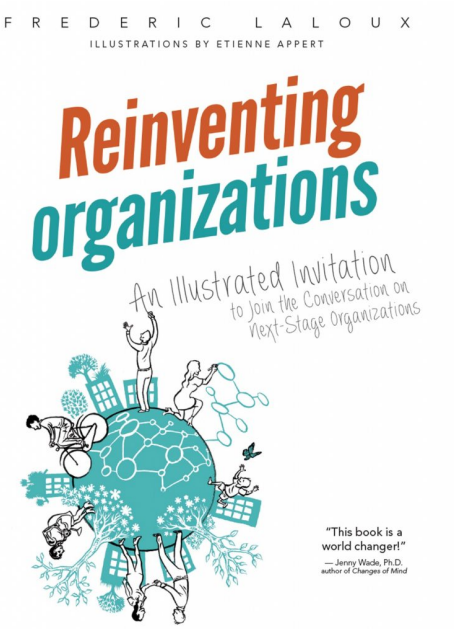
Review: Reinventing Organizations – An Illustrated Invitation to Join the Conversation on Next-Stage Organizations

What a fascinating book. This is about more than management techniques, it's a distinct vision of how people might organise, relate, and flourish.



Reinventing Organizations is doing the popular rounds. I'm going to approach it, learn from it, and critique it from the point of view of church leadership. The author is Frederic Laloux, about whom I know little. It is wonderfully, helpfully (although somewhat, um, caucasianally) illustrated by Etienne Appert. This is not some tome. It's like a printed powerpoint presentation, and reading it feels like attending a seminar.

Laloux' framework builds upon an evolutionary understanding of human organisation. He imagines human society having grown through "sudden leaps" (page 18) from "**red (impulsive)**" communities characterised by gang-like dominance (page 21), through "**amber (conformist)**" army-like shaping of the world (page 22), through "**orange (achievement)**" machine-like

enterprises (page 26), and "**green (pluralistic)**" family-like cultures. He imagines, and this is the book's *raison d'être,* a "**teal (evolutionary)** worldview" (page 38) which is shaped by "individual and collective unfolding… taming the ego… inner rightness as compass… yearning for wholeness" (pages 38-39). This is what he examines, explores, and seeks to apply in the real world.

There's a lot that is good in his vision, and we'll get to that, but there are two fundamental disagreements with which I must clear the air first.

Firstly, I disagree with the worldview in which he explores these worldviews (his meta-worldview?). It is typical human progressivism: We were once ancient and primitive, and we have slowly grown more enlightened over the years, passing through the different colours of the sociological rainbow until we find ourselves at the brink of the next leap forward. This is not peripheral to his outlook; his vision has a religious fervour. His language is almost *eschatological*: "This might sound surprising, but I think there is reason to be deeply hopeful… the pain we feel is the pain of something old that is dying… while something new is waiting to be born"! (pages 16-17).

Such language might be novel in the business world, but it's entirely familiar to the world of faith and spirituality. This world, however, offers the necessary pushback: A linearly progressive story in which we go step by step into either utopia or the apocalypse is rarely a helpful picture. The best eschatology is an insight into the here and now. The different colours and types that Laloux puts forward are useful depictions, but they are less helpful when locked into some sequence of progression. It is more real to think of them as different facets of what human life is like now, and what it has always been. If only he would talk about organisations operating in certain *ways* rather than at certain evolutionary *stages,* his work would be much more accessible.

The fact is, we have always had the **dominant reds**, and the **conformist ambers**, and the **organised oranges**, and the **organic-but-not-quite greens**, and *yes,* the **wholeness-flowing teals**. For sure, they have not always been in balance, but they all have their place, and they all have their ongoing, present value. e.g. red organisations can be *excellent* in a crisis, or where order needs to be brought in the midst of chaos. These worldviews have always been there. To ignore that is to embrace a sort of generational bigotry which refuses to learn from our ancestors who were somehow unable to "hold more complex perspectives" (page 33) than our much more virtuous generation.

Secondly, and relatedly, his teal worldview is nothing new. It might be that it isn't particularly apparent in the contemporary Western world, and so it is a good corrective. But he isn't broaching untapped waters here. At best, he is re-discovering something long forgotten.

Perhaps he can't see it because of a typically prejudicial view of religion that sees the church as being primarily about "rules and traditions" (page 33) and conformity to hierarchy ("oppression" even, page 24). It's clear he simply doesn't get religion, especially of the organised Western sort, which isn't stuck in **amber-conformity** but **orange-machine**! I audibly laughed when he assumed that "priests aren't assigned KPIs, as far as I know" (page 27). He really doesn't know!

It's a shame. This prejudice makes this an awkward book to use in a Christian context. Moreover, it overlooks the deep riches there are in faith traditions, including Christian spirituality, that actually supports his teal worldview.

For instance, the language and concept of *vocation* or *calling* is ever-present in his teal world. Similarly, the sense of belonging and organic flourishing resonates with Biblical imagery of being members of a body, in which we not only *exercise* our gifts, but we *are* a gift of

grace to the larger whole. Organic organisations have been part of missiological thinking for some time now; the lifeshapes framework of a couple of decades ago may not always be practiced as it is preached, but it looks to biology in the heptagon and speaks of "low control, high accountability." Laloux speaks of being a "sensor", the charismatic and contemplative world speaks of discernment and intuitive insight. He speaks of the teal "yearning for wholeness" (page 39) and I reflect on the language of "groaning" for fulfilment in not only Paul (Romans 8), but the laments of the Old Testament. He speaks of the need for "reflective spaces" and I look to the vast wealth of liturgical rhythms and spiritual disciplines. None of these are on his radar, and that's a shame.

So Laloux' wisdom, like most living wisdom, has an unacknowledged companionship and heritage. But in the end that's not necessarily a problem; there's still good here.

There's a refreshing honesty in his analysis. I found his exploration of the interplay between the **green-pluralist** and **orange-machine** to be very applicable to church leadership. These two worldviews are the predominant ones in the West, and they often collide. Many churches, and most church hierarchies, are unashamedly orange, and they should be ever mindful of orange's shadow side (page 29). Many who have fallen out of the religious industry now lean towards green. Here we are "aware of Orange's shadows: the materialistic obsession, the social inequality, the loss of community." Greens "strive to belong, to foster close and harmonious bonds with everyone… they insist that all people are fundamentally of equal worth, that every voice be heard." **Orange–green** typifies, sociologically speaking, the **evangelical–liberal** divide.

For many, being green seems to be the answer. The reality, however, reflects Laloux' insight into the "contradictions" of **green-pluralist** organisations (page 32). It's certainly

something I've observed:

> *In many smaller organisations, in particular in nonprofits or social ventures [churches?], the emphasis lies with consensus seeking. More often than not it leads to organizational paralysis. To get things moving again, unsavory power games break out in the shadows. (Page 32)*

I've seen such paralysis. I've been knocked about by these shadowy power games. The games are often in the shadows of church dynamics; power is often pursued with a degree of self-delusion that denies that power and ego is present at all. It's a complex dynamic to navigate and Laloux does us all a service by acknowledging it.

There is much that is virtuous about the teal ("evolutionary") worldview. The interplay of teal's central characteristic of "self-management", "wholeness", and "purpose" (page 55) is an exciting and dynamic way of exploring organisations such as churches. It leads to some aspirations: e.g. to embody a culture in which "we are called to discover and journey towards our true self, to unfold our unique potential, to unlock our birthright gifts" (page 38). I only need to look at my teacher, nursing, and clergy friends, and others who have pursued a vocational path, to see such a yearning.

I resonated with his understanding that the "one critical variable" to the success of organic teal systems is "psychological ownership people feel for their organization" (page 140). It applies to the ecclesiastical world. In the end, a church's health does not usually come down to capacity, resources, or opportunity; it comes down to motivation. What do we *care* about? Have we actually *bought into* the love of God and the Great Commission of Jesus? What's the difference between our *espoused* theology, and our actual lived-out beliefs?

I loved his image of the "bowl of spaghetti" (page 139), as a

metaphor for the task of unravelling a complex system with simple, sensorial movements. In the church world we speak of "the long walk of obedience" with steps of both *discernment* and *faith*. It is similar; each step is gentle tug on a strand of spaghetti, to see what is next on the path.

Above all, I was encouraged to find that as questions arose in my mind, they would almost always be answered.

For instance, he speaks of leaderless self-managed teams, with little if any hierarchy. I could admire the picture, but couldn't conceive of it working unless there was firstly a dynamic leader who could create the culture and hold the space in which the organic could emerge. His main example of the nursing company Buurtzorg and its leader, Jos de Blok, reinforced what appeared to be a contradiction. How can self-management rely on a dynamic leader?

Laloux recognises the dilemma, and engages with it. He doesn't eschew the concept of power, as if it doesn't exist – "the goal is not to give everyone the exact same power… it is to make everyone powerful" (page 123). He recognises the necessity of visionary, culture-setting leaders, such as Jos de Blok. Sometimes "a committed and powerful CEO is needed" (page 144) to be a "public face" and a chief sensor (page 148).

It has similarities with the dynamic of being a vicar! In church traditions we speak of the "apostolic" gifting, which is interestingly connected to, and often at odds with, the "episcopal" function; perhaps that is an **orange (episcopal)** – **teal (apostolic)** creative tension! The apostolic *covers*, and articulates the common purpose around which others are organically coalescing. It is a joy when a church operates in this mode, and doesn't need micro-managing; "the organization's purpose provides enough alignment." (page 125). It's why we harp on about purpose, mission, and gospel… or at least we should.

This leadership dynamic is especially applicable within the pioneering and church planting worlds. In some circles we speak of pioneer "dissenting pathfinders" who push on into the unknown with gospel purpose; and we have also learned of the need for an "authority dissenter" who covers them and "holds the space" (crf. page 149) in which they can thrive.

Nevertheless, the self-contradictions of the teal vision cannot be fully resolved. For instance, teal is organic and flourishing with self-management, yet in the pragmatics "control is useful and necessary" (page 145). Laloux is honest about most of these tensions, but doesn't fully resolve them.

I am left, therefore with some unease, and it comes back to the philosophical foundations. Laloux' vision is effectively a progressive utopianism, and that is rarely, if ever, grounded in the real world.

For instance, it is a virtue for **"inner rightness"** to be our compass (Page 39); this is the stuff of vocation! But if Laloux had looked into centuries' worth of engagement on human issues, including the monastic traditions, he would have learned how vocation falls when it becomes self-fulfillment alone. Jesus demonstrates this with his spirit and attitude of *kenosis*, or self-giving/self-emptying (see Philippians 2:1-11). Ironically, without that kenotic aspect, Laloux' "inner rightness" is inherently egocentric, tuned in orbit to an individual reality, and not to a grounded, shared, common sense of what is right and wrong. His epistemology is on show here, and it's basic individualism.

Similarly, consider how **"taming the ego"** is crucial to Laloux' vision. It's an excellent aspiration, to realise "how our ego's fears, ambitions, and desires have been secretly running our lives" (page 38). Again, if he had looked to the richness of how the traditions have dealt with ego over the years, he may not have missed the balancing perspective. They speak of sin, corruption, depravity, and shame, and the need for

communities to both allow for it and protect from it. The teal vision is appealing, but it is only effective, and safe, when there is sinlessness. This is never the case; Laloux' eschatology is overly-realised!

Laloux speaks often of trust. Trust is valuable. Trust is precious. And it is these things because it is *rare* commodity within the tensions of the real world. It is right for trust to be withdrawn, because sin abides. Sometimes, walls of protection are what is needed for life to flourish. A worldview that relies so heavily on trust runs the danger of coercing it, and therefore, of doing injury. I did a straw-poll of some friends about their emotional reaction to the phrase "This is a safe space": the offered responses indicated *elevated* fear and insecurity. The assertion of "safe space" into a *system* coerces trust; "If you don't trust us, you can't belong." I can't shake my sense that the teal vision rests on this subtle manipulation.

This mishandling of the human condition obscures the *danger* in the teal worldview. For sure, I can see teal dynamics bringing life (there is wisdom in this book!) But I can also see teal structures being a place where the bullies can win, the power-games can be played, dissenting voices can be silenced, and the popular majority can rule over the lost and forgotten. Perhaps, at their best, these structures can be "natural hierarchies" (page 77), but nature can be harsh! We can imagine, with Laloux, the joy of people "showing up in loving and caring ways?" (page 93), but what happens when they don't?

Similarly, I get that its a virtue to bring your **"whole self"** to work (page 82), but is it really? My whole self has corruptions as well as goodness. Is that allowed? My whole self has shames and injuries. Should I take those out from "behind my professional mask", or from behind whatever persona might actually make work a safe place for me and others? There is a subtle demand for *exposure* in the teal framework, and this is not entirely healthy.

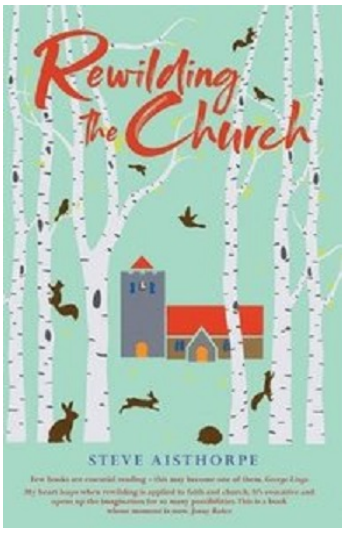
What I do know, from observation and experience, is that the more you lead with the whole of yourself on display, the more you have to count the cost of the inevitable injuries. Every room has it's shibboleths. Teal isn't a worldview in which masks can be dropped; it's a different mode in which different masks must be learned, enforced by tingsha bells.

Vulnerability is inspiring and powerful (let's hear it for Brene Brown). By definition, however, it is a choice to be self-givingly "unsafe". There is goodness in it; Jesus himself shows that it is a path through pain to life. We may aspire to this form of open resilience in ourselves, hope for it in our leaders, and nurture others towards it as well. But vulnerabilty cannot be demanded without causing injury. We do not cast our pearls before swine; there's a reason we offer our deepest parts to the Lord alone, or in close, intimate relationships.

Teal has it's virtues and I have learned much from this book. But just like all the other colours, I do not think it is entirely safe. "Practices are lifeless without the underlying worldview", Laloux rightly records towards the end (page 131). And here's the crux of it. There is some wisdom in this book. Some good things to ponder, insights that can offer a corrective. But in the end, I cannot base my life, my leadership, my wholeness, my organisation upon his utopianism. As a church, we have our founding worldview, and we begin with Jesus.

Review: Rewilding the Church

It is very easy to raise questions about the state of the church. It's harder to provide the answers. This is a decent book, that does the easy bit, but not the hard bit.



You don't have to spend too much time in the ecclesiastical world before encountering a sort of divine discontent.

The *ideal* of the church is so profound, when you dig into it, that St. Paul could only fathom it by calling it a *mystery*. God intervenes in this world *through his people*, through his children, drawn together across time and place, by the Holy Spirit, and counted as united with Jesus himself. All that has come through Jesus to this world – salvation, forgiveness, healing, hope, truth, love, joy, sanctification, peace… – is instantiated, implemented, manifested through his people. We are a *"peculiar people"* reflecting in our very being together, the reality of Christ's resurrection and victory, and the essence of life eternal.

To be fair, this ideal is far from a pipe-dream. I have a testimony, just like millions of others, of tasting some of this in the life of God's people. I have encountered Jesus in sacrament, song, the proclaimed word of God, and the outpoured care and provision of spiritual brothers and sisters. I have known what is like for Church to be lively, dynamic, provocative, restorative, and free!

Like many, of course, I have also encountered the church as a mere shadow of this; stultified, institutionalised, divided, toxic, and sometimes even downright ugly. I was thinking about these things years ago.

How do we respond to this gap between the ideal and the real? How do we cope with it? How do we seek to *change* it? This is the age-old question that Steve Aisthorpe takes us to with *Rewilding the Church.*

Aisthorpe draws on a defining metaphor. He looks to **the ecological movement of rewilding.** This philosophy seeks to restore the vibrancy of ecosystems not through ongoing strategic management of fauna and flora, but by allowing the space for nature to run its course; it entrusts the land to the original, wild, uncontrollable, organic mechanisms that existed before domestication.

> *Advocates of rewilding argue that much of what is done in the name of conservation is little more than the preservation of man-made landscapes through human intervention and and management. It's time, they assert, to step back and allow the processes within nature to reshape the environment. Pages 1-2*

The application to Church life is clear. The metaphor imagines a domesticated church, beset by an "appetite to plan, manage, contain, and control" (page 2), and in need of rewilding in order to realise that elusive ideal. It's quite compelling.

At first and second glance, it aligns with many of my own thoughts about the plight of the church: We have become fear-and-performance-driven; much of our ecclesiastical structure is an attempt to provide a controlled, and thus usually dead-on-arrival, outcome. There is stability, but little faith, in following a map. A truly Kingdom Church will be blown by the Spirit, and will learn to chart new waters; it will know *why* it's going on the adventure it is called to, but will not always be able to fully articulate what that will look like or where it will end up. Aisthorpe's metaphor articulates something similar: "We cannot convey a vision or an outcome… we must convince people of the integrity of the process" (page

12).

Similarly, I have been known to say that my church growth model distills down to “those who seek to save their live will lose it.” That is, it is grounded on *surrender*. Aisthorpe’s metaphor resonates:

> *I am… suggesting that in our well-meaning efforts to create, facilitate, organise, manage and control, we are sometimes in danger of surrendering authenticity for mere reality… By creating and maintaining congregational models that require certain functions and roles, we forego community that emerges from the gift of its people, shaped by the context of their lives and the realities of the wider community. The distinction I am making may seem obtuse or subtle, but it is certainly important. It is the difference between a community with Jesus at its heart and a club for followers of Jesus. In one we are firmly in control; the other is the result of surrendering the driving seat. (Page 27).*

His chapter on “culling the invasive species” is excellent in this regard. Through this part of the metaphor he deals with the invasive idolatry of *busyness* that feeds much of the toxicity of modern church culture. “For the kingdom that Jesus proclaimed and demonstrated to flourish and expand, ” he says, “we don’t need to *do* more and we don’t need to be cleverer; it is neither ingenious tactics nor nifty strategy that is required… we need to respond by culling what is unhelpful, live lives of simple and courageous obedience, and trust God that what emerges will reflect the splendour of his kingdom” (page 158). He channels Eugene Peterson’s *Contemplative Pastor* in this section, and conveys its richness.

Most fundamentally, (and here he draws significantly on Hirsch and Frost and their *ReJesus*), he centres it on Jesus, the “Wild Messiah”, about whom it is all about. I often perceive the church as beyond renewal, revival, or even reformation,

and in need of *resurrection*. Aisthorpe speaks, with Hirsch and Frost, of a "refounding." "Rewilding the Church is not a call to spend more hours on our knees," he exhorts, "although for some it might mean that… it is a refocusing of our attention on Jesus, a reinstating of him at the heart of everything" (Page 57). When we lose Jesus, our "self-identity has been eroded" (page 39) and we need to answer that deepest question of "who do we think we are?"

> *Rewilding the Church begins here: knowing ourselves to be beloved, putting our roots down deep into Christ, allowing our self-identity to be reshaped in the light of Scriptures, discerning his purposes and stepping out into the adventure of faith. (Page 38)*

I have resonance, agreement even, in my engagement with this rewilding metaphor. His perception of the ills of church – that gap between the ideal and the reality – seems to align with my own. He even touches on the problems of missional language (page 46) that I could have used in a recent article on being post-missional! We have the same vista before us. But it begs the question: What now? What do we with this? What next in the pursuit of God's kingdom, to the bridging of the gap between what is and what can be?

At this point the metaphor begins to ring a little hollow, and his suggestions take on that tinge of theory slightly disconnected from the dirt-under-the-fingernails practice of pastoral ministry.

His weakest chapter, on "tuning in and joining in", is the clearest illustration of this. It has much that is virtuous; essentially he calls us to discernment and following the Spirit, to a "conscious setting aside of preconceptions and a determination to discern what God is doing and our role in that" (page 74). This is wisdom, and, in the face of a tendency for churches to grab their nearest Alpha course and

launch forth into another round of having always done it that way, it is prophetic and useful. But taken too far, as I suspect it might be, it can become an unworkable, deleterious, deconstruction.

Similarly, I admire the work he has conducted in researching the spirituality of the "dones." I've even ordered his *The Invisible Church*. He recognises that legalism and dogmatism are part of the problem, and he rightly exhorts towards "creating environments where asking questions and exploring doubts are positively encouraged" (page 130). Yet he fails to recognise that there are limits to such an approach, which if transgressed, inhibits and hinders and unbalances the kingdom's ecosystem.

Let me unpack this: What I think Aisthorpe has done is taken a small step off the edge into a prevalent postmodern fallacy that relies on two impossibilities.

The first fallacy is this: that it is possible to approach the church as a blank slate with no preconceptions. For sure, the kingdom of God rarely comes by means of a bulldozer, a brash leader with hardened ideas of how things should be. It is far worse, however, when it is attempted with a pretense at blank neutrality. There is a form of unhealthy (even arrogant) piety that purports to purely "leave space" for the "Holy Spirit" or the "natural processes" of wild mission. *Everyone* has an agenda, a preconception of how things should be. It is healthy to admit it, and much better to bring that agenda forward carefully, gently, and with humility.

This flaw is in Aisthorpe's metaphor. Every example he brings of ecological flourishing embodies a preconception; it *presupposes* what that flourishing looks like. There is a hidden pre-judgment of what should or should not be the end result of the "rewilding", of what would be considered a "successful" attempt at rewilding, or what might be considered to be a failure. Every ecologist has a hope, a dream, a

passion for what a renewed ecosystem might look like. Everyone has an agenda on their own terms.

But of course, the point of the metaphor is to consider the church: Consider a pioneering venture, a church plant or a fresh expression, launching out like an expedition into the uncharted waters of organic local ministry. The "rewilding" metaphor may help us remember that the team can't control everything; they don't know what lies around the corner, who will be their "people of peace", and what aspects of their work will resonate and take hold. Flexibility, adaptability, and humility will be required. But so will a sense of vision, purpose; and understanding of *why* the venture is being started, and *why* it is worth the cost. These are preconceptions that must be owned, explored, amended, and released, not wished away by some pretence!

The second fallacy is related, and it's this: that it is possible to approach the mission of God as a neutral observer. The rewilding metaphor purports to be a "hands off" approach, and its strength is in its departure from the artificial cultivation of "natural" environments. But it is not really hands-off, is it? Human agency is *involved* in the reintroduction of native species, the elimination of invasive species, and in "creating the environment" in which a new (and usually "better" in some preconceived sense) balance is achieved. Human agency is present, and can't be pretended away.

Consider, again, his otherwise very helpful chapter about "noticing who's missing". He picks up on his research into "the dones" who have left church behind in their Christian discipleship, and, as mentioned above, exhorts us towards creating an environment which allows for "asking questions and exploring doubts" (page 129). It's a great push back at dogmatism. But notice the tension: At the same time as he wants to allow for questions and doubts, Aisthorpe also has a *kerygma,* a *truth* to assert: We must "refocus our attention on

Jesus and the vision he imparted, the kingdom, his certain intention to redeem all of creation and to restore his seamless reign" (page 134).

What's it going to be? Questions and doubts? Or truth-claims about Jesus? For sure, it's both, but the rewilding metaphor doesn't hold that tension. Just as an ecologist cannot pretend that they are not present in their environment; Aisthorpe cannot pretend that the epistemological certainty of the gospel of Jesus – the Way, the Truth, and the Life – can be removed from a church environment of questioning and doubting. To be fair, I don't think he does, himself, pretend; but his metaphor gives succour to those that do, and they are invariably damaging to the church.

It is good for all mission-minded congregations to listen hard, question well, explore and wrestle with doubts and assumptions. But no-one does this in an absolute sense; no-one cuts themselves off from their epistemological foundations. Those who claim to be moved solely by "listening" are usually unhealthy pursuers of their own certainty; and being self-deceived they tend to hurt and exclude and roll over others blindly. Rather, the strength of the gospel is that it has a certainty in an objective life-giving someone other-than-us, Jesus. In the certainty of *him* is a truly safe place in which to wrestle with our questions and doubts.

So what's underneath all this? To be fair, I'm probably amplifying the problem here. Aisthorpe's book is genuine and temperate, and he only takes a small step into these murky waters. Maybe he has simply run into the problem of all metaphors, that they can be extended too far. I'd love to have a longer conversation with him. His insights intrigue me.

What I'm detecting however, and responding negatively to, is a crack left open for a more insidious miscomprehension of the place of human agency in the church, in mission, and in the world at large. It's the flip-side of toxic traditionalism

(crf. page 174) and just as bad. It is prevalent in the more Greenbelt-y ends of the Christian economy, which I'm sure is Aisthorpe's area of influence.

In this view of humanity, we are not merely *corrupted* and *corrupting* (as in the classical views of sin, guilt, and shame), we are *innately corruption itself*. We don't *have* a problem, we *are* the problem. By definition, humanity *unwilds* the environment; we are the problem, in ourselves.

The classical view of the human condition at least has a "solution": At the worst (and most worldviews have it) it is answered in some form of judgement and retribution. In the gospel, gloriously, it is answered with *grace, forgiveness, regeneration, renewal*.

This other view has no grace. Can we call it some form of "nihilistic humanism? It's answer is not the *redemption* of human agency it is the *elimination* of it. It's "gospel" is the diminishment, even the eradication, of humanity itself. If we remove ourselves, the world will be pristine.

We detect this view in our post-postmodern "wokeist" world and as we smart against "cancel culture" and other intersectional diktats. There is no grace. There is no redemption. There is just the elimination of voice, and even of personhood. Where corruption is perceived, in, for example, the recent furore regarding J. K. Rowling's opinion on the essence of womanhood, it can only be solved by eliminating that voice: She should shut up, she should be nothing, her privileged existence is almost an affront. The best we can do is to rid this world of our corruption; to rid this world of ourselves.

Aisthorpe's metaphor allows space for this nihilistic humanism. The rewilding metaphor buys into it: The best form of human agency in ecology is not to act. The best form of leadership is to not lead. The best form of being church is not to be, but to dissolve into the mystery of doubt and of

questions without answer. Run to the end of this road and we deny the value of the very humanity that Christ himself inhabited; we deny Christ.

The gospel is *not* a flip to the other extreme in which human agency is absolutised. It is possible to conceive of a *dominion* ecology in which the *telos* of the environment is subservience to human passion. We can easily imagine, in a Trumpist world, the essence of church being nothing but the articulation of dogmatic norms defining human worth around legalistic performance. This also denies Christ.

Rather we must come to the middle: The gospel speaks of *sanctified, renewed, Spirit-led, life-bringing* human agency. God is an *interventionist* God, not a leave-it-alone-to-its-own-devices deity. God intervenes *through* humanity. This is ultimately, of course, in Jesus, who fulfils the heart and soul of human vocation; from the creation covenant of Adam, through Mosaic holiness, and Davidic leadership as a shepherd after "God's own heart." The telos of the gospel is not grasped in the disappearance of humanity-as-corruption, but in the emergence of humanity-redeemed.

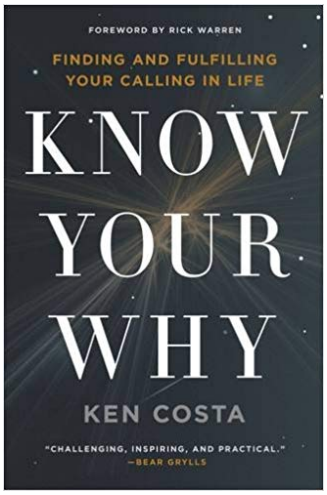
All creation is groaning, Paul says in Romans, as if in the pains of childbirth. For what? To lose the shackles of it's human parasites? No! "The creation waits in eager expectation for the *children of God* to be revealed." (Romans 8:19). The children of God will not rape or pillage or ecologically destroy, but neither will they abandon, remove themselves, or deny their image of God by ceasing to be. They will act with careful, loving, Jesus-shaped agency; tending, nurturing, *intervening*, growing, proclaiming life and truth.

As for creation, so for the church. Both church and creation are eschatologically linked. I long for a true rewilding of both. In the truest sense, *we* are also creatures, and we also belong there: we hear our Saviour and the call to his wild.

I see glimpses of this call in Aisthorpe. But in the end, his rewilding is more of a *taming* of God's people towards a trajectory that's not entirely benign. There is wisdom and good to glean from this book, but the church's deepest longings are not answered here.

Review: Know Your Why – Finding and Fulfilling Your Calling in Life

Sometimes I read an excellent book that I find deeply frustrating. This is one of those times.



Ken Costa's *Know Your Why* is well written, right-hearted, and helpful. **This is a book about vocation.** If you are interested in what it means to live according to the calling of Christ, especially if that calling is within the marketplace of the "secular" world, this book would likely bless you. Costa is not only successful in the world of finance and investment, he is one of the key leaders behind Holy Trinity Brompton (HTB) and the Alpha movement. *Know Your Why* could easily be the "Beta" course – a follow-on curriculum about introductory discipleship for real people in the real world. What's not to like?

Yet I find myself set on edge. In this review, therefore, I am taking a lead from my own reaction. I need to be clear about that. I'm not trying to whinge or tear down. I'm exploring my response and attempting to articulate my disquiet. I am checking myself for a critical spirit!

I must admit a bias. I didn't know Costa's background when I ordered the book, and when I made the HTB connection I found myself wearily sighing. Why? Maybe the pages of endorsements from the pantheon of Christian celebrities provoked my cynicism. Nevertheless, why so critical, O my soul? On the face of it, HTB and Alpha should be "my team" to cheer for. They are the face of charismatic Anglicanism, and it's *not* the skin-deep prosperity-peddling Trumpist forms that have a similar appearance in other places. The HTB/Alpha movement has birthed or nurtured new Christians, new church fellowships, worship leaders I admire, and even the current Archbishop of Canterbury. Why can I not sit with this book, that *is* full of some decent wisdom and pastoral guidance, and savour it freely like a fine refreshing tonic? I should be reading books like this as if it is from a friend to a friend. But I can't. And if I try, I'm pretending.

Here's the thing: Every time I find myself walking in proximity to the HTB hegemony, I don't feel like a fellow-pilgrim, I feel like a *customer.* I read books like this looking for resonance with my own journey. I hope to find some guidance, some solace, or even some rebuke and correction from the steadying hand of an elder in the church. Instead, I have come away from it weary, feeling the same as I do after sitting in a conference room all day.

Am I just being grumpy and over-critical? Perhaps I'm just being a reverse-snob, smarting at receiving crumbs that have fallen from a table set in the shadow of Harrods? Maybe. I do have a reflexive reaction against the presumptive and proud professionalist proclivities of the Western church. But I don't think it's just me. There *is* some substance to my

deconstruction.

I can pull apart this book, and **I find gem after gem after gem of really good stuff.** But when I take a step back to gather the bigger picture, I realise that there is something crucial that is obscured. I can't see the cross. **I see very little of the cruciform life.** This book is about *vocation* and *calling.* In it, I can learn about success from someone successful. But **true vocation rests not on success, but on surrender, death, and undeserved grace.** Vocation, in the end, navigates a wasteland of Christ's sufferings and those who walk it need help to die and live in the desert everyday; we only flourish as a desert rose. To extend that analogy: This book is a manual on English gardening techniques. It is pleasant, useful, *correct*, aspirational, lovingly intended, and frequently applicable; but it overlooks what green English middle-class gardens always miss, that living water *costs* you.

Let me show my working:

The good in this book is really good: "At the heart of the Christian faith is a big, fat *why,"* Costa says (page xx), "A calling for us to be *here*, in this place and at this time… to live out our faith and values in the rough-and-tumble of our everyday existence." If only more Christians and more churches would be moved in this way! Costa's pastoral heart is passionate and clear: "I have longed to strengthen those who try to make the very best of their lives" (page xxiv). I would *love* to have a coffee and a long chat with Ken.

The guidance he offers is focused on Jesus, and responsive to a God who cares and gives us his attention (page 3, *Called to Passion*), and in whom we have our fundamental sense of self ("Identity comes before destiny", page 16). He confronts our need for salvation and restoration, and pushes back at the shames and fears that will turn us from God's heart and lead us into stumbling and falling.

> *This realization that life is best savored when lived for Christ is the key to living well. It moves the center of gravity from me to him, and, in that shift, is the very basis of finding my real calling. (Page 17)*

Costa is dealing with *vocation*, and that's not a churchy thing. **He doesn't just break down the sacred-secular divide, he cuts across the premise of it.** "There is only one sphere of influence: the kingdom of God", he says (page 23, *Called to Engage*). "The world tries to atomize society, but we are called to draw together the spiritual, ethical, and vocational aspects of life" (page 27).

I particularly appreciated his dealing with the problem of *distraction* (page 127, *Called to Focus*). This is a standard, but necessary, theme for discipleship in this generation. Here his experience may make him slightly blind to those for whom money issues are not matters of *distraction* (page 132) but actual *existence*. But he takes it to the right place, including the need to turn and be captured by a desire for Jesus; i.e. to *repent* (*metaonoia* in the Greek).

> *No calling is complete without a true understanding of metanoia. Page 138*

<u>But the essential thing is missing or obscured.</u> This is what has frustrated me.

The heart of vocation is cruciform. All vocation takes us to a moment of death, surrender, and abandonment of self into the hands of God. It is there in *every* vocational story in the Bible. It's Abraham with a knife on Mt. Moriah. It's Moses-of-Egypt shuffling around Midian with his sheep. It's David staying his slaying hand in a cave. It's the rich young ruler facing his idol. It's Peter weeping at the sound of a rooster. It's Paul, blind and helpless in Damascus. It's Jesus hungry for bread in the wilderness, and hungry for life in

Gethsemane.

The *exercise* of vocation needs wisdom and skill and Costa is a great help with those things. But the *foundation* looks more like Bonhoeffer, who literally knew the Cost of Discipleship: "When God calls a man, he bids him come and die." In my own experience, and in walking alongside people over the years, vocation is knowing how we are to be "living sacrifices." Any sense of success is a gift and a grace. I don't quite see this essential dynamic in Costa's book.

The examples he uses, in the main, attach to career prospects and business or philanthropic projects. These are good points of application, but vocation is so much deeper than that. Moses didn't come back down from the burning bush excited about his career shift from shepherd to liberator, feeling equipped with a new-found maturity. Jonah's careerism wasn't *enabled* by his refinement in the belly of the whale, it *died,* and was *vomited* back to life, on God's terms! David wasn't moved by his future prospects in the wilderness, he was spiritually rent asunder until the fragments rested in the Lord his God: "You, God, are my God… my whole being longs for you in a dry and parched land where there is no water" (Psalm 63).

Throughout this book, I kept falling into this gap between the exercise of vocation, and its cruciform foundation.

As one example, consider the prophet's wife in the days of Elisha who needed a miracle of provision; she had nothing but a little oil in the house. Costa wants to turn this into a lesson about recognising what we have, even it is little (page 50, *Called to Flourish);* we should be "prepared to live by an exception." But the story is actually about someone who is at the *end* of herself, and receives a *miraculous* provision. She didn't walk away from her time of indebtedness grateful for her lesson about looking on the bright side; she came out with a testimony of "I had nothing… but God…" Her family had died,

so to speak, and had been restored back to life.

Another example: I truly appreciate how Costa devotes a chapter to the seasons of delay (page 63ff, *Called to Wait.*) For Costa, these seasons are a "a kind of spiritual workshop" (page 64). We might learn, alongside the footballer, Pelé, to imagine ourselves "performing like an irresistible force" (page 67). At this point even he realises that he is in danger of slipping into the "power of positive thinking " (page 67). His response is a subtle deflection, to **cover self-actualisation with a Christian aesthetic** rather than deal with the principle: Perform, but of course, don't forget that "the source of our hope and our ability to deliver come from the Holy Spirit" (page 68). Yes, "we need to be firm, positive, and inspired to believe the promises of the Bible" (page 68), but that is the *fruit* of the wilderness experience, not the path that takes us through. The wilderness isn't an object lesson in having our "dreams and determination run together" (page 75). Rather in the waiting we learn to lay it all down, until the Holy Spirit grounds our inspiration in God and not ourselves. If we seek to save our life in the wilderness, we've lost it.

These gaps matter. "I am no longer the arbiter of success in my life" (page 17), Costa wisely says, but the measure of success he applies in his anecdotes are usually, frankly, *worldly*: measures of numbers, influence, and *size*! If it is that, and not the cruciform way, that seizes our vocation, then we are undone. Costa is borrowing his vocabulary (e.g. the sting of "satisfactory underperformance", page 56) from his mercantile world, and that is not without merit. But the *allure*, the *pursuit*, of 'success' is a subtle idolatry that needs sanctification, not succour. Performance-drive *undermines* vocation. In the church world, especially, we must confront it. One of the ugliest parts of evangelical culture, the wounds of which I encounter time and time again in my walk and in others, is the invalidation of brothers and sisters;

their vocations have been weighed and found wanting by some cold measure of performance that is actually extrinsic to the vocational walk of faith. Fairly or not, in caricature or otherwise, the HTB ecosystem is often that measure.

Those with a prophetic vocation would be *least* helped by this book. Costa rightly recognises that he buys into a framework for expressing calling that is "a privilege of the few, and we should always see it as such" (page 81, *Called to Choose*). He is also wise to affirm the simple serving tasks of being a "cog in the bigger machine" (page 58). This book isn't an insensitive triumphalist treatise! For those who are playing the game, this book will help them win it with integrity. But, for some, the game is rigged. Sometimes the machine needs breaking. At that point the prophetic vocation needs nurture and wisdom. Their "why" would collide with the milieu of this book, I think, and fall through the gap.

I admire his vulnerability in talking about fear and anxiety (page 105, *Called to Courage*). In fact, I found this chapter to be quite therapeutic as I brought to mind some of my own "disappointment and dashed hopes" (page 106). But again, the gap is evident, even in his **theology of failure**. It is good to talk about mistakes, especially painful ones, but, in the end, they are merely *mistakes*. It is *shame* that must be confronted, and Costa *avoids* it. "We will all fail at something at some point, we will never *be* failures" (page 109), he says, and skirts the issue. We can't cover our failures with a Christian aesthetic of "There, there, think about Jesus realise that you're *not* the failure." Rather, it is *precisely* at the cross that shame gives way to life. I need the cross when I *am* broken and wrong – when I *am* a failure, and not simply when I've mucked something up. Christ took my shame, and all my *being* is now a gift from him. This is how vocation is built on his grace, and not our own sequence of little discoveries of how to do things better next time.

I appreciate how Costa may struggle with "determinist

philosophies" (page 83) such as that of Marx and Freud, but he should also be wary of the opposite extreme of **self-determinism**. He urges us to "set [our faces] like flint" (page 121) as we "throw all that we have into this struggle." But he is quoting from Isaiah 50:7 and the rest of it says this: "*Because the Sovereign Lord helps me*, I will not be disgraced, therefore have I set my face like flint, and I know I will not be put to shame." The proactivity is not from us and our flinty faces, it is from the Lord. We realise our vocation when we realise our *utter existential* dependence upon God. Costa gets *close* to it when he acknowledges that "there could never be a shaking so severe as to dislodge the life that Christ wanted to have in and through me" (page 122) and when he affirms an ethos of "not sink or swim but saved" (page 123). But he presents this as if its our "emergency braking system" (page 124) or some sort of safety net. It's not; it's our *foundation*, and the essence of all that we are and do.

Again, I appreciate how he doesn't ignore the *cost* of calling. He quotes Paul's overwhelming challenges (page 156, *Called to Persevere*). But Paul, in fact, rests his perseverance not in his "indominitable *conviction*", but in *surrender and being strong in weakness*. "When we are cursed, we bless", Paul says, "when we are persecuted, we endure it; when we are slandered, we answer kindly. We have become the scum of the earth, the garbage of the world—right up to this moment." (1 Corinthians 4:12-13). Paul is compelled not by self-confidence, but by Christ's love (2 Corinthians 5:14). Once again, the difference between Paul and Costa, is cruciform. All visions die; if they don't we achieve them in our own strength. **All perseverance is grounded in our total reliance on Jesus.** We don't "celebrate because our plans are completed" (page 161), we celebrate because, *he* has led us, and *his* plans have become *our* plans. *Our* plans have died, *his* have been completed. To *God* be the glory.

My frustration here echoes a broader angst. These various gaps

– a tendency towards self-reliance and performance-drive, deflection by appeal to Christian aesthetics, diminution of the prophetic voice and so on – are a subtle but real characteristic of the wider church culture. They are often manifest in the nuance, and so I hope I am not reading them into Costa's book or picking the nits. There is so much good in what Costa writes; I just want him to bring it all the way in. The gaps are subtle, but they do need addressing. Anyone who takes up this book will gain much from it. But start with Christ and the taking up of your own cross first. That is where the grace of vocation is rooted and grows; and it has deep joy.