicule, preventing action. Iconoclasts have learned how to face such fears and seize opportunities, despite the possibility of failure. By doing so, they are actually restructuring the way their amygdala functions. The more times they overcome fear, the more they are able to lead in the face of fear. This feeds back into the brain’s catalog of perceptions.

SOCIAL INTELLIGENCE

Berns explains that for an iconoclast to be successful, they have to help non-iconoclasts overcome their own perceptions and fears in order for them to join their cause. Typically, iconoclasts are leading the charge down an unconventional path discredited by the bulk of society. The biggest challenge facing these natural-born leaders is to coax others to embrace the paradigm shift.

Iconoclasts have highly developed functions for understanding others and guiding them along by maintaining a positive reputation and fostering familiarity. People are drawn into their sphere of influence. To come up with a revolutionary solution is one thing, but to take the risk to manifest it is quite another, because it requires the buy-in of others too.

ICONOCLASTS AND CHRISTIANITY

The book is hard to read at times because of the technical nature of the brain research on which it is based. However, it is well worth the work because of the vistas of new thinking it reveals. To my knowledge, Berns is not a Christian yet the concepts in *Iconoclast* align with the tenets of the Bible. As Christian leaders we are called to see the world differently. II Corinthians 5:7 calls us to live by faith and not by sight. To lead this way requires us to see opportunities in the world, made possible by God, which others might not see. We also must not fall prey to dismissing opportunities that God has placed in our lives because of a lack of perception or fear.

A Christian iconoclast's fear response should be prayer. Too many Christians fail to step out in faith because they fear the unknown, failure or ridicule. *Iconoclast* helps to understand the physiology behind these responses and even provides ways to overcome them that can be combined with prayer.

All too often it is easy to disregard others who disagree with how we approach our ministry. After reading *Iconoclast*, I was struck by how often Christian leaders sell themselves—and the Kingdom—short by not spending the time, energy and effort to develop the social intelligence required to bring others along for the cause of Christ.

This book helped provide some personal insight and shed light on the experiences I have had and the people I have worked with in my 34 years in Christian leadership. Christian iconoclasts probably have not been fully aware of the process at work within them as they strive toward change. Christian institutions have not always embraced iconoclasts either, categorizing them too quickly as radicals and troublemakers.

I believe that this tendency has forced the church into a place of increasing irrelevance in this post-Christian era of our nation. We must remember that Jesus Christ himself was an iconoclast, and overturning the moneychangers' tables outside the temple was a distinctly iconoclastic act that we in modern Christianity now hold as an example. We must be open to those who perceive our world differently as Christ did, and heed ideas that may challenge our traditions but ultimately spread the gospel.

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