

Q&A: How do we hold both conviction and humility?

Sarah, responding to my previous post, asks:

Hi Will, could you write another blog post on what conviction and humility look like? Speaking truth to power as you say.

Conviction is essential for obedience; it doesn't forsake humility. And if we are saying and doing things that our society agrees with, they will recognise humility. But if we are humbly speaking God's truth that is at odds with the world around us, it won't be liked, it will be hated, and the world won't see any humility at all because we are pointing to an authority higher than all others. We endure, we bless, we answer kindly, we are humble. But we will have to be prepared to not be seen as humble whilst we are bowing the knee to the Lord Jesus?

[This is a Q&A question that has been submitted through this blog or asked of me elsewhere and posted with permission. You can submit a question (anonymously if you like) here: <http://briggs.id.au/jour/qanda/>]

Thanks Sarah, and to others who have asked me if I could follow up on my previous post that deals with a perceived incoherence between two aspects of the gospel:



1. The truth-claim that Jesus is Lord. (The *message* of the gospel).
2. The character of humility. (The *mode* of the gospel).

As a wise friend commented, "Great stuff, Will. You outlined the dilemma well. I'd like to hear a fleshing out of the solution a bit more." This is my attempt.

I'm not going to ground this attempt in anything more profound than my own experience and an aspiration towards common sense.

It begins with an agreement with the premise of the question: the Christian call is towards both conviction *and* humility. These two are not at odds. In fact, in the Christian worldview, **conviction and humility cohere**, that is, they go together and can't be separated.

And I also agree with the premise that, in the end, the fact of this can't be determined by other people; it is centred on Jesus. This is point of contention, perhaps. Almost by definition, humility involves an awareness of others, a willingness to listen, to be open to being changed and moved by someone and not hardened towards them. Paul is right: "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others." (Philippians 2:3,4)

The key to my thoughts is this: our other-awareness derives from our Jesus-centredness. That is, our humble approach towards others, in the end, relies upon us being found in Jesus, for Jesus, to Jesus. That is, **our conviction about the gospel is the source from which our humility derives**. There are a number of senses to this:

Firstly, there is a sense in which **Jesus is the greatest example of humility**. We saw that in the previous post when we looked at Philippians 2:6-8. To be apprentices of Jesus is to have the same "mind of Christ" and approach others in his mode. This is essentially "WWJD", which isn't always easy to practice: sometimes being silent, sometimes speaking up, sometimes standing against, sometimes

submitting. Whatever the exact behaviour, the heart is humble.

Secondly, there is a deeper sense in which **Jesus enables us to be humble**. Humility is aware of others, but there can be a flip-side to that. I am also other-focused when I am driven by fear, pride, panic, hate, lust, and so on. If my sense of identity and worth is bound up in others, then it is impossible to be truly humble. If my identity is other-centred then any actions I do, even if they are nice and acquiescent will be at least tinged by self-preservation or self-fulfillment. Rather, if Jesus has captured my life (Galatians 2:20) then I am his and his alone; therefore I am *free* of obligation towards anyone else. I owe my eternal life to no-one else. Therefore *I am free to be humble*. John 2:24 describes this of Jesus, who in his humility, “would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all people.” He was free of them, he was free to love them.

Thirdly, there is a similar sense in which the **Spirit of Jesus compels us to be humble**. There is a conceptual and practical aspect to this. Conceptually, the gospel is a great leveller: “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9). Practically, we trust that the Spirit of Jesus is at work in us. “Christ love compels us” (2 Corinthians 5:14a), says Paul, and he is right. However that compulsion is manifest – speaking, listening, acting, resisting, or simply solidly *being* – Jesus doesn’t just show us the way and give us the freedom to walk it, he leads, guides, propels us forward. The more we look to him, the more we are moved by his humble, life-giving Spirit.

I think the the premise of Sarah’s question is right. Our humility towards others rests upon our dependence on Jesus. Because of this, we cannot, in the end, measure the “success” of our humility by whether it is recognised or not. It doesn’t

mean we ignore others, or dismiss other's opinions and beliefs – after all, Jesus, didn't do that. It *does* mean we don't fear others, slip into their traps, or concur with their brokenness; we are embraced by Jesus first, and we love others out of freedom.

And it won't always "work." It didn't work for Jesus. "If the world hates you," Jesus said (John 15:18), "keep in mind that it hated me first."

Gill and I have certainly known what means to be rejected. It does lead to some soul-searching. Many times, we have fallen short of the humility of the gospel, and have not been careful enough in manner or mode. Sometimes, we have compromised on the truth. At other times, I have had to conclude that I could do no more: My physical size has had me perceived as overbearing, and I can do little about that. I inhabit the role of vicar, and sometimes people respond to previous negative experiences of other vicars, and I can do little about that. All I can do is focus on Jesus and seek to be more like him.

But when it works, it works! I received a voice message today from a friend of mine. Here is someone who is fully committed to the gospel, and feels very free to share it. But there is no sense (beyond ordinary human brokenness) that that conviction is not manifest in a Jesus-centred humility. Take a listen to Uncle Nige:

<http://briggs.id.au/jour/files/2020/02/Nige20200222.mp3>

And finally, I was struck today by an article that summed it up really well, from the point of view of Adam Neder, a Christian teacher. He conceives of humility as an *awareness of our weakness*, and therefore a dependence on the Spirit.

Many of us who teach Christian theology are keenly aware of

the poverty of our language in comparison to the reality of God. We try our best to speak truthfully and faithfully, but our words often seem thin and unreal, they taste like ashes on our tongues, and we wonder if our teaching will add up to anything more than wasted time. In extreme cases, this trajectory of thought and feeling can lead to a deadening acedia that takes root within us and leaves us hopeless or in despair.

But an awareness of our dependence on the Spirit moves us in the opposite direction. It eases the pressure by displacing the teacher from the center of the educational process. It relativizes our weaknesses. It does not eliminate them, and it certainly does not excuse them, but it assures us that God rises above them. And this awareness becomes an essential source of freedom and joy for those who believe and depend on it, whereas for those who do not, teaching can become a burden too heavy to bear—at least for teachers who want their students to know God personally.

Humility is an awareness of the “poverty of our language” and a “displacing the teacher from the center.” When we come full of ourselves, with controlling systems, asserted techniques, and market-proven strategies, we are missing the mode of the gospel. When we come dependent on the Spirit, that is the power and freedom to humbly gift ourselves to the world. Whether the world receives us or not is not for us to know or control.

That then is the only “solution” I can offer: Jesus first, the rest of it will follow.

Image credit: Pjposullivan

Is the Gospel a Power Play?

The perceived incoherence of belief and humility.

The heart of the gospel includes a *mode* as well as a *message*. Jesus is the substance of both of them.



The mode of the gospel is one of humility. “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit,” Paul exhorts us in Philippians 2:3-11. “Rather, in humility, value others above yourselves... have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:... he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant.”

Here is what theologians call *kenosis*, the self-emptying character of the gospel. Jesus, who had the power to command twelve legions of angels, doesn't use the sword (Matthew 5:52-53) but lays down his life. This is the Teacher who sets the example of washing feet (John 13:1-17). “Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant,” he says to his disciples when they jostle for position, “whoever wants to be first must be your slave – just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Matthew 20:26-27).

We, who follow Jesus, are meant to reflect this mode. It's why we wince when there is hypocrisy in our midst, when we see the drippingly wealthy lifestyle of televangelists, or the coercive and oppressive legacy of Western colonialism. We align more clearly with the likes of Mother Teresa or William & Catherine Booth, and above all recognise that the greatest gospel heroes are usually unknown and unsung.

It isn't always simple. Jesus' humility, particularly during his passion and crucifixion, was one of complete surrender to the will of God; he was acquiescent, and was "led to the slaughter... like a sheep silent before her shearers" (Isaiah 53:7). At other times, he is forceful in his actions and language, particularly towards those who exercise and abuse their power. He turns over the tables of the exploitative money changers (Matthew 21:12-13). The pharisees and teachers of the law are "snakes", a "brood of vipers" and worthy of judgement (Matthew 23:33-36).

When we consider these oppressive people, we agree with Jesus' actions. Whatever humility means, it doesn't mean being a doormat, or agreeing with oppression. In fact, **our postmodern world might give us an insight that Jesus appears to be addressing: truth claims are power plays.** By asserting what they declare to be *true* (in how the temple operates, or in the application of God's law), Jesus' opponents are constructing a social framework in which they get to have power and influence. Jesus is right to undermine it!

But here, if we are not careful, we run into an incoherence. Because the gospel is not just the *mode* of humility, it is a *message* of truth. Its shortest declaration is three words long: **Jesus is Lord. We are making a truth claim.**

We don't want to lose humility. Should we therefore refrain from laying out this truth? Let us not fall into the trap of the Pharisees and assert our truth, especially when we inhabit a dominant or privileged Christian position in the Western World. Would it not be more Christ-like to withhold our voice, and be silent like lambs?

Perhaps we should not only lay aside our voice, but be aware of our own heart and attitude. Jesus was humble, so why should we be so arrogant as to hold that we have any particularly correct insight into the ways of the world, the way of God, and the wisdom of what is and what might be? Jesus was self-

effacing, so if we speak his name, we must be doing it for our sake, not his. Evangelism itself, therefore, is a form of oppression. We should lay down our power-claiming truths even within the confines of our heart; we should let go of our beliefs.

Thus, we arrive at our incoherence: For the sake of the gospel, we should stop sharing the gospel. Indeed, for the sake of the gospel, we should stop holding to the truth of the gospel.

If there is a defining dynamic of Western church life, this is it. We want Jesus, but we're embarrassed to believe much about him, let alone speak of him. What if we're wrong? We could so much damage!

I understand the dilemma. After all, other ways of resolving the incoherence may not be particularly attractive to us:

We could modify our sense of Jesus' example of humility and so be less humble ourselves: If he was humble at all, it was an acquiescence tightly attached to his self-sacrificial death on the cross – something he *chose* to do, and therefore a demonstration of his power and strength. The kingdom of Jesus is muscular and assertive: it lays a claim on truth, and on our lives, and dictates some specific ways of living. This world is caught up in a war between good and evil, and we must fight for righteousness in every area of influence: politically, financially, sociologically. This isn't dominance for its own sake, it's justice. We must protect the innocent, particularly the unborn, and hold back the warped worldviews that will pollute the world of our children.

I'm sure you've heard this rhetoric.

We could modify our sense of Jesus' claim to truth and so have less to believe and say: If he made any truth claims about himself at all, they were probably misinterpreted by his biographers, and later given the authority of holy writings by

power-hungry men. Jesus is not *the* way, *the* truth, and *the* life (John 14:6), and if he said it, it only applies within the Jewish world that he inhabited, and he never meant it absolutely. Jesus may have claimed authority in the Kingdom of God (Matthew 28:18) but he meant it subversively, that we might further his Kingdom the way he intended: through dialogue with the oppressed, and inclusion of those discarded by society. The Kingdom of God is made present wherever the compassion that Jesus exemplifies is exercised by any of God's creatures.

I'm sure you've heard this rhetoric also.

Both extremes in this dialectic have a degree of appeal. But it's not a coherent resolution. Within the church, we find ourselves lurching between nihilism ("We can't really know or be anything, let us just be, resting in the empty and meaningless") and more explicit forms of control ("This is how it is, now get on and make the church bigger, don't fail or we will lose influence"). In over-simplification, it's so-called liberalism on one end, and traditionalism (even modern market-driven traditions) on the other.

The synthesis is where we need to be. Neither Jesus' humility, or his claim to truth, can be modified without losing the essence of who he is, and the gospel we believe.

This comes when mode and message combine. As we saw above, Jesus operates in humility. At the same time, Jesus surely does make truth claims about himself. His declaration to the Jews in John 8:58 – "Before Abraham was, I am" – is undoubtedly a claim to divinity. John 14:6 is unequivocal, "No one comes to the Father, except by me." Even the example of humility in Philippians 2 is not a denial that Jesus is "in very nature God", but an exposition of how Jesus didn't *cling* to it for self-grandeur. **We are not nihilistic. Jesus is Lord.**

Jesus is the only one who can lay claim to holding “all authority in heaven and earth” (Matthew 28:18) and do so with humility. Why? Because he is the only person for whom that is true, and who holds it rightly and justly and appropriately, and not by some pretense.

To hold that Jesus is Lord, therefore, not only speaks truth, it also embraces humility. If Jesus is Lord, then I am not. If Jesus mediates the way, the truth, and the life, then I can not. It sets the mode of the gospel: I can not speak the truth in and of myself, I can only seek to echo his words. I can not heal and transform, I can only seek to reflect his heart, and point others towards his safe life-giving arms. I can not untangle the warp and wefts of injustice and human brokenness, I can only, daily, seek to follow the lead of the Spirit of Jesus. **We are not authoritarian. *Jesus is Lord.***

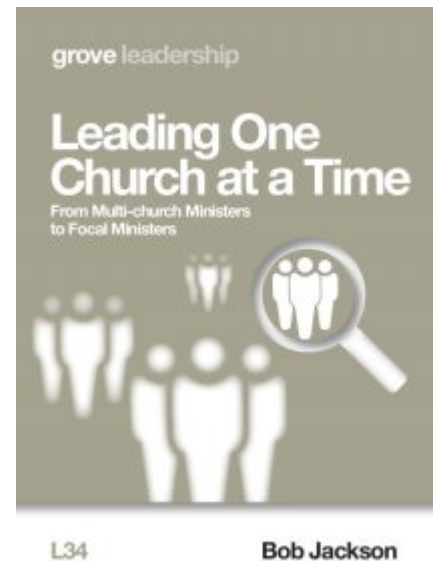
If we really hold to the truth of Jesus, we will be committed to humility. We will entrust others to his care, not try to control them. We will speak truth to power, without fear or favour. “We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; when we are slandered, we answer kindly” (1 Corinthians 4:12-13). How? Because it’s not about us, it’s about Jesus. We live for Him.

The mode of humility involves a self-surrender. The message is that Jesus is the Lord. The two together is the heart of the gospel.

Review: Leading One Church at

a Time – From Multi-church Ministers to Focal Ministers

Grove booklets are helpful little tools for the ministry toolkit. They are often insightful and informative. Occasionally, like this one, they are somewhat frustrating, because the content should be bleedingly obvious.



Church researcher, Bob Jackson, posits the question, “As clergy numbers fall, is there a better leadership model than multi-parish incumbency?” (rear cover), and the answer is basically “Well, of course!” As church attendance declines, and the relative cost of “employing” a stipendiary vicar increases, the number of parish churches per clergy has also been increasing. Combining and amalgamating parishes sometimes works, but, in general, it stretches the mode of ministry to a breaking point, spreads the vicar too thin, and accelerates the decline. Jackson has researched the numbers (page 7).

So what do we do instead? Jackson proposes the use of “Focal Ministers”: Individuals, who are not expected to carry the burdens of incumbency (more on that later), but who can *focus* on the local congregation, the local community, and lead the rhythms and practices of the local church towards properly contextualised gospel ministry. Statistics show (page 9) that this is generally effective. This is not surprising. “Human communities rarely flourish without a hands-on leader. Leadership is best embedded, not absentee” (page 5).

Jackson spends his 28 pages helping us to imagine life in the Church of England with such Focal Ministers in place. He unpacks the benefits, identifies some of the pitfalls, and articulates some good practice. While opening up the “Range of Focal Ministry Options” (page 16), he maintains the “irreducible core idea... that one person leads one church” (page 3).

Taken alone, it is a simple premise, i.e. it is bleedingly obvious. The complexity and the relative obscurity lies in its juxtaposition alongside existing ecclesiastical structures, culture, and expectations, particularly in the Church of England.

To reflect on this, I have come from two different angles.

The first angle relates to what I have experienced and observed over the years.

In my *experience*: I am used to recognising and raising up what Jackson might call Focal Ministers (FMs). In one of my posts, the lay reader of many decades experience was clearly exercising local ministry, and much more effectively than me as I was stretched between three half-time vicarly posts; it was a no-brainer to encourage her towards increased ministry, and, eventually, ordination. In another post, Gill and I identified a young man with clear giftings and call, as he was raised into leadership we did ourselves out of a job. I could go on and on in delightful reminiscence about the numbers of coffees we’ve had to encourage people into areas of ministry (leading, preaching, pastoral care, etc.) While not all of these would be exactly the same as Jackson’s FMs, they were in the same ethos. I’m not trying to blow my own trumpet here, but isn’t this the norm? Isn’t this how ministry works? How else do you do it?

Similarly, I have been able to *observe* various forms of focal ministry. The Diocese of Tasmania experimented for many years

with “Enabler Supported Ministry” (ESM) in which a “Local Mission Support Team” (LMST), which usually included an Ordained Local Minister (OLM), was called by the local congregation, recognised by the Bishop, and provided with a stipended “Enabler.” It differs slightly from Jackson’s model (it has a local *team*, not a focal *minister*; it is overseen by a non-authoritative *Enabler* rather than an incumbent in a “mini-episcopate oversight role” (page 8)). When ESM worked, it worked. When it didn’t two things often emerged: 1) The LMST collapsed into one person, usually the OLM, who effectively became a Focal Minister, and 2) there were times when the Enabler needed to be given some authority in order to resolve conflict etc., and so were often also appointed as Archdeacon-Mission-Support-Officers. I don’t know if Jackson has looked at ESM (or it’s “Total Ministry”, “Every Member Ministry”, or “Local Collaborative Ministry” equivalents) but he’s arrived at a model that aligns with the outcomes.

The second angle for my reflection relates to my recent history in the Church of England. My current Diocese of Sheffield is in the midst of significant structural shifts. The development of “Mission Areas” with “Oversight Ministers” and “Focal Ministers” is a key part of the strategy. These issues are therefore very much live for me (as a recipient more than a participant in the current moment) and it has stimulated some thoughts for what to embrace, and also to avoid:

1) Focal Ministry requires a cultural change, but the danger is we only grasp it structurally: Jackson promotes FM as a way of eschewing the “pastor-and-flock model and professional ministry” (page 5). This is a strange contrast; turn over “pastor-and-flock” and you don’t quickly have a “Focal Minister” you have a flatter structure with no clear hierarchy. At best this could look like effective partnership, perhaps within a fivefold shape. At worst, (and I’ve observed this), it looks like

bland egalitarianism articulated as “we don’t need anyone to lead us” and often feeling directionless and, ironically, insular. If Focal Ministry can find the balance between assertive leadership and collaborative inclusion, then that’s fantastic, but that’s firstly a cultural issue not a structural one. There’s no reason why “normal” ordained leadership should not also find that balance. Similarly, without cultural change, it will quickly reduce back to a pseudo-vicar and their flock.

2) Focal Ministry raises questions about what ordination is all about. This is not a bad thing; it raises good questions! In Jackson’s model, Focal Ministers are charged with being the “public face of the church, [the] focal leader in the community, [the] enabler of the ministry of all, [the] leader in mission” (page 20), and he can imagine them leading a congregation of up to a 100 or so (page 26). On page 23, he suggests that Focal Ministers could get started by “raising the standards of church services,” looking “for people who have left the worshipping community” to hear their story, and using festival services as a means for growth. All of that is a great description of what *ordained* ministry looks like on the ground! If it isn’t, then what on earth are we teaching our ordinands to do? The only aspect of ordained ministry that Jackson doesn’t really mention is theological reflection and sacramental ministry. But don’t we also want our FM’s to be theological formed, and aren’t we giving them the oversight (at least) of the celebration of the sacraments in the local context? So, conceptually, how exactly *is* Focal Ministry anything other than a mode of ordained ministry?

We need to think about how Focal Ministers are “searched for, trained, and supported” (page 25). One would hope that Focal Ministers would be assisted in discerning their particular vocation, provided with training in theological reflection and pastoral skill, and offered tangible support

(perhaps even some remuneration where possible) so that they are free to exercise their ministry. How is this not the same concept as the pathway to ordination and the provision of a living? It may be that our training pathways for ordinands are not helpful for FMs, and that we should provide them with more flexible and contextual options. That doesn't raise questions about the training of FMs; it raises questions about the possible general irrelevance of ordination formation! If ordination formation is relevant, why wouldn't we offer it to FMs? If FMs don't need it, why would we require it of ordinands?

In Jackson's model, there isn't really a difference in kind between Focal Ministry and Incumbency, it is a difference in degree (in his chapter 4 the only difference between "FM" and "IN" is that FMs only have one congregation and an INCumbent can still have multiple). The church offers a more rigorous (and defined) form of support to Incumbents, and a more flexible (but presumably cheaper and missionally adaptive) form of support to Focal Ministers, but they are both (in the truth of the concept) exercising the essence of ordained ministry. This is not a bad thing. However, it *feels* awkward because the Church's statutory wineskin can't easily cope with the adjustment, and we have to develop new terminology to get it there.

3) My only real concern with the model, therefore, is in its implementation. Jackson speaks of the need for "official diocesan policy" when it comes to this (page 25). He speaks of "a discernment process" for FMs "as there is with readers and OLMs" (page 25). He suggests that a "Focal Minister training syllabus will be needed, perhaps prepared nationally" (page 20). Some form of process is needed, of course, but the extent of it worries me.

The joy, and beauty, and actual *point* of FM is the local connection and flexible local adaptation of ministry. As soon as you have syllabi and processes that are imposed

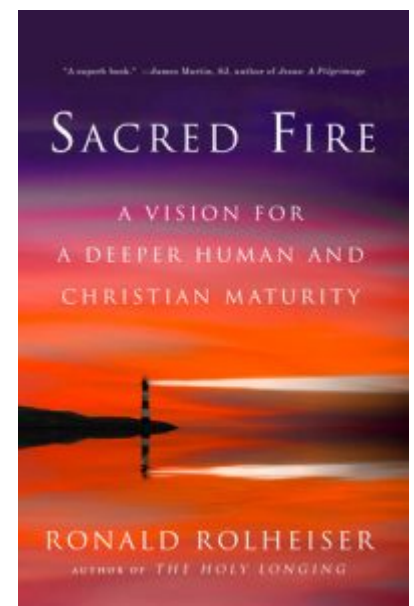
from a distance (even nationally!), they risk becoming hoops to jump rather than resources to release. Such processes often hinder local adaptation by insisting on irrelevancies, and they undermine recruitment of FMs for whom that is onerous. Too much centralised expectation and we might as well replicate (or just use) the ordination streams and send FMs off to the so-called “vicar clone factory.” We need to learn the lessons from what happened (or didn’t happen) with the aspirationally contextual Pioneer Ordained Minister schemes of 15-20 years ago.

It’s at this point of FM discernment and training that Jackson should have emphasised the role of the Incumbent Oversight Minister. Surely it is in the “mini-episcopal” incumbent that you entrust a level of discernment for who may or may not be invited into the FM role? Surely someone who has been through the “full” ordination program (and subsequently provided with the living) will have been equipped to offer formation and training to those with whom they share the work? An incumbent is both aware of the local context, and connected by their office into the wider accountability; incumbents are key to the framework working. In fact, here is the point of distinction between the two roles of incumbent and FM: incumbents are called to *raise up and form*, in addition to joining the focal work on the ground.

In conclusion, Jackson has given us a useful resource. The prospect of a framework that aligns with what he presents excites me. Not least of which because “it rescues incumbents from impossible job descriptions, enables some to work at a more strategic level and others to enjoy a more fruitful ministry with direct responsibility for fewer churches” (page 27). But I still slightly shake my head. This is not a new solution to a new problem. This is simply a framework around the sort of work we should have been doing anyway. No matter the exact form or nomenclature, we need to get on with it.

Review: Sacred Fire – A Vision for A Deeper Human and Christian Maturity

Like many life-long Christians, my formative years were shaped by speakers and writers fanning the flames of zeal and purpose. We wanted to know God's plan for our life. It was about learning our gifts, keeping pure, and pursuing Jesus for the life that lay stretched out before us. We would change the world!



There's nothing wrong with that. Three of my four children are now, officially, young adults, and I want something similar for them. Opportunities lie open before them. They don't fully realise their sheer *potential*. So push into Jesus, equip yourself with his Word, become familiar with his Spirit, find healing for childhood hurts, and launch forth! "I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one" (1 John 2:13).

We all grow out of our youth and into our adult seasons. And the discipleship that once formed us no longer fits as easily. We try and make it work. We take our sermons and channel our inner youth: fan your passion into flame, live life for Jesus! We mentor others by setting and pursuing goals, just like we did when the vista was young and wide. And we do the same with

our churches: we place our communities on an horizon of opportunities, articulate some mission *action* goals and motion for them to launch forth like the youth we once were. Occasionally it works.

Our forms of discipleship are youth-shaped, even as we hit our middle age. They don't hit the mark. This is where we need the sort of wisdom Ronald Rolheiser offers in *Sacred Fire*.

Rolheiser's framework is simple. He identifies three stages of discipleship in our walk through life:

1) **Essential Discipleship:** *The struggle to get our lives together.* This is the youth-oriented form of discipleship with which we are familiar. It's for when we are *searching*, "for an identity... for acceptance... for a circle of friends... for intimacy... for someone to marry... for a vocation... for a career... for the right place to live... for financial security... for something to give us substance and meaning – in a word, *searching for a home*" (page 16, emphasis mine). "Who am I? Where do I find meaning? Who will love me? How do I find love in a world full of infidelity and false promises" (page 17)? We are familiar with these things.

2) **Mature Discipleship:** *The struggle to give our lives away.* This covers the majority of adult life, and begins when we become "more fundamentally concerned with life beyond us than with ourselves" (Page 18). The transition from young adult to responsible parent typifies the entry into this stage of life. "The struggle for self-identity and private fulfillment never fully goes away; we are always somewhat haunted by the restlessness of our youth and our own idiosyncratic needs... [However the] anthropological and spiritual task will be clear: How do I give my life away more purely and more generously?" (page 18). This is the substance and focus of the book.

3) **Radical Discipleship:** *The struggle to give our deaths*

away. As we age, the default line shifts a second time. The question is no longer “What can I still do so that my life makes a contribution? Rather, the question becomes: How can I now live so that my death will be an optimal blessing for my family, my church, and the world?” (page 19). Rolheiser touches on this at the end.

Perhaps the quote from Nikos Kazantzakis on the very first page, sums it up: Three prayers for “three kinds of souls”.

- 1) *I am a bow in your hands, Lord, draw me lest I rot.*
- 2) *Do not overdraw me, Lord, I shall break.*
- 3) *Overdraw me, Lord, who cares if I break!*

It is the second of these that we need to explore.

In this stage of life, the aspiration is not towards heroism, but towards *eldership* (page 64). Rolheiser doesn't go into it, but my reflection is that eldership has diminished in our collective imagination. Take any popular movie (my thoughts jump to *Happy Feet*) and it pits zealous youth against repressive elders: youthful explorations of real experiences against the oppression of traditions and the narrowness of a self-loathing parental generation. It's an effective narrative; even now, my heart flutters with some longing to be the heroic youngster. But I'm getting old. I also long to cover, care, nurture, and father. I yearn to pass on some of the depths and ancient learnings that I discovered on my own youthful quests, and which I have digested over many years.

Eldership is valuable, so how do we disciple people towards eldership? How do we disciple people in their maturity?

This collision occurs in the church world. We promote (and fund) *avant garde* pioneering programs and strategies that promote church growth. There's a risk of it being seen as just a young person's game. That isn't the case. I realised some time ago, that I simply ain't the green young church planter I

used to be (thank God). I'm not going to be able to grow a church, or pioneer something new, through my waning youthful zeal. It will only come through growing into and resting upon a developing *eldership*. That's the discipleship I need, and Rolheiser has helped me.

I no longer need to explore paths of youthful imagination. I need to fathom the depths of when the patterns of life are "pretty bland, or flat, or overpressured, or disappointing" where underneath the (relative) stability of life "is an inchoate, nagging disquiet, that is stirring just enough to let us know that someday, though not quite yet, there are still some deeper things to sort out and a deeper journey to be made" (pages 65-67).

One of Rolheiser's more powerful images is that of the "honeymoon." Perhaps it sums up the dynamics of a mid-life crisis!

Our route to maturity generally involves a honeymoon or two. Honeymoons are real, are powerful, and afford us, this side of eternity, with one of the better foretastes of heaven. Because of that they are not easy to let go of permanently. Inside of every one of us there is the lingering itch to experience that kind of intensity yet one more time..." (Pages 69-70)

We could be driven by that allure for honeymoon excitement, not just in terms of marital fidelity, but simply as a fantasy of what "success" means to us ("grandiosity" as Rolheiser calls it). Starry-eyed youth run to their honeymoons, thinking to have escaped loneliness. In our mature years, we learn to embrace a "new loneliness, that of seeing and accepting the actual limits of our own lives, a pain intertwined with accepting our own mortality" (page 74).

If there is one bit of wisdom to dwell on from this book, this is it.

All discipleship equips, and Rolheiser does just that: He unpacks workaholism. He looks at “acedia” – that noonday listlessness and ennui mixed with a daydream of regret and jealousy (pages 79-81), and the answering hope. He looks at forgiveness and how it is needed at the most existential level (page 83). He even unpacks all the seven deadly sins in helpful and insightful ways! Sloth, for instance, is not laziness so much as wilful distraction (I’m looking at you, Netflix). He teaches us to pray (page 169ff), with emotional honesty and life-giving rhythms. And he reminds us to bless and not curse (page 212). Chapter 8 sums it all as “ten commandments for the long haul.”

It was gratifying to find myself familiar with some of what he expounds. Gill and I have reflected for some years on how life is so often a divine call to *wait*. Our world is now-and-not-yet, and this can feel like Easter Saturday, or the days between Ascension and Pentecost. Just like Rolheiser, we also have drawn on the road to Emmaus (page 98ff) to grasp the depression and despondency of what this can feel like, despite the (unrealised) company of Jesus on the road. We too have encountered the painful compulsion of Peter (page 105), as we are bound to the one who has the words of eternal life, despite the costly road on which we are led and where often we don’t wish to go. In the words of one of the songs that inspired me in my youth, but which I didn’t understand until I had lost some blood: **“I know who I am, I know where I’ve been, I know sometimes love takes the hard way.”**

In all good discipleship, we need to be both affirmed and stretched. This book stretches us towards the giving away of life that defines our age and stage. We are stretched towards kenotic living, and laying down of pride and judgementalism, superiority, ideology, and personal dignity (page 124). We are compelled to imagine living as ones baptised into Jesus, not just baptised into John: i.e. baptised into “grace and community” and reliance on the one who can do the impossible.

Pentecost comes not to the self-hyped and activated, but to “a church meeting where men and women, frightened for their future, were huddled in fear, confusion, and uncertainty, but were gathered in faith and fidelity despite their fears.” (page 131). We cannot live our lives out of “sheer willpower” (page 130). I know; I tried that once ten years ago and I broke.

The way of mature discipleship is to give away our life. It is Paul sharing in the sufferings of Christ. It is Mary, watching the crucifixion, not running, but absorbing the pain and refusing to “conduct its hatred” (page 149). Sometimes, the Lord places us as walls upon which the ugliness of a broken world breaks, and upon which the sulfurous sharpness of an idolatrous church sloshes. In our youth we might fight back. But in our maturity, we absorb, we bow, we break, and all that the stooping does is put our faces closer to the Rock on which we rest.

That is not the same thing as despair. Our muted helplessness is not a passive resignation, but its opposite. It is a movement toward the only rays of light, love, and faith that still exist in that darkness and hatred. And at that moment, it is the only thing that faith and love can do. (Page 149)

We need this sort of discipleship. We need this sort of imagining of what mature leadership, mature lives, mature ministry looks like. We need a church that can cope with being out of control, that can lean into decline and devote what is left as an offering of blessing. We need a church that finds faith in pain, and just simply *is* as the winds and waves of the world wash around.

We need to inspire our youth, and delight in their zeal (and their pretensions at times). And us older ones need to aspire to eldership, and give away our lives.