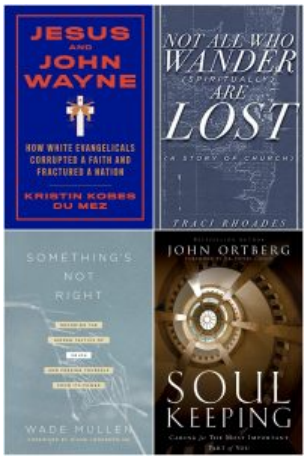
For When The Church Hurts You – Short reviews from my reading pile #1.



It's been a habit of mine to review every (substantial) book that I read. This hasn't happened in the second half of 2021. Changes to my job, while delightful in many ways, have left me with barely the time and energy to attend to the word of God and prayer, let alone to the reading and mulling-over of books in general. This too will pass.

Instead of reviewing each book in-depth, I'm attempting a broader overview. Because the books I have read fall into two broad categories, I will do this in two parts. The second part, coming, will engage with books that critique our current industrial forms for expressing Christian religion. They have helped me ponder some subtle revolutionary ways of being God's people that are both ancient and future.

In this first post, I'm drawing on a different theme. It has reached a crescendo this year, cresting at the time I reviewed Langberg's *Redeeming Power*. In the background is the fallout from the abuses of Ravi Zacharias. An accompaniment that has swelled in and out (with its, um, "variable" release schedule) is the Rise and Fall of Mars Hill podcast.

This theme is a mournful lament to the simple fact that church culture can be, and often is, toxic. Gill and I have been processing our own ecclesiastical trauma; Langberg and others have helped us do that. One of our key realisations has been to accept the reality of our abuse. Unlike others, we are not victims of a malicious perpetrator. Nevertheless, we have been

hurt, and it wasn't just "one of those things"; it has been, at various times, due to toxic culture, vicious immaturities, and collective negligence. We can't just shrug it off; we have been wounded and the healthy thing is to pursue healing.

And it is not just about us. Our children have, unavoidably, witnessed what has been done to us; and have been on the receiving end of ostracism and shunning themselves. They have carried emotional loads which have been indirectly, but obviously, foisted upon them by inept church leaders unwilling to carry their own burdens, let alone the yoke of Christ to which they laid claim. Our children are learning to discern between the way of Christ and the way of his people, and how to count the life-giving cost of the former while standing firm against the latter. In due course they may share their own story; I will not go further than that here.

Similarly, by God's grace, we have encountered a number of others who have fallen under the wheels of the religio-industrial complex. Amongst their experiences are the effects of being silenced, ostracised, manipulated, or made subservient to a form of mission that is more about ecclesiastical ego than ecclesiological pursuit of God's good kingdom. The deconstruction of church is real. We are learning how to hear these stories, to undergo our own as-healthy-as-can-be deconstruction (because God's grace abounds when we are undone), while holding fast to the hope that is true, and truly, within us.

These books have been a part of that journey this last half-year.

Jesus and John Wayne : *How white evangelicals corrupted a faith and fractured a nation* – Kristin Kobes Du Mez
Not All Who Wander (Spiritually) Are Lost : *A story of church* – Traci Rhoades
Something's Not Right : *Decoding the hidden tactics of abuse and freeing yourself from its power* – Wade Mullen

Soul Keeping : Caring for the most important part of you – John Ortberg

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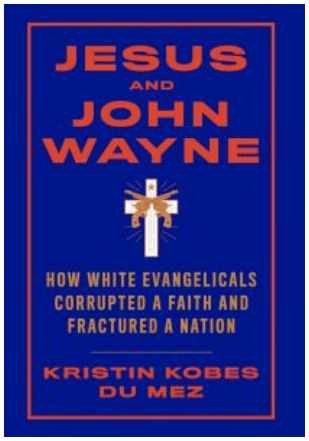


Jesus and John Wayne by Kristin Kobes Du Mez has become such a touchstone book that it's almost a meme. It is closely tied to the American evangelical scene and while it gives some helpful insight, it also perpetuates the Trumpian vs Wokeist culture wars that are besetting the West of late. Consequently, some love the book, and others loathe it.

Du Mez describes a cultural phenomenon: "White evangelicals" who "piece together" "intolerance towards immigrants, racial minorities, and non-Christians" and "opposition to gay rights and gun control" in which "a nostalgic commitment to rugged, aggressive, militant white masculinity serves as the thread binding them together into a coherent whole" (page 4). Hence, Christians have come to worship and follow a proverbial John Wayne more than Jesus Christ. At times my evangelical friends need to read and inwardly mark this critique; at other times it is just an evangelical straw man, certainly with respect to what evangelicalism means outside of the US, particularly in the two-thirds majority Christian world.

The deconstruction, however, is helpfully real. Billy Graham is dealt with (page 23), along with the likes of Falwell (page 49), Dobson (page 78), Eldredge (page 173), and, of course, Driscoll (page 193). It is a valid unveiling of the late 20th

Century ecosystem of a religious industry forming and feeding a marketplace of conservative ideals.

So how does this speak to the theme of ecclesiastical trauma? **On the one hand, I am with Du Mez.** I first encountered American messianicism over a quarter of a century ago while working for a mission agency; it disturbed me then, it nauseates me now. There's a cultish idolatry in it, and while the blatant stars-and-stripes version isn't really prevalent outside of the US, the culture permeates. How can it be that church-by-default in the 2020's is basically Willow Creek of the 1990's, complete with it's success-driven if-you-ain't-growing-there's-something-wrong-with-you marketeer method of managerial machoism? I've been under that bus, and too many of my friends have also. Du Mez gives insight into both the politics and social psychology of it all, and it is very helpful.

> *Evangelicals hadn't betrayed their values. Donald Trump was the culmination of their half-century-long pursuit of a militant Christian masculinity. (page 271)*

A pervasive culture of misogyny is a particular focus of the book. You only need to hear the testimonies coming out of the *Rise and Fall of Mars Hill* podcast to see the legacy and fruit of the masculine hero complex. It hit close to home for me: While Gill and I weren't exactly fulsome proponents of the personalities, we *did* lean into the resources and some of the teaching of men such as LaHaye and Eldredge and even Driscoll. To be sure, some of it was helpful, but we have come to discern how many of the foundational premises are not of the Kingdom of God. Consider how marriage has been upheld as a way of sanctifying what remains an essentially pornified man-centred understanding of sex. To the extent that, back in the day, I did not detect, and even furthered, this corruption, I am chastened, saddened and regretful.

> *The evangelical men's movement of the 1990s was marked by experimentation and laden with contradictions. "Soft patriarchy" papered over tensions between a harsher, authoritarian masculinity and a more egalitarian posture; the motif of the tender warrior reconciled militancy with a kinder, gentler, more emotive bearing… it might have appeared that the more egalitarian and emotive impulses had the upper hand…. At the end of the decade, however, the more militant movement would begin to reassert itself. When it did.. [it] would become intertwined both with the sexual purity movement and with the assertion of complementarianism within evangelical circles. In time it would become clear that the combination… could produce toxic outcomes.*
> *(Page 172)*

On the other hand, however, *#JAJW* is not, for me, a salve for healing, it's just another beating. In this way this book differs in my experience to that of Langberg whose titular focus is the *redemption* of power. What hope does Du Mez offer? In our experience, the early 2000's were *hard* ministry years. We were young and naive and winging it on-the-fly, clinging to whatever was of *some* use from the very few spiritual parents we could find who would help us navigate – let alone lead! – into uncharted waters. The Hybels-speak was already beginning to wear thin, and no one (apart from the self-infatuated Driscolls and Bells) had alternatives to offer. We eased our way forward, stumbling, learning, hurting, on the way.

Take that example of "soft patriarchy" quoted above: The emphasis on servant leadership in, say, Promise Keepers, *was* better than the Marlborough Man masculinity exemplified by our own fathers; so we took that step in the right direction. It's only in hindsight that we can see that it wasn't enough; it continued a disenfranchisement of our sisters; and it allowed an aspiration to manly-service to manifest yet another form of control. The first time I glimpsed this was when, having expressed some excitement about an upcoming meeting of

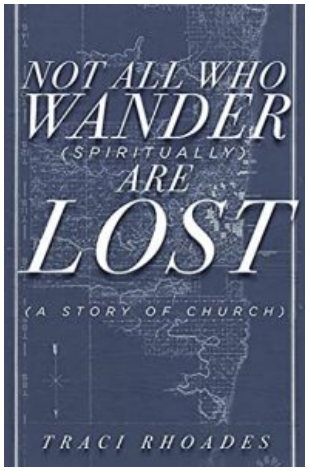
mission-hearted sacrificial church-planting pioneers, I encountered the sadness of a Christian sister who shrugged and said that it was not a room she was welcome in.

I have learned to heed those who have had skin and blood in the game, and aren't about the winning. To that extent, 20th Century evangelicalism, like all periods of history, had its dross, and its pure metal. Du Mez gives only cursory mention of those who don't fit the stereotype of the antagonist she needs; her bias is clear. Consider Jim Wallis of Sojourners (briefly mentioned on page 47) or the likes of John Mark Comer and Jon Tyson (the same generation as Driscoll, but more refined by trial to a place of humility) who are the children of 20th Century icons such as Willard and Ortberg and Peterson. Their story is not told; yet it is these sorts of men who exhibit a form of masculinity that is worthy of at least some aspiration. I found only one explicit caveat conceding that the "evangelical cult of masculinity does not define the whole of American evangelicalism" (page 301).

Jesus and John Wayne has now been weaponised by both sides. It is yet another no-man's-land for those of us who have been wounded from both right and left. Du Mez writes, "In learning how to be Christian men, evangelicals also learned how to think about sex, guns, war, borders, Muslims, immigrants, the military, foreign policy, and the nation itself" (page 296), and it's a familiar, political trope of conflation; apparently if someone has, say, a traditional theology of, the atonement (caricatured on page 200), then they are also guilt of islamophobia and the idolisation of the military! Correlation is not causation, neither is there a necessary coherence entwining all these things – and perhaps Du Mez is simply making a generalist observation – but that is not how it gets played. I get why some would wield Du Mez as a wrecking ball of deconstruction; but there is often an arrogance in their assertion, and it invalidates more than it gifts life. In its activist fervour, the left is just as corrupt and corrupting

at times as all that Du Mez rightfully points out about the right.

I read this book, and feel homeless.



This was one of those books that I got for its title. At the height of covid, when the deconstruction was real, I was looking for testimonies of those who had passed through ecclesiastical storms, and were able to perceive the Tolkeinesque adventure within the journey. This was not that book. The title of *Not All Who Wander (Spiritually) Are Lost* is verging on literary clickbait.

Traci Rhoades' book is basically autobiography told through the sequence of her church involvement. Perhaps its beauty is in its sheer *ordinariness* ("Overall, when I look back on my early years in the church, I'm more thankful than disillusioned", page 12). Like all ordinary stories she reveals the easy and comfortable times, and the storms that have tossed her about. From "flannel boards" and "vacation Bible school" (page 3) to bewilderment at power games in leadership, Rhoades is descriptive, rather than analytical. The church she describes is cultural phenomenon rather than theological wonder. And while she is not naive, she never reveals the sort of crisis that is relevant to me and mine in this season.

> *I've been in church forty-plus years. Don't think for a minute it's always easy or there aren't times when hefty doses of grace and forgiveness are needed, yet I've never considered leaving the church… Generations of my biological family have faithfully attended church, and I know I have a place in that heritage. (Page 23)*

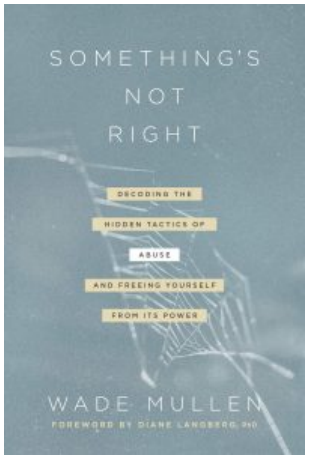
The anecdotes from others are more helpful, and a bit more raw and real (e.g. "a story of a woman who had to leave for a time in order to let Jesus heal her heart.", page 29). Nevertheless, this whole book is more like an easy-listening podcast than a serious grappling with serious things; it's a glorified pinterest post. Sometimes, as she listed the various ways in which she was involved in the consumeristic programs of her latest context, I was simultaneously agitated and bored. What person of depth measures a church by a "parking lot" test and the rest of the quality-control criteria she employs (page 82)? The thought of pandering to such proclivities palpitates this pastor's pulse!

Perhaps the value of this book lies here: It is presented without guile. Occasionally I was even reminded of those heady days in my youth when the mission of the church *excited me* and when I could agree with Rhoades' Sunday School teacher, "I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go to church'" (page 3). Those days are well and truly gone, but there is something of my "first love" in that sentiment which softens my cynicism even if it leaves me feeling wistful and sad at innocence gone. I still love the church of God, mostly in its hidden guises, but I am not void of delight, and sometimes it has the whiff of childlike wonder.

> *The Jesus I met in the churches of my youth is the same Jesus who meets me in this spiritual wilderness. Jesus is the one who has formed and filled me. Jesus is the one who leads me, saves me, calls me. The Jesus I asked into my heart as a child is the same Jesus who I gave my on-fire heart to in my*

> *early twenties, and is the same Jesus I entrust my broken heart to now. (Page 92, quoting "Aaron")*

I read this book, and feel both annoyance, and, at the same time, a reminder to not disparage a way of being church through which God has blessed many, despite its manifest inadequacies.



Wade Mullen's *Something's Not Right* has a foreword by Diane Langberg, which is an instant recommendation. The subtitle speaks to it's purpose: *Decoding the hidden tactics of abuse and freeing yourself from its power*. It is not, so much, a therapeutic book; it is a *resource*, a form of training, that informs those moments when we know something is simply not quite right.

As such, Mullen provides an antidote to gaslighting. We know from experience that those who go through ecclesiastical trauma do a lot of soul searching. Most of us are, rightly, grounded in a desire to not rock the boat, to not tear down needlessly, and, in the most appropriate sense of it, to keep any rebellious spirit in check. Self-reflection is important, but it can be exploited by abusive perpetrators and toxic cultures. When we get tangled up, asking "What's wrong with me? What have I done wrong? Am I going mad?", the real issues (external to ourselves) avoid the exposure and the light they need for resolution. In contrast, Mullen helps us to be aware of the real toxicity, and to "advocate for yourself" (e.g. page 172).

> *Abuse impairs your ability to make sense of what is happening. It spins you around and disorients you. (Page 79)*

The value of this book is it's applicability where toxicity is more subtle than blatant. Gill and I have not had many dealings with *overt* corruption but we *have* run the gamut of the *covert.* In our time we have experienced shunning and have had silence manipulated into us. We have been left capsized in the wake when perceptions are valued more than reality, and when dysfunctional institutions and offices are too big to question, let alone fail. We have been squeezed into false narratives which comfort the insecure but powerful. I found descriptions of all these sorts of things on the pages of this book, and it was a strange comfort to read; perhaps we're not crazy, just hurt.

Mullen speaks of silencing (e.g. page 13), different types of secret-mongering (page 17), the ways in which flattery is used (page 38), financial dependence (page 40), and attempts of using "past trauma against you" (page 174). A diagram (page 71) simply titled "dismantling your world" sums it up. He describes the protection of the indispensable over against the vulnerable (e.g. page 27). He speaks of narcissism and the complicity of those who prefer sterile comfort to healthy conflict ("peace when there is no peace", page 155). He describes the loss of agency ("a piece of her identity fell off with each step she took into the culture of the church", page 57). To a greater or lesser extent, we've seen it all, and personally experienced more than enough of it.

> *I think many live with untold stories, not because they never want to tell them, but because they never encounter safe people and safe places where their stories can be heard. (Page 170)*

Here's a piece of truth behind why we are no longer enamoured by the religio-industrial church, and the glamour of success: "No amount of patience will produce change in an abusive community that isn't willing to surrender its legitimacy and pursue the entire truth" (page 166). Those who seek to save

their lives will lose it, you see. But that opposite is also true; and we have ever aspired to call God's people to lay themselves down, and so be saved.

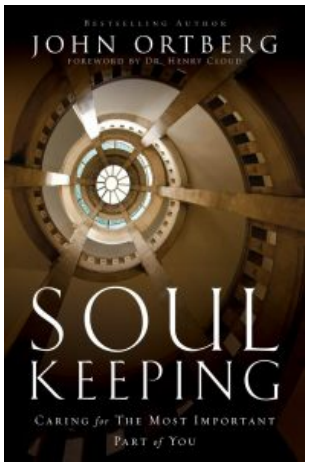
I read this book and I feel validated.

And, in a healthy way, I also feel warned. As a church leader I am privileged to be invited into the vulnerable parts of people's lives. Church is its best when it is not shallow, aloof, "professional," but embraces vocational vulnerability and communal exposure to the grace of God. As Mullen describes those who are complicit in toxicity, I am marking it in myself: Have I made that excuse? Have I blinded myself to that flaw? I am aware of my faults; we all bring a degree of toxicity to our relationships.

Sometimes, it is even expected of us. I have long observed that I know a *few* pastors with a messianic complex, but I know *many* churches who put their pastors on a pedestal. Mullen helps me to not buy into that game, to detect when it's happening, and to climb down to the ground, no matter the cost, or the disappointment I bring others.

I read this book and I feel wary of myself, but also equipped, perhaps, to have some blind spots revealed.

And finally, I read this book and I feel some hope. I see in my own family some of the wounds Mullen describes, including his own. Cynicism, despair, and hopelessness can easily abound. Yet Mullen seeks to move in the opposite spirit. And he does this with aspiration that I think I can share: "I look for and cultivate beauty." (page 177)



It seems useful to conclude thinking about ecclesiastical trauma with a book that is more positive; Ortberg's *Soul Keeping* is about wellbeing.

It intrigued me for a number of reasons, not least of which is my appreciation of a growing movement of Christian spirituality that is hard to define but is nevertheless real. It is theologically evangelical, pyschologically mature, sociologically aware, missional and holistic. It is epitomised by the likes of John Mark Comer, Tish Harrison Warren, and Jon Tyson. Look in to their background and you find influences such as Ortberg, and before him, Dallas Willard. This book, in many ways, is simply Ortberg's homage to Willard. There's even a line about the ruthless elimination of hurry (page 20) that someone "stole".

Ortberg considers "the soul" within the "operating system of life" as "the capacity to integrate all parts [body, mind, will etc.] into a single whole life" (page 42). "…like a program that runs a computer, you don't usually notice until it messes up." This concept of *integration* is at the heart of it all. And it is foundational to some of my own recent endeavours to bring emotional, physical, and spiritual health together.

In this book, therefore, we ponder ways in which our way of life can damage our soul, such that we are more dis-integrated. In doing so, there is a nuanced realignment of some of our church rhetoric: A "lost" soul is not about "destination", but "condition" (page 62). Salvation is not just about the location of our eternity, but of regeneration of soul in the here and now; it is about health and our soul

finding it's home. "Sin fractures and shatters the soul" (page 67), and the gospel is the path of restoration. Eternal life is meant to start now.

In this way our theology is grounded. Idolatry isn't mere metaphysics, it's essentially *addiction*; a "finding oneself" in something or someone other than our maker. Worship isn't mere duty of some ethereal benefit; it's the upwelling of our very selves towards the source of life, our maker.

> *The soul must orbit around something other than itself – something it can worship. It is the nature of the soul to need. (Page 85)*

The exhortation of the book is a gentle assertion of agency, by the grace of God. Ortberg spins a parable in his prologue (page 13) of a fresh stream flowing from ancient roots to bring water to a village. If the stream is *kept* well – if it is cleared of detritus, and kept to its course, and resolved of pollutants – it is life-giving, and a bubbling joy. If left unattended, it can go stagnant and bring death. The exhortation is this: *The stream is your soul, and you are the keeper.*

Here there's a connection with the theme of ecclesiastical trauma. There are two facets to this. Firstly, trauma is a damaging of the soul. It is usually inflicted by those who have not *kept their soul* well; and who deflect that responsibility onto others. (An aside: vicars have the "cure of souls", but that does not make us the springs of water that others can empty; it is to help others find the source of life, and equip them to tend to their own stream). Secondly, for myself at least, the healing of that trauma is about re-integration more than anything else (including management-speaks words such as *resilience*).

In this light, trauma can lead to worship. "God has placed eternity in our hearts" and pain reveals our hunger for it.

That is grace. There's a reason why it's called the "dark night of the *soul*" (see chapter 16, page179). God moves, so that we might follow. That is love; it is how he woos us and draws our attention to himself. And therefore pain builds maturity, and hope. Ortberg puts it like this: "There will be great pain, and there will be great joy. In the end, joy wins. So if joy has not yet won, it is not yet the end" (page 113). The resolution of my own trauma is, paradoxically, an *honest awareness* of it (so that I can tend to my stream) without giving it my focus. Trauma may block or hinder my soul and needs attention, but it is never able to be my source. Integration begins in worship, and attending to the presence of God.

Which is where my pondering ends, at the end of a busy year. There is a sadness in realising that much of the year ahead will need to be about soul-keeping, being aware of the pollutants that leak and the blockages that tumble from many ecclesiastical machinations. But there is also resolve. I cannot build the house; unless the Lord builds it, it is all in vain. "I cannot live in the kingdom of God with a hurried soul. I cannot rest in God with a hurried soul." (page 134).

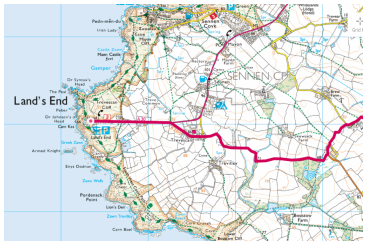
I will begin 2022 by discipling my soul, like I might disciple a child. Awake, my soul, and sing.

Loving Where You Put Your Feet

This is a story of a virtual pilgrimage, and sowing the seeds of the real one.

During the lockdown of early 2021 we were all, of necessity,

spending a lot of time in our homes. As I pondered the tumultuous year that had been 2020 I found myself on the Ordnance Survey website looking at some of the places where we had walked during the summer. I love maps. I value my Ordnance Survey (OS) subscription!



I found myself, with podcasts playing in my zoom-seasoned headphones, scanning the map of the country that I have come to call home. I "visited" Land's End – the most Westerly point of Great Britain – and I began to ponder. How *do* people do that famous "LEJOG" walk, from Land's End to John O' Groats. What paths do they take? What does it *look* like?

On the OS maps you can zoom right in. You can find the public rights-of-way; the green-dotted lines that give us the right to walk across fields and forests and back alleys and carparks of industrial sites. The satellite imagery lets you know if it's paved or gravel or overgrown-tangle-of-nettles-and-brambles. You can see when the way is blocked by a river, or a motorway, a railway, or an MoD restricted zone. I began to plot a route, planning my path, imagining the place where feet might tread…

I became lost in it. Even on a screen, it became something of the rhythm of trudge. I've done a lot of hiking in my youth. I know what it's like to be in that zone. It is a place of peace, and of processing pain; it's a place of simply being on an internal journey while the outside moves on past. This is part of walking-as-pilgrimage, as I understand it: The interior journey and the exterior journey align.

As the lockdown continued, the virtual journey did too. I began to ponder what was moving me. In the end it wasn't to

travel across Britain, it was to travel across *England*. We've had this heart for a while: The Scottish love Scotland, the Welsh love Wales, but who loves England? As my computer screen took me across moors and meadows, suburbs, cities, and industrial scars, I was beginning to pray for this adopted country of mine. I want to love the place where I put my feet.

Now my virtual pilgrimage had purpose. Lands' End to Lizard Point takes us to West and South extremes. It would end in Marshall Meadow's Bay, on the Scottish border in Northumberland. Lowestoft Ness (near where I was born) would take me to the most easterly point, and some of the lowest points in East Anglia. And why not take the route to Scafell Pike, and stand (virtually) speaking on England's tallest point?

But even with all the cardinal points, so much would still be missed. Praying and loving the scenery I saw (on a screen in a vicarage study in Sheffield), I found myself visiting every Cathedral in the country. It would take a zig zag up the country; two thousand miles of plotted pixels and roads to imagine.

And then it was done. Not in reality; just in my heart, and on an internet site. But what would it take "IRL", as they say? Google tells me that pilgrims on, say, the camino de Santiago, can average 15 to 20 miles a day. I plotted it out. Averaging 17 miles a day, with a day off every week, a real-life walk, a placing of love-plodding feet, would take 140 odd-days. That's a sabbatical and a few weeks annual leave! Perhaps one day…

But it got me thinking. It got me pondering my own interior life, as well as my own physicality. I wasn't sure I could walk five miles, let alone seventeen! I might not be able to walk across the land; but could I even walk across the *city* to which God has brought me? I *love* this place; and I'm learning to love it more and more. It has posh green parks, and broken

old factories, ancient ruins, and legoland low-rises; and people of every colour shape and sound.

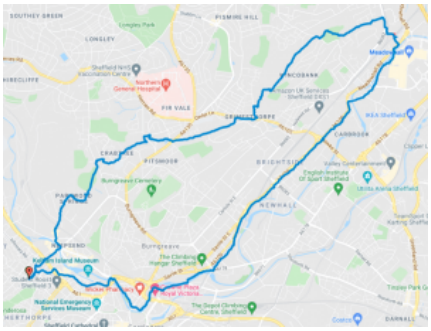
Throughout his year, therefore, I've been doing a local pilgrimage; loving the place where I put my feet. It began with "loop walks" from my house. I walked to Meadowhall and back; nine miles and I couldn't walk for a week! It has ended with long treks to other counties, to return by train; sometimes alone, sometimes with companions, or larger groups.

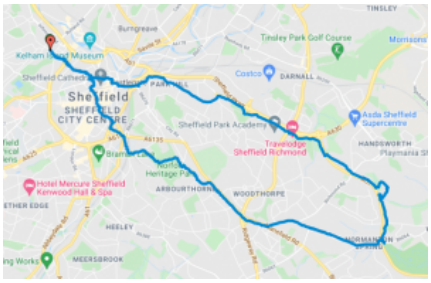
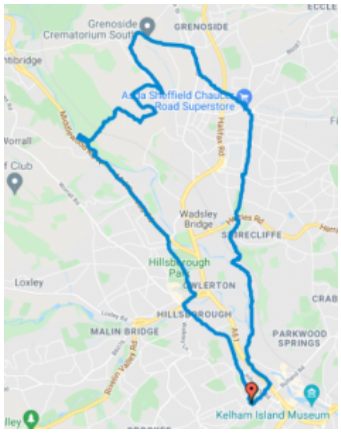
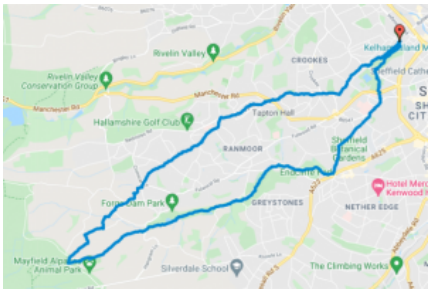
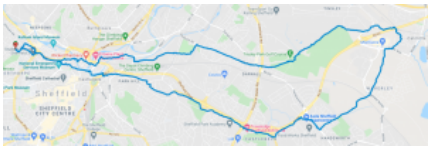
Each walk – whether four hours long,or eight hours long – has been a *journey*. Sometimes there's been a bounce in my step. At other times I look at the horizon to where I'm going and I'm plodding, and hurting, and wondering why I bothered. Leaning into joy, or into pain and weariness; such is life.

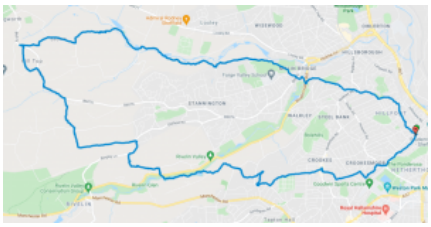
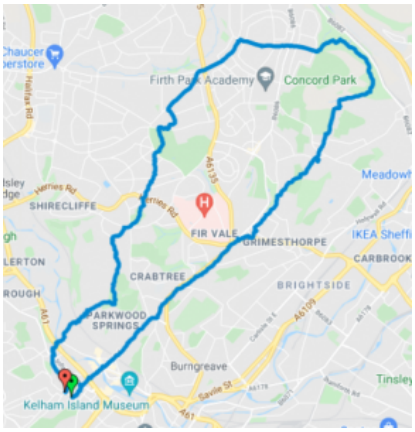
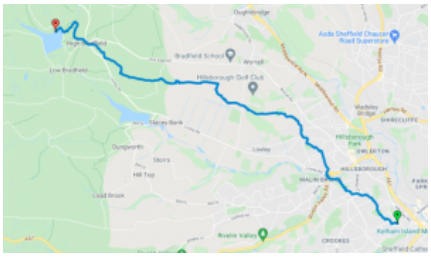
And I have *seen* the place to which God has brought me; nooks and crannies and even some hidden paths that I would never have discovered. I have chatted with a few along the way, and received encounters as God's invitation.

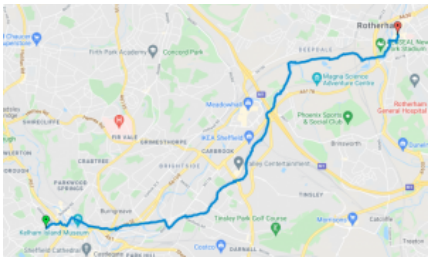
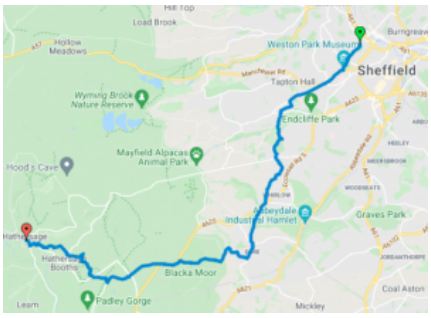
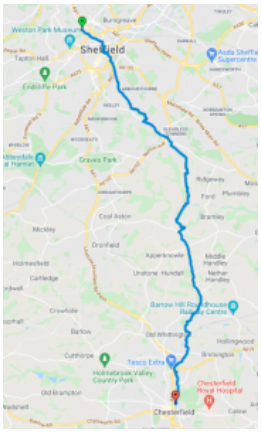
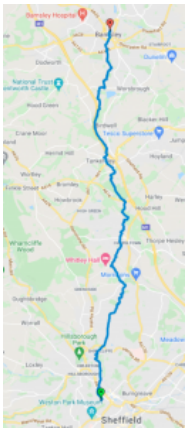
The routes I have taken form something of a flower-shape; these became my "flower walks" of 2021. And they have been a joy. They'll continue into 2022, where I'll continue to love where God has put my feet. Feel free to join me!

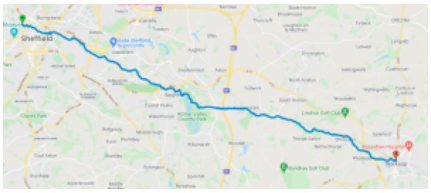
And for those who would like to know the detail of where I've been….

	**FEB 2021 – MEADOWHALL AND BACK** Nine miles, and I couldn't walk afterwards. The five-weirs walk, and then back along the hills. I discovered Wincobank! Iron age history, and a patch of moorland in the midst of Sheffield suburbs.	

	**MAR 2021 (#1) – WOODHOUSE AND BACK** Eleven and a half miles alongside the Parkway before looping down and back along the tram road, finishing with Norfolk Park and through the central city.	
	**MAR 2021 (#2) – GRENOSIDE AND BACK** A tick under ten miles, and feeling stronger. A walk along the Don River and through the suburbs of Parson Cross before farm fields (muddy!) and Beeley Wood and returning through Hillsborough.	
	**APR 2021 (#1) – PORTER BROOK AND BACK** The snow was falling! Ten and a half miles across to Endcliffe and all the way up the Porter Valley and back through the suburbs of Fullwood and Tapton Hill.	
	**APR 2021 (#2) – CATCLIFFE AND BACK** For twelve miles, I was joined by two fellow travellers and a dog! Through Darnall and Tinsley Park, almost to the M1, before coming back through Handsworth, and back along the Parkway. At the turnaround point, it felt like a long way from home.	

	**MAY 2021 – DUNGWORTH AND BACK** Across to Hillsborough and then along the Loxley Valley. The hills and valleys on the way back matched some ups and downs in my interior life. Each hill was a push.	
	**JUNE 2021 (#1) – BEAUCHIEF AND BACK** A loop into South Sheffield, through Nether Edge to Beauchief, across to Graves Park, and back via Heeley. I struggled with foot pain, but the day was a joy, resting in God.	
	**JUNE 2021 (#2) – SHIREGREEN AND BACK** I was joined by my daughter for a loop into North Sheffield, through Fir Vale to Concord Park, and back through the old and new estates of Shiregreen and Longley to Parkwood Springs. This was to bring the “loop walks” to a completion.	
	**JULY 2021 – AGDEN** It was time to go on a journey “with an end” and not loop back. On a hot day, family and friends were going to Agden Reservoir. I joined them, walking through Hillsborough and the edge of Wadsley, and through beautiful farmland to High Bradfield.	

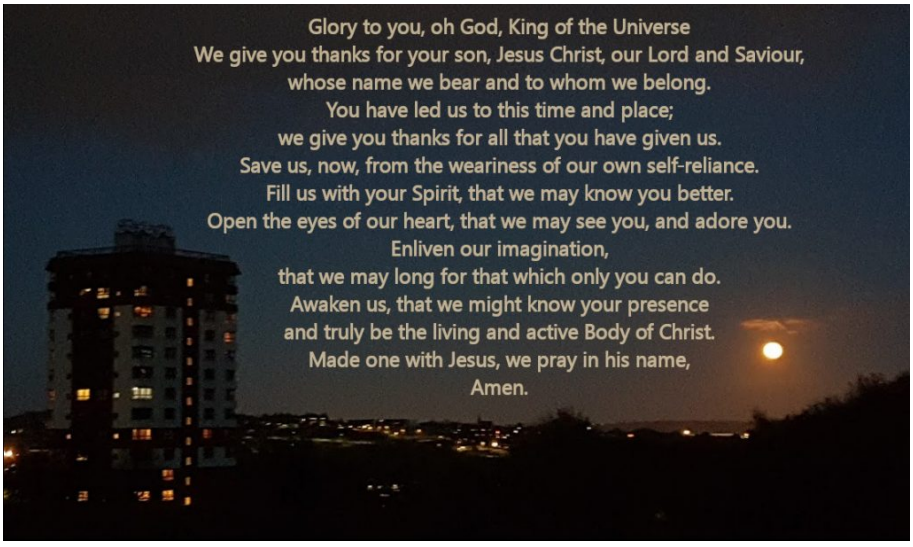
	**AUGUST 2021 – ROTHERHAM** I'd been set back by a dose of covid. I need a walk that was a physical rest. A gentle flat walk along the canal to Rotherham was perfect. This was also the beginning of a new season (post-summer) of integrating physical, emotional, and spiritual health. More on that soon.	
	**SEPTEMBER 2021 – HATHERSAGE** It was time to be stretched; to throw some caution to the wind. I was joined by a dear friend on a journey to Hathersage, through the well-to-do suburbs of South Sheffield and over the peaks, on a gorgeous, spirit-lifting day.	
	**OCTOBER 2021 (#1) – CHESTERFIELD** Another shift in season. It was time to walk *to* somewhere, not just *from* Sheffield. I pushed long to Chesterfield, from suburbs to suburbs with farmland in between. Some of the paths were overgrown. This was a solitude walk, a time of retreat.	
	**OCTOBER 2021 (#2) – BARNSLEY** Joined by two good friends, this was an adventure for all of us. Through north Sheffield suburbs and outlying villages, interspersed with fields. This path went alongside the M1 for quite some time	

	**NOVEMBER 2021 – EDALE** Time to walk as community. A group of about a dozen, from all different walk of life, joined me on perfect autumn day, across the peaks, to Edale. This pushed the limits physically. Walking together is slower, but much more enjoyable. Fellowship at its best.	
	**DECEMBER 2021 – WORKSOP** Winter was closing in, and so was my mental health. This was a solitude walk, almost impromptu as the diary cleared along with the weather. A day of retreat and soul searching as I trudged beside still waters.	

The pilgrimage will continue in 2022. Nothing forced. Semi-planned but impromptu. With solitude, and togetherness. Loving where we put our feet.

A Prayer For Our Church

Last week I was at a conference where the following words were used to describe our current circumstance:



Volatility
Uncertainty
Complexity
Ambiguity

I won't unpack those words here; they speak for themselves. They certainly describe something of what it's like to be working, living, and breathing within the context of a parish church (as well as more widely). The normal means and methods of planning and strategising are being lashed by this perfect storm.

And that's OK.

In fact, in so many ways, these are the exact circumstances in which the church of God should revel and excel. This is not because we are more stable, certain, simple, and clear than any other part of society, but because the gospel we cling to speaks of a God who is! He is a rock and a refuge. Lo, he is with us always, to the very end of the age. Including in the storms.

In the light of this, I have been struck, recently, by how St. Paul prayed for his churches in the midst of their own volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous days. He didn't pray, first and foremost, for a change in their circumstances; he prayed for an opening of their eyes to *see* and *know* the one who is *with* them in all things.

> *16 I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. 17 I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. 18 I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, 19 and his incomparably great power for us who believe.*

Ephesians 1:16-19a

This is my prayer for the church, also.

> *9 …since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you. We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, 10 so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, 11 being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, 12 and giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light.*
> *Colossians 1:9-12*

We *have* so much. We have theological and teaching resources. We have freedom to worship, and people to proclaim the word of life. We have resources of time and money. We have the necessary institutional frameworks. We absolutely have the *opportunities* to serve, care, and speak of the way of Christ. We might pray for more of these things, but we have them already.

Our plate is full, so to speak. What we *need* is a desire to eat and drink of that which has been given to us. This is eucharistic mystery: "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood; has eternal life and I will raise them up on the last day" (John 6:54). We are happy to arrange the room, set the table, even welcome and serve the dinner guests; we have planning meetings and strategy documents and even some slick slideshows to prove it! We would do it all, but one thing we lack: to sit down and *eat and drink* of Jesus himself.

Oh that we would behold him. See him. Know him better. Yearn

for him. Long for him. That we would be in *orbit* around him and have *confidence* that when he is known, and followed, as the Way, Truth, and Life, then – and *only then* – will the life-filled kingdom of God be on earth as it is in heaven.

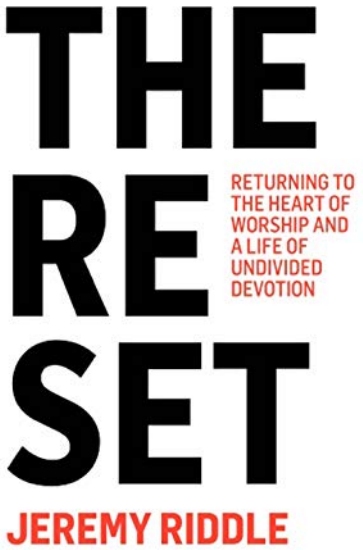
So "open the eyes of our heart", Lord! Just as Paul prayed long ago. Give us the Spirit by which we may see you and *know* you. *Enlighten* us with a revelation of how you are with us, and call us, and shape us, and change us, and move us. *Awaken* us, Lord, to the truth of who you are. *Enliven* us that we might overflow with the marks of the one to whom we belong. The rest of it will come from that. Without that, the rest of it is wearying and ultimately worthless; and I think we know that in our hungry spiritual bellies.

To that end, I've written a prayer for the church communities to which I belong. It's not particularly precise or poetic, but I wonder if you might join me in praying it with me each day as we head quickly towards advent, the season in which we wait for the Lord. We *will* wait for the Lord.

Glory to you, oh God, King of the Universe
We give you thanks for your son, Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour,
whose name we bear and to whom we belong.
You have led us to this time and place;
we give you thanks for all that you have given us.
Save us, now, from the weariness of our own self-reliance.
Fill us with your Spirit, that we may know you better.
Open the eyes of our heart, that we may see you, and adore you.
Enliven our imagination, that we may long for that which only you can do.
Awaken us, that we might know your presence
and truly be the living and active Body of Christ.
Made one with Jesus, we pray in his name,
Amen.

Review: The Reset – Returning to the Heart of Worship and a Life of Undivided Devotion

The deconstruction is real. The pandemic season is lingering and the waves of its wake are more disruptive, more disturbing, more confusing than the sudden crisis with which it struck.



It's real everywhere. It is, certainly, in the church. Now is the time when things are being questioned. Now is the time of being undone.

We used to have forms and structures and predictable routines; we could hide in them and deflect away those deeper things we feared to face. Perhaps we imagined easing back into comfortable unchallenging modes of common life. But covid has ripped the covers off of us, and the substance, or otherwise, of our exposed core cannot be unseen. It *moves us*, it *frightens us*, it *shakes us*. Is it any surprise that even the biggest American denominations are being rocked and refined by scandal after scandal. It's in the UK too. Covid was not a *crisis* for the church, it has been a *catalyst*; the crisis is coming. Are we ready?

Jeremy Riddle is a world famous worship leader, currently on the team at Vineyard Anaheim in California, and formerly of Bethel. You *will* have heard his music. There might perhaps be one higher level in the pantheon of professional praisers (the Order of St. Tomlin perhaps?) but he's up there at the pinnacle of the religio-industrial complex. Wonderfully, beautifully, and above all *Christianly*, he's questioning it all.

> *I'm writing this book in the midst of a global pandemic that has shut down church services, programs, conferences, and Christian events of almost every kind. This is a moment of reset (Page 119)*

The book isn't long. It isn't actually all that insightful, in the sense of saying something new. For instance, we've all known for some time that there is something "off" in the industry of Christian worship. It's refreshing to have it explicated from someone in the know. "The model [of the "Christian" music industry"] may still be useful to Christian music artists and bands," he says (page 88), "but apart from a deep work of repentance and reformation, I don't believe this industry is fit to carry and release the new sound of worship God is about to pour out." Later, he writes about the "lack of kingdom ethics and practice", "secular leadership", and the lack of witness and accountability within the supplier space of the Christian market. He looks for reformation with regard to event management, stage production, performance drive, social media, and influence. They are important critiques, and this isn't merely a tearing-down whinge; it's the launching place for a positive vision (more on that in a minute). And he shows his working.

Chapter by chapter he reveals his heart that we might "cease playing Christian music games" (Introduction). He reveals (Chapter 1) his perspective on the recent history of Christian music, and the "worship movements" which have dominated the

charismatic world; he wants to reclaim something of the purer creativity that was there at the beginning of the charismatic renewal. I know what he means; I still separate the charismatic world into "old-school" Spirit-driven wing-and-a-prayer crazy-but-faithful, and the stage-managed program-driven risk-averse-consumerism dominant variant. He lays the foundation:

> *Worship is the sound of a covenantal people; a people betrothed to Jesus. It is the sound of their love, adoration, and zealous devotion to the only One found worthy! (Page 8)*

He appeals for a greater purity (Chapter 2) that opposes idolatry, particularly that of *popularity.* He imagines worship that sounds a lot like ***discipleship*** – costly, eternally-minded, driven by love, and built on our weakness and the gift of life's pains in which we have nothing left but a life of faith. He wants to get our eyes off of our ourselves and onto Jesus (Chapter 3) and so be marked for a zeal for reform, beginning in the "internal temple" of our own hearts (page 37). Indeed, the shape of what it takes to become "wholehearted" (Chapter 4), is to embrace "*our death*" (page 41), the cruciform road of a life surrendered to God. This is the heart of worship, informed by the "joy set before" us (page 50).

> *If the call doesn't require you to lay your life down, it's less than the call of Jesus. If the call doesn't cost you everything you have to obtain it, it's less than the call of the gospel. (Page 47)*

It was at this point, that my reading become less academic and more soul-searching. His deconstruction resonates with my own. In his chapter on "dreams" (Chapter 5), my own heart ached. I know what it's like to dream youthful dreams, and launch forward with missional zeal. I also know what it's like for my dreams to be my idols that were "keeping me from

surrender” (page 53). But without dreams, the joy of the Lord is elusive. The chapter explicates the problem, and it took the rest of the book for that tension to resolve. Chapter 6 (“Born of the Spirit”) begins to prod at that path. “The presence is a person”, he says (page 64), and this is the beginning of the touchpoint for me. Here’s **something I’ve learned from my own deconstruction: I miss Jesus**.

I’ve got a pretty good handle of the *doctrine* of Jesus. That is necessary and good, and I appreciated how Riddle asserts the place of Biblical truth (Chapter 7). But, (to quote him quoting J I Packer), the goal of theology is *doxology* (page 77), and *that’s* what I miss. In my youthful zeal, I was David dancing before the ark. In the desert of my undoing, I am Elijah in a cave of depression, missing the still small voice. I have struggled to yield to the Word of God, not because I despise it, but because, like Jeremiah, I don’t want it to burn in my bones with nowhere to go. We often sit in silence, my Lord and I, and he is more patient than me.

I think, this is where I’m at in my deconstruction: I am learning to speak. Not the preaching, praying, performing type of talk, rather I am learning to talk to Jesus again. He is present as a person, you see. I am learning to trust. I am no passivist, but I cannot generate the Kingdom of God. I cannot even build it. My agency is not my own, it is his, and all I can do is be used each day. I’ve spent too many years hiding in the striving, or curled up in a wearied whirl. Now it is time to simply be, *with him*, content to know and be known by him. I *miss* it, because I know it from my childlike youth. I want to *discover it*, because I’ve never been here before.

So come on, Jeremy Riddle! Tell me about “mothers and fathers of worship who have allowed their voices to be silenced, quieted and tamed” for whom “the pain of life, disappointment, personal failure and misunderstanding have taken the wind out of your sails” (page 119). There is prophetic truth in your words about old flames burning in our latter years, hungry for

true, deep, yielding, cruciform, intimate, worship. This shakes and wakes my heart.

Here is a picture of "the future" (Chapter 10). We have encountered a similar vision in a number of places; it's not about a particular plan or movement, but a bringing together:

> *Here is what I desire to see: I desire to see the worship movement marry the prayer movement and the missions movement. I firmly believe that if worship is re-anchored in ministry to the Lord and ministry to the world, it will explode with fresh life, creativity and power. (Page 111)*

Time and time again, at the moment, we find a visceral reaction against "going back to the ways things were." No one has the passion to *merely* put back the forms of church. Rather, we are hearing language of *integration* at every level. At the structural level it's there – a push back at specialisations and homogenous units (imagine worshippers and evangelists and prophets and pastors together in community!). And it's there in a desire to integrate worship life and work life and home life and inner life. There's a yearning to live out of rhythms of grace in a Kingdom that is not just for Sunday mornings, but breakfast tables, and conversations in the park, and for when life sucks. At the same time as churches are starting to count how many are "coming back", dispersed monastic communities like the Order of the Mustard Seed are facing surges of interest. In fact, they put out a podcast this year on "apostomonasticism." It captures a similar vision to Riddle's.

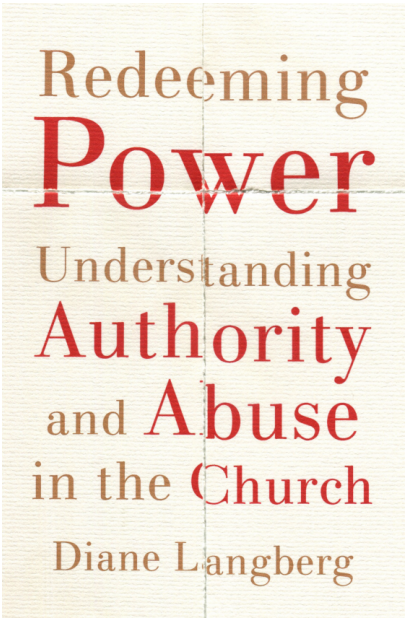
In the end, though, it's a challenge. It challenges me personally. This books imagines "a new expression of an ancient kind of worship leader… leaders whose lives of devotion are once again rooted in the rhythms of prayer and the mission of Jesus" (page 112). I yearn for this, I *aspire* to it. And here's the rub: It can't be striven for, not

by myself. It challenges us leaders because it gets to the heart of it all, the necessary “mark of intimacy” (page 114). I miss Jesus. I need to talk to him again.

As covid begins to wane, the real crisis is appearing. For us leaders it will be a new set of expectations, perhaps some pressure to perform in some wonderfully Christian, churchy way. It’s easy to cry “let’s get back into it.” My self-exhortation is to only have one primary pursuit: prayer first, intimacy with Jesus first, to be the sheep that knows the shepherd’s voice. It feels like we’re starting from scratch, but that’s ok. This is a waking-up season, an open-the-door-after-the-storm season, a sort-through-the-rubble season. It’s a stripped-back-to-the-only-one-who-is-truly-real season. It’s the season to sit at his feet. We are in a grace-filled reset.

Review: Redeeming Power – Understanding Authority and Abuse in the Church

In this current moment many Christians are deconstructing their understanding of church. Covid has catalysed it but not caused it. As the *forms* of church have been stripped away it seems that many are questioning the *substance* in their church experience.



Gill and I have found ourselves in numerous related conversations. No two of them are alike, of course, but there tends to be some common factors. In most, there is a sense of wanting to "cash out" of a religious framework that had previously been "bought into". Sometimes, but rarely, it's a form of deconversion. Sometimes it's a desire to question the unquestionable, perhaps like in Ecclesiastes, to see if there *is* actually something new under the sun. "After 18 months of covid, I'm now not sure why I was getting out of bed on a Sunday morning." "I've now had a positive experience outside of the typical Sunday, and have realised it was negative experience inside, this *can't* be what it's all about." This is not the typical whinge of consumeristic disappointment ("Pastor, I'm just not being *fed!*") it's of simply of being *done* with church on it's own terms: "This is not the dynamic gospel-embodying radically-believing community of Jesus-loving disciples that it pretends to be!"

After two decades in professional pastoral ministry I'm going through my own gentle deconstruction. This is no bad thing. It is part of maturation to go through times in which the grace of the Lord has us being "undone." From dealing with my childhood issues in Bible College, through a breakdown at the pointy end of church planting, to the small-boat-big-ocean

experience of moving between hemispheres, it's all part of the letting-it-die-to-rise-again cruciform shape of life with Jesus. You can't be a leader without passing through these times. Yet this post-covid moment feels like a *big* reset impacting across the body of Christ; I'm waiting for it to hurt, timing the contractions of what might be.

It is in *this* context that I have encountered Diane Langberg's *Redeeming Power: Understanding Authority and Abuse in the Church*. I have very few "must read" books for those who are in or considering church leadership and this is now one of them. It is good, solid, biblical, insightful wisdom for general application. In dealing with abuse, it relates to these times; in with and through the pandemic, the church world has also been rocked by revelations of spiritual and sexual predation in prominent organisations. There is *much* introspection about systemic injustices and abuses going on. Consider Langberg's interview on Justin Brierley's *Unbelievable?* podcast and her master class at the European Leadership Forum.

Langberg's wisdom is also a light for the present deconstruction. Personally, she has taken me to an examination of my own ecclesiastical trauma, including my own complicity and weakness, as well as helping me dare to imagine the ideal of what might be. Reading it has been a deeply personal experience. I simply can't review the book objectively; all I can do is to enter into a dialogue with it:

First interaction: For Langberg, **power is *real* and ubiquitous, and can be used for good.** Power is not conflated with evil.

My reflection: Very few of my ecclesial traumas have come through domineering powermongery, although I have heard those testimonies. Rather, I have collided with those who are *blind* to their hurtful exercise of power. In fact, some toxic situations are constructed by those who *deny* having any power at all! There's delusion in it, and also manipulation, a form

of leadership nihilism. By eschewing the formalities of power, manipulations are brought below the threshold of what can be "called out" and so accountability is avoided. To hold a leadership position in such a context is to be both loaded with unattainable expectation (so that the ineffectiveness of "power" can be proven), and, at the same time, be shunned because of the taint of the title. It is weary, and lonely, and toxic.

Langberg's view of power is more robust. As one who is literally an expert on the *misuse* of power, she offers a profound and edifying reminder: there is goodness in the power of *Jesus.* This is truly affirming: "Are you verbally powerful? The Word gave you that power. Are you physically powerful? The mighty God, who breaks down strongholds and sustains the universe, gave you that power. Do you have a powerful position? It is from the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords…" (page 10). It also gives the proper bounds:

> *Godly power is derivative; it comes from a source outside us. It is always used under God's authority and in likeness to his character. It is always exercised in humility, in love to God. We use it first as his servants and then, like him, as servants to others. It is always used for the end goal of bringing glory to God. God is pleased with his Son. That means our uses of power must look like Christ because he is the One who brings God glory. (Page 13)*

Langberg is thoroughly biblical, and therefore *instructs* me in the healthy ways to hold what power I have: "We need the truth of the written Word of God and of the Word of God made flesh to help us see how to live out what God says, or we will lose our way, interpreting the written Word through the lens of culture and tradition and easily bending what is written into our own ends" (page 88).

Second interaction: Langberg understands **vulnerability**.

I have experienced cruelty in the church: Biting words. Shunning actions. I have known leaders who deflect their emotional burdens so as to foist them onto the shoulders of those who are weaker and at risk of injury. I can remember two times when words cut into me and left me to bleed; both times they were on the lips of those "above me" in the Church of England. They weren't godly rebukes (I've had plenty of those) or wise, "hard" words of appropriate correction, they were words of diminishment moved by insecurity in one instance, and prejudice in the other. I had no recourse to emotional defense or safety; they didn't see my vulnerability or didn't care. Vulnerability isn't just powerlessness, though. At other times, even though I was one of the most powerful persons in the room, the attacks were more covert, aimed at those that I love rather than directly at me. No one is invulnerable.

Part of my turmoil is that I am *tired* of being vulnerable. I would like some *safety* please, a place to rest, a freedom to not be dependent on those who do not have my wellbeing at the top of their priority list. However, I have also learned that if you can't lean into your vulnerability you can't exercise your power well. "You and I struggle to understand our own vulnerabilities and to manage them wisely" (page 28), Langberg says, and it's a necessary task. "Vulnerability and power are intertwined, engaged in a dance that is sometimes beautiful and sometimes destructive" (page 19).

Here's the key: Vulnerability is a "welcome gift" (page 22), a vehicle for our own growth, and for the building of trusting, deep, beautiful relationships." Which means, also, that it needs to be *guarded,* "because it is unwise to make yourself vulnerable in abusive situations… **Maturity is learning where to guard ourselves, and where to lead from our weakness.**" I genuinely *love* the church, but note what that means: "The capacity to love makes everyone vulnerable… even God" (page 26). A journey through the world of church is often like walking through a battlefield marked by fortresses, no-man's

lands, and battlefronts. We get tired from the exposure, and we seek castles of our own. I *feel* the draw of the drawbridge, but what would that look like, and would it actually be healthy and *loving?*

There's a tension to embrace here: To express love, we learn to offer ourselves vulnerably. To receive love, we create as much safety and security so that the vulnerability of others doesn't lead to their injury. How, then, do we offer safety from a place of insecurity; how can we offer a safety that we have not yet, first, received? In our experience, the normal machinations of church life struggle to embrace that tension. Church should manifest a shared mutual experience, a dynamic of abiding in the heart of God in whom we are perfectly, ultimately, safe, and therefore free to be vulnerable, and free to love. The fact that it often doesn't feeds the deconstruction.

Langberg explores this dynamic, in particular, with regard to gender and race dynamics. As a large white guy, this is instructive for me. Do others feel vulnerable where I feel safe? Compared to others it is relatively *easy* for me to find safety; this almost *defines* my privilege. It's on me to understand the vulnerabilities of others: In one experience I found myself aware of others' negative experiences of church leaders. Understandably, as a church leader, I was "lumped" into that box of unsafe people and, to some degree, I wore the face of those who had injured them. In a context of mistrust, my leading needed to be both aware of the trauma and yet shaped by freedom rather than that abusive legacy. It takes Jesus' wisdom to walk that line, and my inadequacy is obvious. Langberg is instructive; picking up on the language of "headship" in the gender dynamic she gives insight into that way of Christ: "To be a head is to turn the curse upside down, not to rule over others. The Son of Man did not rule, though his disciples longed for him to do so. Instead he held out his great arms and said, 'Come. It is safe.'" (Page 104).

Third interaction: Langberg understands **deception, at a systemic, cultural level.**

> *Systemic abuse occurs when a system, such as a family, a government, entity, a school, a church or religious organization, a political group, or a social service organization, enables the abuse of the people it purports to protect. (Page 75)*

I've remarked previously how the Church of England, like many church institutions, is abusive by default. If we were to describe, for instance, a marriage relationship as being marked by financial dependence, spiritualised language of authority, the priority of reputation over truth, decisions being made for-and-not-with, and gaslighting condescension, all our alarm bells would ring! Yet this often describes the relationship with institution for those in a pastoral position, along with their family. The harm is mitigated, sometimes even eliminated, when good people are in authority and they are are able to resist and overcome the natural tendencies of the organisation. Langberg calls those things the "fundamental, though often hidden, properties of the system itself" (page 76) and reflects on how easily we refrain from speaking honestly about them. It leads to "…preserving an institution rather than the humans meant to flourish in it" (page 78).

All of this rests, of course, on forms of deception and self-deception which, itself, rests on a form of subtle idolatry. Langberg locates this at the heart of the first sin (page 29): We deceive ourselves by agreeing that we do not *need* God in order to be like him in nature and character. We cover our vulnerabilities by leaning into other things – "toxins" of deception. A common idol to lean into – for safety, preferment, provision, comfort, purpose – is the church itself. The result "is clear that we have preferred our organizational trappings to the holiness of God." (page 79).

The result is harm:

> *Deceived hearts are closed hearts. They are closed first to the God of truth and second to other humans. Deception always does damage to the one deceiving and to those being deceived. (Page 40)*

Deconstruction, at its gut, is a reaction to this hidden hypocrisy. “Deceptions are systemic” (page 37), Langberg says. If we’re brave, we might seek to name them. In my own context of the Church of England some of them are obvious: Class, education, and position correlate to worth; That which exists is necessarily favoured by God and should not be questioned; Institutional deference is the same as unity in Christ.

Collective deception incorporates a form of blindness and therefore foments a culture of suspicion. Langberg speaks of the dueling cultures of “secular culture” and “Christendom” (page 47) and that war is real: On the one hand is the machinery of the religio-industrial complex, consumeristic, and self-centred. On the other hand is the graceless pseudo-gospel of post-post-modern humanism. Both are defensively defined. “Any human not transformed by the redeeming work of Jesus Christ lives out of self as center” (page 47). In the no man’s land in the war of attrition between the two, it is lonely. Even good gospel words – “discipleship”, “mission”, “kingdom of God”, and even “Christ” – cannot be trusted. “Good words can whitewash evil” (page 50).

> *“When we hear scriptural words about building up the church for the glory of God, the work sounds heavenly. But when the building materials are arrogance, coercion, and aggression, the outcome matters. How we flesh out our good words matters.” (page 52).*

It’s easy to become cynical. It’s easy to become bitter. It’s easy to long for the false-comfort and false-community that

might come by joining one of the camps. I admire Langberg for clearly being at home in the middle, digging into and holding truth.

For instance, as she explores the question of the gender imbalance, she fulsomely critiques the patriarchy: "…violence is the male's right, and the burden of managing it is the female's" (page 93). But this is no shallow deconstruction. Rather than dismiss marriage, itself, as an abusive framework, Langberg speaks of "familiar theological words and concepts" that are misused to "sanction or minimize abuse and crush human beings." (page 94). In this she takes the same line as Barbara Roberts (who I've written on before) in recognising that while "God hates divorce" this is not merely the "termination of a legal relationship" but the "disunion" caused by abandonment and abuse (pages 94-95).

Indeed, Gill and I have often found a correlation between abusive systems and the treatment of marriage relationships. I literally cheered out loud, therefore, as Langberg affirms the mutual ministry of Priscilla and Aquila: "Priscilla was not just serving coffee or 'supporting' Aquila. She is mentioned first in four out of five instances… Do you perhaps have a silenced Priscilla in your church? (pages 100-01). Priscilla and Aquila are a side-by-side ministry that Gill and I have looked to as our own exemplars. Most church cultures cannot cope with them. They will split a couple either by insisting on subjugation or individualism. Over the years, it is in this area that Gill and I have felt the most disempowered, and pondered the cost of staying within the institutions we were in. There is a real spiritual component to this; to the extent that a marriage relationship speaks of the relationship between Christ and his people, a self-deceived organisation will seek to diminish it.

Langberg also spends some time interacting with the systemic issues of race. I've just interacted with Robin DiAngelo's White Fragility, so I won't delve into that too much here. She

takes us, however, to the more general issues of collective guilt and shame that are thoroughly missional in impact. She asks, “Do we really think that we can enslave millions of people for more than two hundred years, treating them as things to be used, crushing, oppressing, and humiliating them, without long-term effects reverberating throughout generations descended from both slaves and slaveholders?” (pages 111-112). In the English church we would do well to ponder what our unresolved legacies are. We have not yet dealt with the abuse of either our own classes and peoples, or our external dealings with the wider world. Our systemic deceptions are rooted in our shame, meaning that England cannot love itself well. The call on the Church of England is to lead the way, without falling back to the comfortable deceptions of either denialism or self-flagellation. In the meantime we are perpetually self-starved of missional efficacy. We should learn from the “intergenerational transmission of trauma” (page 113). If we wish to see God’s kingdom come, we need to bring reconciliation and healing to this land, beginning in ourselves.

Fourth interaction: Langberg understands **abuse within the church**.

It is a grace that I only have secondary experience of predation in church institutions. But I do *have* that experience; I have observed, from one step away, the nature and impact of predatory abuse on individuals and churches. My own experience of abuse is that of *negligence* rather than predation. Langberg speaks to the toxicity that can breed both.

For instance, a useful general point that Langberg makes cuts across our elevation of *external* qualities of position and charisma. These speak of power, but not of character. She takes us to Jesus: “Listen to the Word of God: ‘What comes *out* of a person is what defiles him. For *from within,* out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality,

theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness…" (page 25). I personally have found it relatively easy to not be enamoured by academic prowess or formal titles; the Australian in me is naturally wary of pretension. Indeed, "an ability to articulate theological truths does *not* mean the speaker is an obedient servant of God" (page 127).

What has taken me longer to size up is the allure of *success*, and of wanting to simply *belong* to a movement or spiritual family who might offer covering and security. "All of us long for meaning, purpose, connection, and blessing. The systems of Christendom offer us these things" (page 147). There is compulsion to *prove* oneself worthy of inclusion, and that is, invariably, a toxic dynamic. When it is fed, and the *performance* is rewarded more than formation and maturation, abuse abounds. Langberg's observations apply to our present church culture:

> *A leader is expected to know more, achieve more, and perform better. The more adequate they are in those areas, the more they are declared a success. Leadership is thus reduced to a never-ending treadmill of acquiring more and better skills and achieving impressive results. (Page 128)*
>
> *Character work and an understanding of one's personal history are not usually emphasized in training for ministry. This is unwise giving our heart's capacity for deception. (Page 130)*

I have filled out a number of application forms for pastoral roles in my time. *None* of them specifically ask about wilderness experiences (page 131) or of the maturation that comes in dry times and adversity; they *all* ask for proof of numerical growth, and offer a box for credentials and publications. We run to managerial and financially-driven structural changes, yet the reality is that "pastors and leaders often live with little to no oversight… longing for

good mentors” (page 131). We have left behind the traditions of spiritual direction, confession, and apprenticeship and have professionalised ourselves into courses and criteria. No wonder people get hurt.

I have been comforted by Langberg here. It is easy to carry the pain and shame of church trauma. Yet, the fact of that speaks to the deficiencies of the abuser and the abusive system, not the wounded ones (page 25). I have seen my teenage children summon emotional resilience and tenacity to weather circumstances that were beyond their control. The simple fact is that some of the roles I have inhabited have brought my family into an unsafe environment. I have searched my soul, I have blamed myself. But in the end there is grace in an honest grief: Their vulnerability was not their, or my, fault.

What I have found necessary, in the aftermath, is to wrestle with my *powerlessness*. Langberg brings her analysis and reveals what power looks like in a spiritual context (page 132-133). This was helpful to me. Despite the “power” of my ordination and the ministry titles I have held, my predominant experience of church life has been *disempowerment*. There are blessings and joys and brothers and sisters within the church of course; these are gifts from God. But they are usually gifts *in* the context, and not usually of it. It is simply the case, that the decades I have given the church have *restrained* me more than flourished me: socially, financially, and even in terms of my own dreams and longings. The church has not, ultimately had my back, it cannot, ultimately, be “for” me. This is simply the way it is; it is the cost of vocation, and it has been from the beginning. Even St. Paul as he writes to Christians who are rich in themselves, reflects on how he has become “scum of the earth” and “garbage of the world” in comparison (see 1 Corinthians 4:13).

As I work through the impact of this on my life and my faith, I hear similar echoes in the current deconstructions. I *love* the church of God. I *remain moved* to do my bit to see God’s

kingdom come. I hope to speak words of life, and facilitate life-changing hospitality. I am drawn to know the heart of the Father and do what I see him doing. Yet, at the same time, I cannot recall the last time I saw in myself, or the church, a spirit of freedom and joyous expectation. To engage with the church is to steel ourselves for potential trauma, and to long for God. "Victims assume that God is also silent. Many people have asked me through the years whether they can find help for restoring their sense of safety in the house of God. that such a question must be asked is frankly, damnable" (page 137).

Fifth Interaction: Langberg understands the **redemption of power**.

My journey through this book has taken me to some of my pains and regrets. That's fine; it is necessary, sometimes, to take stock of one's injuries, and the temptations and weaknesses that leave us open to hurt. I'm still "hungry for safety" (page 153), for instance, and I need to be aware of how that drives me. I want to use whatever power I have for good and not for ill.

There is grace in the pain, and I see that affirmed in Langberg's treatise. I have had a blessed breakdown. I am willing to "let the work die" (see page 149) because I know from experience that those who seek to save their church, and strive for performance, will lose it. That doesn't mean it's easy. I learned that "long before God called [me] to shepherd, he called [me] first and foremost to be his lamb – a silly, stupid lamb who does stupid things, follows others into ravines, and allows themselves to get devoured" (page 150). It's all about grace.

I am learning – learning *again* perhaps, although it feels like it's from scratch – the necessity of prayer. Many of us leaders forget to pray (page 151), we forget to hope. Hoping hurts. Jesus only did what he sees the Father doing. He did that "no matter the cost. He did not work to preserve a

system, even one originally ordained by God" (page 154).

I am wary of the future. We should read Langberg as a prophet, warning us, calling us, berating us as churches tear themselves to shreds. "Rather than dealing with our own discomfort, self-absorption, or fear of matters not going our way, we distance ourselves and label and dehumanize others", she says (page 56). We've got some difficult conversations in the Church of England coming up, and they are surrounded by toxicity.

I am even wary of releasing this interaction onto this blog. I am used to "thinking publicly" and have written about politics and all sorts of difficult issues in the past. But there will be some who won't get what I am writing here. I *feel* my vulnerability in the institution to which I belong. "Some of us have faced the power of systems that proclaim God's name yet look nothing like him. That power can be formidable. It's hard to fight an organic whole, particularly when a system is full of people we love or those important to us and our future" (page 82).

Where then lies the hope? Matching Langberg's metaphor on page 51, one night I had a dream: Gill and I were in a situation in which we were required to live in a certain house. It was horrible. Excrement on the walls. Mould and mildew. Holes in the walls which let in frigid air and provided hideaways for poisonous spiders. It was a nightmare. It was a "home" in which constant vigilance was required in order to survive. If that is a metaphor for church life, then what is the answer? Reform is no longer enough. Renewal is no longer enough. Not even revival. What is needed is *resurrection*; a "burning down" is required, from which the new can emerge. That's not a negative thing. I think Jesus' friend Peter promised something like it, for "it is time for judgement to begin with God's household" (1 Peter 4:17).

Perhaps the deconstructions at the beginnning of the post-

covid reconstructions are a context where this can happen. Covid has stripped away our forms and many of our churches have found that there wasn't much substance underneath. There is a lesson to heed here: "**God does not preserve the form without regard for content. God wants purity in the kingdom of the heart, not the appearance of it in a system.** Our systems, our countries, our faith groups, our tribes, and our organizations are *not* the kingdom of God." (page 84).

Like all prophets, Langberg therefore, sees the value of hope in the time of trouble. "The voices of victims today, of those abused and violated and crushed in our "Christian" circles, are in fact the voice of our God to his people" (page 190), she says. In that way they are "troublers" in the best sense of the word; the "'Valley of Trouble' is God ordained, and in this place, he is calling his people back to himself" (page 190). Langberg writes, therefore, to encourage the *dissidents* and to give succour to those who are lonely.

> *Jesus sat apart from those who stood together in his day. It is quite a picture, isn't it? In the same manner and spirit of Jesus, all Christians should be dissidents in the corrupt systems of this world, including in our own beloved institutions. (Page 85)*

This is where this book has catalysed my wrestling. To survive what is coming I need to learn to be with Jesus in the lonely place, in the solitude of dependence on him. That is where my safety lies. "The discipline of living under the governance of God in the hidden places is a lifelong work." (page 176). Only from here can the beautiful vision of the church, that Langberg *never* loses, emerge; it's a beautiful vision of what she calls "Lady Ecclesia" (page 181).

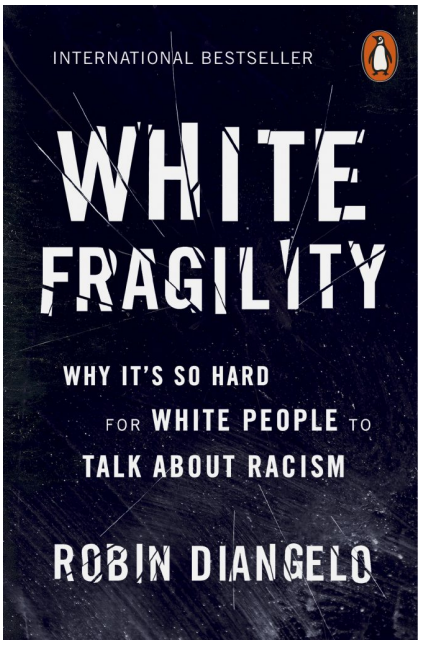
> *The people of God who compose the body of Christ on earth are to live fully and faithfully under the lordship, authority, and mastery of Jesus Christ. **If we are to be mastered, we***

> ***must know him.*** *(Page 186)*

Intimacy is required. If “we love and worship the system or our church more than we love and worship Jesus Christ” (page 187) it all falls apart. This is a truly pastoral book. As I’ve conversed with it, it has exposed me to some honest reality, and thus thoroughly brought me, in the end, to Jesus.

Amen.

Review: White Fragility – Part 3b: Pursuing a dynamic resolve – vocation and identity



This is the final part of my multi-part engagement with Robin DiAngelo’s *White Fragility*. My dialogue with the book commences in my first part (link); you may want to begin reading there. The book is about how white people, while participants and beneficiaries of systemic racism, are racially blind to themselves and complicit. So far I have engaged with DiAngelo’s arguments through the lens of my own reflection, and in the previous post (link) I explored some biblical themes that support her view. What she reveals about racism is well argued, but how do we move towards a dynamic of resolution? In this part my intent

is to show how I find it more helpful to look beyond DiAngelo's ideology for that, and, in particular, I draw on a Christian understanding of vocation.

Part 3b – Vocation and identity.

There is much that resonates between DiAngelo and the Biblical voice. But there is also some discord. DiAngelo, is unashamedly, manifesting an *ideology.* "Ideologies are the frameworks through which we are taught to represent, interpret, understand, and make sense of social existence" (page 21), she says, and I agree with that definition. In fact, from a Christian point of view, a desire to shape our social existence by what Jesus "represents, interprets, understands, and makes sense of" is a decent description of what I would call "discipleship."

Ideologically of course, DiAngelo is not neutral. I also don't think she, or anyone else, would describe her ideology as "Christian." Some dialogue is needed at the point where the voices diverge, and that is my intent here. Unsurprisingly, I find the Biblical voice more compelling.

Consider what we raised previously about individual and collective identity. DiAngelo eschews individualism, and understandably so, because it underpins the white propensity to deflect: "I don't belong to a privileged class, I am just me!" If we are to move forward, we can't *ignore* individualism. Generalisation *reveals*, but *individuals* must act. This only happens when there is some sort of *alignment* between individual and collective identity, i.e. when a person has a sense of *ownership* about what is happening collectively.

DiAngelo has rightly revealed to white people our collective guilt. But how do we move forward with that? Collective guilt can only be dealt with *collectively,* because that is what is

required for *systemic* change. It is manifest formally as enacted civil rights and forms of reparation and restitution, as well as organically through shifts in the dominant culture. No one person can achieve this, yet it doesn't just happen by itself, it requires individuals to act. And, as DiAngelo points out often, it's on white people to own their issues and do it, not people of colour to chase it.

To move forward we need an *alignment* of individuals and the collective. DiAngelo, in her anecdotes, often encounters a non-alignment. From one direction it looks like individualist defensiveness. From the other direction, an individual can be absorbed by the collective guilt. I've seen this as a form of despair in people, an emotional overwhelming in which they are unhelpfully stuck in the shame of their privilege.

The biggest strength of *White Fragility* is that it elucidates well what is wrong and what is going on. Admission is a big part of the solution; but beyond that the there is only a weak provision for the alignment we need.

It *can* be found, however, in the Biblical voice. Indeed, it's there in the person of Jesus. **What is the cross of Christ if it is not the perfect alignment of an individual carrying the load of collective guilt?** "He himself bore *our* sins" says Peter (1 Peter 2:24), along with a multitude of other New Testament witnesses. It is the very essence of atonement and and it leads to redemption and reconciliation. The implications are also clear: Atonement neither excuses or permits ongoing complicity with evil and injustice. Rather, it compels that our bodies be used as "instruments or righteousness" (Romans 6:13). Christian spirituality looks to a process of *sanctification* in which the individual matures in cooperation with the work of the Holy Spirit, into repentance, amendment of wrongdoing, and increasing Christlikeness. An aspect of that is understanding how we are called and led to interact within the collective of the church, humanity, and the wider world. Our word for this is *vocation.* It is *grounded*

in forgiveness and freedom and is *towards* the righting of wrongs, and the renewal of the world.

Vocation is individual-and-collective in character. The individual Christian is caught up into a collective marked by the name of Jesus. We refer to the "body of Christ", one body united with many members or parts. As an individual-in-community, I am responsible for manifesting Christ's *character* to my brothers and sisters, and I am a "gift" as I *serve* in the particular way that I am enabled, impassioned, and inspired by God's Spirit and truth.

When it comes to responding to racial realities, true vocation is a pathway forward. It is defined by Christ, and therefore counters self-absorption, deflection, and blindness to sin. It also incorporates a freedom from despair. It is active to pursue what is good and what is right; the individual finds their place to *move* the collective towards the justice desired. Today's vocational prophets speak truth, the pastors care and mend lives, the healers heal, the wisdom-bringers speak, and so on. DiAngelo speaks the truth about white people. Vocation values this truth, and is also grace-filled *towards* the pursuit of self-awareness, goodness, and justice.

In this regard, vocation interacts, helpfully, with privilege. It would take an entire essay to examine this properly, but we can take a quick look: In 1 Corinthians 12, St. Paul explores the individual-in-collective image of the "body". In that exploration he recognises differences with regards to "honour." There is a close correlation, I believe, between that sense of societal honour and what we might call "privilege." Here's the point: Paul's reason for raising it is to turn it upside down. We should "treat with special honour" those who are otherwise "less honourable" (1 Corinthians 12:23). We privilege the underprivileged. We should favour those who have been unfavoured.

There's a corollary here that I believe DiAngelo, herself,

recognises: privilege itself is not a sin. I didn't ask to be white and male. I didn't deliberately locate myself in a situation where I had access to good education. I have received the blessing of a healthy marriage and loving children; something that was neither owed to me or inevitable in life. The moral, and vocational question is not whether I am privileged or not, but what am I going to do with it. Again, the Biblical voice informs us. The character of vocation rests on Christ's character of *kenosis,* i.e. self-emptying. Christ didn't cling to his divine glory, but offered himself to the vulnerable, even laying down his life (Philippians 2:1-11). We are called to share this "mind of Christ", and treat whatever we may have in the same way, i.e. self-sacrificially. If we have privilege, we don't cling to it. We certainly don't ignore it, or our complicity in whatever prevents others from attaining it. Rather we *spend it out* in the direction of goodness and justice. If I find myself with power, I don't hold it to myself, I use it to empower those who are disempowered. This means it's a self-effacing empowerment, even a handing-over-of-power empowerment.

In this way the **Biblical affirmation of vocation is not antagonistic to the values of *White Fragility*, but it *is* more useful.**

Before we conclude, however, I need to address one point of discord between the Biblical voice and DiAngelo's ideology. I'm hesitant to do this, as the value of *White Fragility* stands alone as a prophetic voice revealing white racism. Nor is DiAngelo setting out a fulsome treatise of her ideological foundations. Nevertheless, to the extent that I can discern her framework through which she can "represent, interpret, understand, and make sense of social existence" I find myself looking for ground that is more solid, from which to heed the truth she speaks. The discord is around the dynamics of identity and intersectionality.

Identity is a complex thing, and fundamental to our self-

understanding. If I can ask and answer "Who am I?" I'm expressing my *identity*. A significant component will be how I see myself as an *internal* self-reflection; DiAngelo recognises this, for instance, with respect to the complexity of a multiracial person (page xii). There is a also a multiplicity of *external* characteristics by which I might self-identify and through which I might relate. "I am white, but I am also a cisgender woman, able-bodied, and middle-aged", she says (page xii). What is dominantly expressed as my identity will often be driven by social context. DiAngelo's whole project is to force those who do not see themselves racially to face that characteristic and its social context, and *incorporate* the results into their perceived and articulated identity. This is the value of the book.

As the social characteristics of identity intertwine we end up with what has come to be known as "intersectionality." We find *ourselves* at the intersection of social categorisations, a complexity of different identifying markers – race, gender, sexuality, class and so on. Intersectional analysis can be and often is beneficial. It is a means by which we might explore ourselves-in-context. Again, DiAngelo's project is to confront white people with their disinclination to undertake that exploration.

However, **intersectionality is an intractable problem**. It has the same shape as DiAngelo's book; it can *reveal* much, but, in and of itself, that revelation alone does not effect change well.

Intersectionality reveals the *complexity* of human existence; I am writing this in the aftermath of the assault and murder of of Sarah Everard. I am hearing the pain of women. The male-female social identity is being tested and explored right now, and rightly so. I am also hearing the pain of people of colour, pointing out how many black women have been murdered and who haven't received the same attention as this white woman. It's pain upon pain, at an intersection of two

categories of identity. We don't wish to despise or diminish either of them.

The complexity, however, reveals the intractability. The social categories are not mere labels on dynamics which are otherwise the same shape; they rub up against each other in different ways. It can even lead to a form of unhelpful division. That's not with regard to division *within* a social category; *White Fragility* has been a healthy exploration partly because it *refuses* to ignore the racial divide. What I mean is an eventual *competition* between categories; race vs. gender, gender vs. sexuality, religious identity vs. class and so on.

Here's the ideological collision: It seems to me that DiAngelo's ideology attempts to look for the solution inside the intersectional black hole, as if it can be fathomed, and ordered, and solved. It can't be. We might be able to elucidate and bring justice to one social categorisation. But that intersects with another, and another, and sometimes they *are* at odds. We do what we can do make a judgement of rightness and wrongness within the finite categorisations that we can explore, but we *are* finite. There's a reason why we appeal to the infinite wisdom of the divine to bring about judgement and make things right! We can't do it. We certainly can't do it justly.

We all look into the intersectional blackhole. We all latch on to the identities that most adhere to our self-understanding. They are generally the ones that most correlate to our sense of pain and shame. We grasp hold of them, and we cry "What about me?!" So which of us has the right to rise above it all?

DiAngelo is unashamedly a believer in "identity politics": "All progress we have made in the real of civil rights has been accomplished through identity politics" (page x) and she lists everything from women's suffrage to same-sex marriage and even the recognition of the white working class in the

2016 presidential election. She is revealing her intersectional hierarchy. I am, at least to some extent, in agreement with it, as I hope I have demonstrated in this engagement with the book. But I am also very very wary of absolutising it. Civil rights are good, objectively so, and certainly within the social categories in which we dare to explore our complicity and fault. But civil rights action is *not* commensurate with bringing order to the intersectional chaos.

If intersectionality is a nexus of oppression, then it can only be ordered by those powerful enough to assert a hierarchy of identity, by those with the dominance to set the meta-narrative in which the social identities exist. This *inevitably* is a new form of oppression; all it does is shift the injustice, and the intersectional twirl finds a different oppressive equilibrium. Paulo Freire warned of this years ago. In today's world, for instance, the "fight" between feminism and transgenderism is over the narrative that defines womanhood, and consequently, personhood. It is essentially a conflict about intersectional ordering. In my world, the phenomenon of "cancel culture" is invariably a diminution of the religious or spiritual identity. Ironically, and this is one of those intersectional complexities, in discounting spiritual and religious identity many purveyors of identity politics are complicit in racism. Generally speaking, white progressives value spiritual and religious identity less than people of colour do.

An attempt to assert intersectional order is a form of domination. The extent to which those who aspire to identity politics cannot see this, is the extent to which they, themselves, are blind to themselves; it is the extent to which they have arrogantly placed themselves above the fray, and consider their own hierarchy of identities as "normal" and others as deficient. They both ignore and perpetuate the injustices that eventuate and are thereby complicit in them. I

wouldn’t be the first to point out that many of them are white, and middle class, and are fragile in this exposure.

Here is what I affirm: If we reach into the intersectional quagmire, and examine the category of racial identity, *White Fragility*, is one of the best resources I’ve come across. It is instructive, truthful, helpful, challenging, and properly uncomfortable. I have literally had sleepless nights dissecting that discomfort, and working out how to not just leave this volume behind like yet another book, but apply it in my racial world. I am now more aware of the defensiveness and fragility that DiAngelo speaks of, and it has taught me about myself. I have much, much more to learn about systemic racism. I have received a cajoling in which I must recognise my white privilege, amend my individual ways, and use that privilege vocationally, towards collective justice.

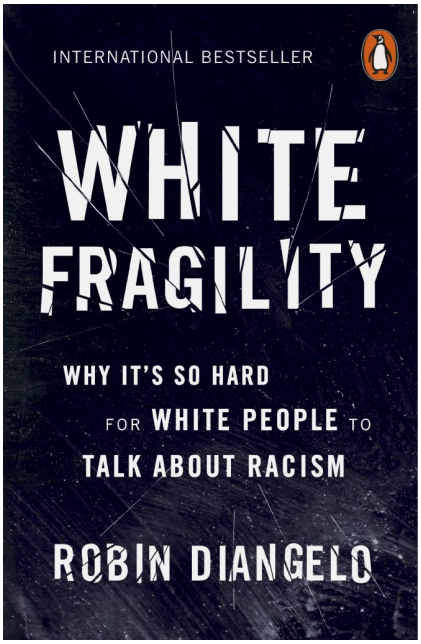
However, on the same grounds, I cannot endorse a broader intersectional ideology. It is not an effective pathway to real peace, or justice. In fact, I only see more despair, darkness, fracture, and pain when I see people move from an exploration of the world’s evils, and a resolve to attend to them, to take on the posture of a more universal judge.

Maybe I’m mistaken. Maybe it’s just my turn to learn about an everyday calculus of suffering, and to find myself at the bottom of the intersectional heap of those who have power and privilege. I mean, that’s sort of what Jesus did.

But I also look for hope. And I have only ever found that in Jesus, in whom I have been made new. My identity is first in him – everything else has been, is being, and will be surrendered to him – and all will be made well in him. I look for the day when I can run to Jesus and easily find in my vicinity – running ahead, and already there – black, brown, and all manner of brothers and sisters, with whom we share the deepest love of all.

Without that hope, I fall apart. Maybe I'm fragile after all.

Review: White Fragility – Part 3a: Pursuing a dynamic of resolve – religious resonance



This is the beginning of the third part of a multi-part review of Robin DiAngelo's *White Fragility*. The topic of discussion is systemic racism and, in particular, the collective blindness of white people towards their racial bias. In my first part (link) I explored DiAngelo's observations by analogy with the phenomenon of classism. In the second part (link) I explored my own racial ignorance as a white person. DiAngelo does well to describe the *problem* of white fragility. In this part I am moving towards a focus on the question of "What we do in respons?" This will be the subject of my final post. I am not looking for a quick easy-fix, but aspiring to a dynamic of resolve towards white people owning their part in the world in which we live.

Part 3a – Religious resonance

DiAngelo does well. It's hard to articulate a problem in a

context beset by blindness. She's persistent, and holds our nose to it until we can smell it. It can be an unpleasant experience, but it's honest, and useful. But what does she imagine as a way forward?

At one level, it is obvious. DiAngelo is keen for white people to engage with "cross-racial skill building" (page 7), and hopes for when feedback about "our unaware yet inevitable racism" might be "graciously received" (page 113). I can certainly get on board with that aspiration; emotional honesty and humility are graspable virtues! The guidelines she, herself, attempts to follow (page 125) are instructive for anyone in a position of power and privilege. Her own experience of "owning" her racism (page 145) is a demonstration of emotionally honest, humble, relational living. If only these were more prevalent! I want more of this in myself. I want more of this in the communities and churches in which I participate and lead!

What DiAngelo describes in her hoped-for response reflects aspects of what I might call "confession" and "grace." The one who is at fault, owns the problem, and doesn't deflect. The one who is harmed, in a context of freedom, may offer a gift of illumination and help increase understanding. "Having racist assumptions is inevitable (but possible to change), I will feel gratitude when an unaware racist assumption is pointed out…" (page 132). I need this. We all need this. If this is all that eventuates from books like this, that alone would be significant, and good!

My aim here, however, is to look a little deeper. To do that I am going to do my best to bring a Christian theological lens to bear. There will be some positive resonance, as well as some differences. However, before I proceed further, I need to recognise – and hopefully disclaim – a real phenomenon: I am becoming aware of how phrases such as "biblical worldview" and even "Christian" can intertwine with the exact forms of white privilege that DiAngelo has illuminated. Christianity has

often (but far from always) played the part of the white man's religion, and its forms have been used to sustain and justify segregation and white supremacy, just as DiAngelo has described. Even the beautiful eschatological vision of an ethnically diverse renewed humanity caught up together in eternal worship can be misused; "We are all one in Christ!" is over-realised eschatology, and harmful, when that unity is not actually present in the present. Is the truth and certainty of ultimate renewal grounds for ignoring present sin? *me genoito!* Certainly not!

The Christian worldview can be perverted by whiteness, and my hope of disclaiming that is this: I sit at the brown-skinned feet of a crucified-and-risen man, reading the Scriptures that he read, upheld, and fulfilled. Within those pages I encounter and aspire to pathways of truth first walked by slaves, excluded women, African eunuchs, all manner of people who do not look like me. In the contemporary world I have received more spiritual food from the hermeneutics of black revivalism then the culturally-appropriating white-washed liberalism of the dominant ecclesial paradigm. I am far from fully sanctified, but this I know: Christian spirituality is not only a valid voice to hear, but a source of wisdom, more ancient, more universal, than any other perspective I've ever encountered. Moreover, it has a mystic ability to divide soul and spirit, joints and marrow, and do the deep work beyond what we can ask or imagine. In its truest form, it is exactly what is needed to give sight to the racially blind.

The Biblical witness often harmonises with DiAngelo's position. Sometimes this is *against* the rhetoric of those who might claim a "Biblical worldview" but are actually far from it. For instance, an absolutist individualism is *not* biblical. DiAngelo posits a sense of both *collective guilt* and *individual complicity*: We aren't just "handed" our privilege as white people, the "systematic dimensions of racism… must be actively and passively, consciously and unconsciously,

maintained” (page 64). The individual can’t just simply deflect on to the collective; it is wrong to “exempt the person from any responsibility for or participation in the problem.” (page 78). This is not a foreign theme in the Biblical narrative.

The Old Testament writings, especially, interweave that sense of systemic injustice into the deeper sense of idolatry and rebellion against the heart of God. Amongst myriad examples is the prophet Amos (5:14) who cries, “Seek good, not evil, that you may live. Then the Lord God Almighty will be with you, just as you say he is.” That evil is not just individual moralism, it’s against the “fat cows of Bashan” (Amos 4:1) who “make it hard to the poor.” His summary introduction is against *Israel collectively* who “deny justice to the oppressed” (Amos 2:7). The prophetic injunction is to a *people* – usually *God’s* people – not just to individual persons. My few short words here are not enough to express it – go and read the Bible! But heed the heart of God that is revealed. God responds to collective as well as individual guilt. He will even broken-heartedly take his people, collectively, into exile, because of their unrepented injustice, and so seek a change in their heart and their ways. The Western church should take heed!

We *can* conceive of a people, experiencing systemic harm, crying out to God, “How long, oh Lord? Remember *us*!”. We *can* conceive of him hearing, and heeding. There are some deep, deep expressions of this in the history of the black gospel movements. It is thoroughly biblical.

Moreover, God’s gracious gospel invitation, in Jesus, is to belong as an individual to a unified collective. This is most profoundly expressed by the image of a “body” – a diversity of members in a dynamic whole. St. Paul, especially, uses this image (see 1 Corinthians 12), He expresses it in a way that upturns the normal social defaults of his day. The gospel invites us into this common-union and this invitation is not a

matter of affirmed privilege, but a belonging-to-one-another life of kenotic (self-emptying) transformation.

DiAngelo's sense of collective guilt, and privileged complicity, therefore, should not offend us Christians. It's part of our worldview. When exploring ourselves racially, we would do well to pray, together, along with the psalmist, "Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" (Psalm 139:23-4). Or is that only about acceptably-white personal trespasses like drinking alcohol and fornicating?

Indeed, in my mind, the Biblical voices are more consistent than DiAngelo herself. This is certainly the case when it comes to grasping the concept of "guilt". DiAngelo appropriately uses this language, e.g. "Anti-blackness comes from deep *guilt* about what we have done and continue to do; the unbearable knowledge of our complicity with the profound torture of black people from past to present" (page 94, emphasis mine). Given that, it is utterly incongruous that towards the end of the book, she refuses the language for herself: "… I have a racist worldview, deep racial bias, racist patterns, and investments in the racist system that has elevated me. Still, *I don't feel guilty* about racism. I didn't chose [sic] this socialization, and it could not be avoided. But I am responsible for my role in it. to the degree that I have done my best in each moment to interrupt my participation, I can rest with a clearer conscience…" (page 149, emphasis mine). Perhaps, at this point, she is simply using it as a descriptor of emotion, i.e. "guilty feelings." Nevertheless, her entire book has revolved around an honesty about guilt, but, here, at the end she steps herself back and couches it in terms of self-justifying attempts at a clear conscience. "I've done my best" – isn't that a deflection?

The thing is, I don't think this undermines her argument. Like all of us, DiAngelo is fragile when faced with being counted

as guilty. I don't disparage her for it. The Biblical voices are well-used to this phenomenon. A common objection to the gospel is the ever-present retort: "I don't need anyone's forgiveness, I've done my best!" In this way the gospel is more consistent than DiAngelo; the gospel will not let us ignore our complicity and guilt in the fracture of this world, including it's systems of injustice and pain. It will not even let us deflect towards our own good efforts. "All have fallen short", Paul famously says (Romans 3:23).

The Biblical voice is also more robust than DiAngelo when it comes to *shame.* This a complex issue and there are two interwoven senses to understand. Firstly, shaming can be a malicious act of "othering" someone to diminish them and exercise power over them. But, secondly, someone can be "ashamed" in a healthy way, when they become aware not only of acting wrongly but having a *propensity* to act wrongly – i.e. that wrongness is in their character somehow. The gospel, literally, is about God entering into, inhabiting, and transforming our shame. It therefore relies on this second, honest, transformative sense. The gospel is rejected, however, when it is perceived in the first sense; when it is perceived as a malicious power-play, shame triggers our fragility, and we respond in defense. **It is absolutely evident, in *White Fragility*, DiAngelo *is* shaming white people,** because there *is* guilt and we *do* have a propensity to perpetuate the systemic injustice! I believe she is doing so with the transformative intent, but she is encountering the defenses of the other perception.

The Biblical voice *affirms* the possibility of white fragility. And why not? After all, we Christians have a deep heritage in studying sin! I may speak, theologically, of "original sin," or of an innate propensity to act seflishly and unjustly as part of our broken human community; I might even call this "depravity." DiAngelo speaks of "habitus", an interplay of free will and societal structures which maintains our comfort

and equilibrium (page 103). I then might speak of the "heart being deceitful" (Jeremiah 17:9). Surely these concepts are not foreign to each other?

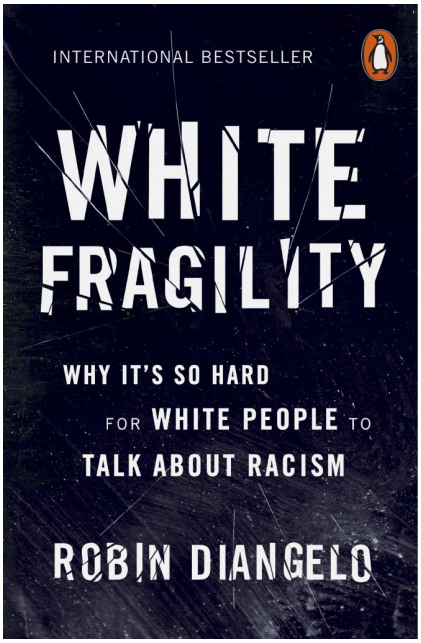
In fact, as a professional sin-studier, I might dare to offer a little advice: One of the critiques of DiAngelo's approach, in the sense that it doesn't *help* white people talk about racism, is her imprecision with regard to sin. I see this in her use of loaded terms like "white supremacy" applied almost indiscriminately. It's a term that connotes overt acts of violence and assault. Yet, applied to broadly, it would also cover lesser sins such as a mildly-negligent use of racist idiom in a conversation. This doesn't excuse either act, but it is unhelpfully imprecise. I get that she's pushing towards a common root of systemic white superiority, and that is appropriate. But we Christians do that too, and we have learned the limits of it. Our word "sin" also has a broad semantic range, grounded in a common root, and it also can be applied to anything from the cruel, malicious, literally diabolic oppressions of human empire, through to the complex inclinations of an otherwise innocent thought life. I've reflected it on that previously, and have suggested that we needed adjustments in our phraseology in order to communicate our intent, open the door to repentance and change, and not trigger misunderstanding and defensiveness. We don't want to *ignore* sin and shame, but we also actually want to *break* the shame-cycle, not reinforce it.

Nevertheless, the Biblical voice does recognise the times when the root cause of sin needs to be revealed. DiAngelo uses a big stick, and it's likely warranted. Jesus himself, tired of the religious deflections and excuses of his day, also uses amplification to uncover what is hidden and persistent: "You have heard it said, do not murder… but I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment.." (Matthew 5:21). You can't hide behind "done my best" and "I'm not a racist", you must examine the heart and

the root of the matter.

There is much that resonates between DiAngelo and the Biblical voice. But there is some discord also, particularly at the ideological level. DiAngelo has wisdom and insight, but the Biblical voices, in the end, offer more hope and a clearer way forward. This will be the subject of the final part of my engagement with *White Fragility*.

Review: White Fragility – Part 2: Exploring my ignorance



This is the second part of a multi-part review of Robin DiAngelo's *White Fragility*. This book explores how *white* people struggle to engage with the reality of racism in our society; we do not understand ourselves racially, and are blind to how we participate in and contribute to inequality and the manifest bias against people of colour. In the first part (link) of my review I attempted to grasp DiAngelo's argument by using analogy; I correlated her observations regarding white racism with the cultural blindness of the English middle class. In this part I now seek to apply DiAngelo's points to myself; I admit that I am playing an equivalent part, in racial terms, to what the middle class has played in my immigrant experience.

Part 2 – Exploring my ignorance.

A book like this cannot be read objectively. The main point of my analogy, in the first part, is to demonstrate why I, myself, might be racially unaware, and unable to taste the water I'm swimming in.

To that end, I need to admit to some anxiety. I don't *feel* the privilege of being of white. I know that, relatively speaking to so many others, I *am* privileged. Many of these privileges, ironically, are attached to assumptions of middle class success. But I don't feel the *racial* privilege. I have *seen* acts of racism against my friends and neighbours, and, perhaps, have some internal gratitude that I don't have to weather those storms. But race isn't embedded in the calculus of my life.

Instead, my self-awareness, (and I'm confident I'm not alone in this), attends to where I *do* feel underprivileged. I am, for instance, an immigrant outsider to self-seeding ecclesial networks, my path did not lead to cushy jobs (which, to be fair, I no longer aspire to) or obvious financial security, and I've never worn an old school tie in my life! Like the anecdotal antagonist on DiAngelo's very first page ("A white person can't get a job anymore!"), I do not *feel* empowered. In fact, I often feel *excluded,* in particular, by those with the formal and informal power to categorise me – and perhaps even "cancel" me – because of a privilege (white, male, straight) that I never asked for, and can do nothing about. And, in complete awareness that I am writing this freely and publicly, and that I literally own a right to a public-speaking platform – I often feel *voiceless*, unheard, ignorable, different, alone.

But this is exactly where I think DiAngelo has a valid exhortation: **It's *my* job to get over that anxiety, and, to be**

honest, to get over myself! Perhaps there *is* some injustice in my own broader experience, but that does not give me an "out" by which I can ignore other exclusionary dynamics, particularly racial ones, in which, whether I like it or not, I am a participant and a beneficiary.

What I have realised, from this book, is that with regard to racism, I have much to learn. I hadn't clocked, for instance, how something as ostensibly benign as "white women's tears" (page 134) could actually, and understandably, express racial power dynamics. That example clicked on a small light, and left me thinking, "if that is the case, then what else?"

A helpful pathway into my ignorance was the correlation with gender. I cannot be "colour-blind" in my relationships, just as I cannot be "gender-blind" (see page 81). The *bias* is there; for any number of reasons I will relate to a woman differently than to a man. The vast majority of those reasons are socially accepted, therefore I can admit to them, process them, and adjust them to ensure that they are not deleterious to anyone, including myself. But DiAngelo is right: As a white person, I have not had the opportunity or particular inclination to examine my racial bias. That effective denial of bias "ensures that we won't examine or change them" (page 11). In short, I need to "name my race."

> *… a critical component of cross-racial skill building is the ability to sit with the discomfort of being seen racially, of having to proceed as if our race matters (which it does). Being seen racially is a common trigger of white fragility, and thus, to build our stamina, white people must face the first challenge: naming our race.*
> *(Page 7)*

To be clear, I am not on some crusade of virtuous self-flagellation here. I can make some robust assessment of myself: I truly don't think I am guilty of overt or even

aversive racism; I don't *consciously* exhibit "racial disdain that surfaces in [my] daily discourse" (page 45). Similarly, I *don't* share all of DiAngelo's experiences. She reflects that "not one person who loved me, guided me, or taught me ever conveyed that segregation deprived me of anything of value" (page 67). That is simply not my personal experience. In fact, the opposite is true; my wife and I have experienced a diversity of cultural contexts, including ones that are multiracial, and when we find ourselves confined to an echo-chamber of progressive liberal whiteness we *feel* the deprivation of that segregation. And let me tell you about how the prophetic presence of an Iranian community impacted a previously pale church community one day!

However, as DiAngelo reinforces, racism is a system, not an event. It pertains not to my individual experience, but to the privilege of my racial class, a class which was *invented* by white colonials in order to protect that privilege. The ignorance I need to reflect on relates to my *complicity* to this system, this world. To a large degree, this is necessarily about admitting ignorance and deliberately informing myself.

I can, for instance, reflect on what DiAngelo presents as the "common set of racial patterns" engendered by our socialisation(page 68). These are characteristics of the white collective, things like "preference for racial segregation", a "lack of understanding of what racism is", and "seeing ourselves as individuals, exempt from the forces of racial socialization." I can observe aspects of these in myself. I know, for instance, that I have "focused on intentions over impact"; I can remember nervously washing away someone's awkward casual racist remark by asserting that "no harm was meant." In other ways, I'm open to instruction. I don't think I have, for instance, a submerged and "internalised assumption of racial superiority" (page 55), but would be glad to have it revealed to me. I'd rather deal with it, if it's there, than

pretend it away. In this way it is more uncomfortable, and and also more useful, to be open to my complicity in the disproportionate advancement of white people as a collective.

The reality is that I simply do not have to think about being white. For sure, I live in a multicultural area, and I can see how my race might be impediment for certain church activities; to that extent I *realise* I am white. But I don't have to *think* about it. As I think and dream and imagine my life, my *whiteness* is simply not a factor. To that extent, I *am* a beneficiary of some key sociological resources, of "self-worth, visibility, positive expectations, psychological freedom from the tether of race, freedom of movement, the sense of belonging, and a sense of entitlement to all of the above" (page 25).

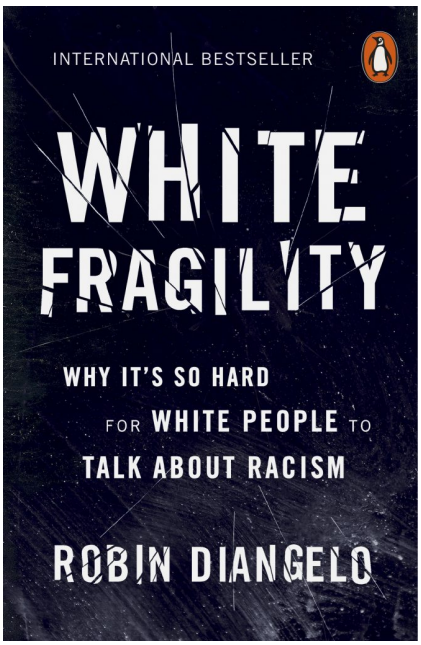
I had assumed that this book was, in the main, going to give me an insight into the lived experience of people of colour. It does, of course, do that to some extent. But that is not the point; its intent is to give an insight into the *white* lived experience of ignoring or diminishing people of colour. It is actually more confronting. If it had been a book on how ethnic minorities experience racism, it may have left me informed, perhaps even angered, but, in the end, only *objectively*. In fact, I would have likely had a moment of self-congratulation for being open to understanding the plight of my non-white brother and sisters. *White Fragility* is more prophetic than that; it holds *our* feet *in* the racial story, so that we might understand *our* part.

Truth, however, takes a while to inhabit and explore. DiAngelo has given me a map of my ignorance, but it's up to me walk those trails myself. Like all maps, it turns what is unknown into "known unknowns". This book has given me the lie of the land of the racial privilege from which I benefit, the extent of my likely unconscious complicity, and, to a certain degree, what I might do about it.

However, it's that last question – what to do about it – where DiAngelo is less helpful. If I may draw on a religious example: *White Fragility* is like God's good law; it rightly, justly, appropriately, reveals what is wrong and our part in it… and yet I sense little power by which it can make things right. I will explore this further in the next part.

Review: White Fragility – Part 1: Understanding by analogy

I'm reviewing this book with some trepidation. It is far from my field of expertise. It is not a Christian book. It interacts with a topic that invokes emotional as well thoughtful response. It's a serious book about serious things with which we must seriously engage.



The broad issue that *White Fragility* touches upon, of course, is systemic and cultural racism. We might instantly think, therefore, that the focus is on people of colour. That's a telling assumption which raises the exact issue that the author is focused on, as per the subtitle: The problem is "Why it's so hard for *white* people to talk about racism."

The author is Robin DiAngelo, an academic and a professional in the area of diversity training. The illustrative anecdotes she brings from her experience ground her discourse. It's unfortunate that this attaches the book very closely to the US context, but that does not diminish its value for the broader Western and post-colonial world.

My reflections are going to come in a number of parts, spread out over a number of posts on this blog. I will be "wrestling out loud", so to speak, and doing so in response to the DiAngelo's focus. She is articulating an observation about white people, and I am a white person. I have gone through some difficult introspection as a result of this book, but I am not laying claim to any emotional hardship. In all that follows, I will simply be seeking to follow the aim of my blog; it's a "wild attempt at thinking things through." We live in a racially charged world which white people are often blind to, or deny – this is our *white fragility*. What are the dynamics behind that? How might we own what we need to own up to and act upon it well? I welcome any feedback and critique. I am on a learning curve.

My intention is to engage with this book in three ways. The first part is included below. The second and third part will come in subsequent posts, which I will link here when they are uploaded: Part 2, Part 3a, Part 3b

Firstly, in this post, I am going to try and **understand by analogy.** I will be drawing on my own experience of being an immigrant and of English classism. I want to be clear: I am not pretending that there is any equivalence between my experience and that of people of colour. I am, however, seeking to understand DiAngelo by applying her thoughts to something that is within my own comprehension. I participated in some racial awareness training recently and it affirmed a similar approach; being aware of when we ourselves have been "othered" can, if held well, use empathy as a bridge to understanding.

Secondly, in a subsequent post, I'm going to try and **admit my ignorance.** This book *does* challenge and confront white people, and I am a white person. Having done my best to understand what the author is saying, I will aspire to allow myself to be undone by it, and examine myself racially. At the very least, I will try and find the bounds of my what I do not know.

Thirdly, in a one subsequent post, and then another, I will **seek a dynamic of resolution**. I come to this as someone aspiring to be a disciple of Jesus. This fundamentally forms and shapes how I will explore and interact with DiAngelo's approach. I will discover much that mutually affirms, and also some philosophical collisions. Please note: I am not looking for a simplistic *solution* here, but what I'm calling a *dynamic resolution*, i.e. a pathway ahead towards what is *right,* to which I, for my part, can aspire.

Part 1 – Understanding by Analogy

When my family and I arrived in the UK in 2015 we found ourselves in the middle of "Middle England." It was a significant cultural collision. We made many mistakes, and we sought to educate ourselves. Our encounter was with the sociological collective that we might generally call "The Middle Class." At the time, I wrote about some of the reading I'd done as I struggled to understand.

I'm mentioning this *not* because I think there is an equivalence between classism and racism. Rather, it is a reflection using analogy; my understanding of one thing will inform my understanding of another thing. I have found myself agreeing with much of what DiAngelo says about white people *because* I have seen similar dynamics within the English middle class. I am also aware that I have only seen these because, as an immigrant, I have straddled the boundary of being on the "inside" and the "outside" of the normative group. But let me

say it again: I am not conflating. A white immigrant's experiences are grounded in aspects of identity, (e.g. accent, cultural presumptions), that are often *positively* received and generally excused or overlooked. All that my experience affords, if anything, is a glimpse under the sociological hood.

For instance, DiAngelo asserts from the very beginning that "being white has meaning" (page 2). As a group, white people do not see themselves as a racial category, but rather as a racial *norm*. This is a confronting truth. Many white people would dismiss it as a nonsense. I may have included myself in that number at one point but, from my cross-cultural experience, I now know what it means for a class of people to be blind to themselves while classifying others. I can grasp a little of the *concept* of whiteness in this regard, even if I can't fully appreciate the impact of it.

Those on the inside of a "normative class" cannot taste the water they swim in. Immigrants do. In order to process the dynamics of their new situation, *generalisations* are needed: We have to be able to make conclusions: "Middle class English people exhibit a certain behaviour." This is necessary in order to navigate the world we have landed in and so minimise social and psychological injury. It does *not* mean that *every* middle class individual person acts that way. Similarly, DiAngelo, generalises about race, and unashamedly so (page 11). It offends the "cardinal rule of individualism" and our visceral white, middle class hatred of being managed as a herd. Yet we *do* act with some herd-like dynamics, and a lack of awareness is part of the problem. Those dynamics are maintained through what DiAngelo calls "socialization"; "we make sense of perceptions and experiences through our particular cultural lens" (page 9). Immigrants have to learn these perceptions, but for the dominant culture they just "are", and are often unexamined.

Why this blindness? In the middle class there is often an

underlying foundation of fear and shame: the fear of never quite being secure enough, and the shame of being comfortable when others are desperate. DiAngelo, speaking of whiteness, identifies defining ideologies such as *individualism* and *objectivity*. I can also detect these within the middle class; as a member of that group I learn (i.e. am socialised) to think of myself as fully in control of my own destiny, and able to impartially assess myself and others. By these means I can divest myself of responsibility for another's misfortune, protect myself from their fate through objective assertions of why they are lesser, and unconsciously invest in a system that will maintain my conclusions. If we disrupt this system, we disrupt some deeply held self-protections; we are *fragile*. I can therefore comprehend why DiAngelo asserts: "We need to discuss white people as a group – even if doing so jars us – in order to disrupt our unracialized identities" (page 89).

> *I could see the power of the belief that only bad people were racist, as well as how individualism allowed white people to exempt themselves from the forces of socialization. I could see how we are taught to think about racism only as discrete acts committed by individual people, rather than as a complex, interconnected system. And in light of so many white expressions of resentment toward people of color, I realized that we see ourselves as entitled to, and deserving of, more than people of color deserve; I saw our investment in a system that serves us.*
> *(Pages 3-4)*

There are other analogical correlations as well. DiAngelo asserts that racism is "a structure not an event" (page 20). I find it interesting, and helpful, that her references to *overt* acts of racism are usually the illustrative *beginnings to* her broader argument; the overt is used to reveal the related, covert, hidden, systems. Again, without conflating, there is a correlation in classism: Overt acts of snobbery are

relatively rare, and, after all, “it’s not like we put people in the workhouses anymore.” We do, however, define success, and restrict the pathways to it, in ways that “help” people to know their place and stay there. I can conceive of what DiAngelo means when she talks about “new racism”, “a term coined… to capture the ways in which racism has adapted over time so that modern norms, policies, and practices result in similar racial outcomes as those in the past, while not appearing to be explicitly racist” (page 39).

DiAngelo asserts that the “social forces that prevent us from attaining the racial knowledge we need” include “the ideologies of individualism and meritocracy, narrow and repetitive media representations of people of color, segregation in schools and neighbourhoods, depictions of whiteness as the human ideal, truncated history, jokes and warnings, taboos on openly talking about race, and white solidarity” (page 8). I can elucidate at least one analogical example from this list: My children have gone to a good school and can do so by virtue of our address. We do, however, live in a “poor neighbourhood.” At some point the school’s catchment was arranged to include this neighbourhood. I suspect it was a deliberate attempt to help the lower classes. But here’s the observation: it is the children from the poorer, multi-racial neighbourhoods which are required to travel two miles uphill to get to the campus. It sits and belongs in the middle of a more affluent suburb. This is not an overt act of classism (or even racism in this case); nobody has said “let’s make it difficult for the poor kids and the BAME kids to get to school.” But somehow it’s ended up that way. It’s not the only example in the city I live in.

Here’s another correlation: DiAngelo asserts, “I believe *white progressives cause the most daily damage of people of color*” (page 5, her emphasis). Her point, as I understand it, references those who see the evil in overt racism, and decry it, yet, in failing to realise their own complicity in

systemic racism, end up reinforcing it. The correlation in classism is with regard to those who "care for the poor" in some way. I see this in church circles all the time; even when it is manifested in good things such as food banks, there is, so often, an entrenched "client-patron" model at work. It is unspoken but real: "I am here to help you. I am normal. You are a poor person."

"White equilibrium is a cocoon of racial comfort, centrality, superiority, entitlement, racial apathy, and obliviousness, all rooted in an identity of being good people free of racism" (page 112). DiAngelo is not speaking nonsense. I've seen this dynamic with respect to class. But now I must seek to understand it with respect to race and my own whiteness. I need my equilibrium disturbed. When it comes to understanding racism, I must admit that I am playing an equivalent part, in racial terms, to what the middle class has played in my immigrant experience. In other words, I am likely to be unaware, and unable to taste the water I'm swimming in.

I must turn away from my known analogy, and do my best to understand myself racially. This will be the content of my second part.

Q&A: How does the church move away from the "singing group leader" = "worship leader" model?

Anonymous asks:

How does the church, especially the evangelical/charismatic wing, move away from the "singing group leader" = "worship leader" model?

The same problem exists in the traditional robed choir churches. I recall hearing one Dean talking about the cathedral choir delivering "high quality" worship. I remember my first vicar preaching a sermon telling us that the same word is used for "worship" and "service" in Greek. I think we could do with some teaching on this issue at some point.

[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 for the question.

To get to your final point first. What you describe is a *cultural* problem. It's something for which "teaching on the issue" alone is not enough. I can give something of a theoretical and theological response, but in the end this matter is one of the heart, of desire, of the orientation of our lives. It is, absolutely and in fact, a matter of devotion and worship.

I'm reminded of the complaint received by a pastor one Sunday: "Pastor, I didn't really enjoy our worship this morning." The response? "Well, that's OK, we weren't worshipping you."

To be frank, an honest assessment of our motivations for turning up on Sunday morning would probably reveal how self-centred we tend to be. That's not *necessarily* bad; we can come to church seeking relief, solace, or comfort, and while these are self-centred, God loves us and delights to graciously give us good gifts. However, we can also come to have our egos stroked, our angsts papered over, and our privileges decorated in virtue. "I'm not getting what I want from church! I'm not being 'fed'!" can be the genuine complaint of the spiritually hungry soul, or the entitled whinge of an acceptable form of ecclesiastical narcissism. Usually it's somewhere in between.

As a vicar, when I field complaints about church, ("The children were too noisy", "The livestream isn't family friendly", "I didn't know the songs", "The sermon was too long", "The sermon was too short" etc. etc.), I have learned to parse the feedback through this frame. Is it genuine feedback that I really should listen to? (It often is.) Or is it a self-centred demand for a better performance from myself or others? (That happens as well.) I have learned to look for the issue behind the issue. I ask myself, and sometimes the person who's talking to me: "That's interesting. What are the expectations that are not being met? Is it actually my job to meet them?"

This, of course, raises the question of what the "job" of Sunday actually is. Your suggestion is helpful here. Yes, "worship" and "service" share some semantics, and the original greek words are worth exploring:

> **λειτουργία** (leitourgia), from which we get "liturgy", relates strongly to the sense of "serving." It pertains to things such as a military or civic service, or the duty of giving alms to the poor. In a religious setting, the priests in the temple *serve* God, through offering sacrifices or administering other rites and ceremonies. It sounds dry and dusty, but there is a real depth to it. It is right to come to church for spiritual succour and

solace, but we also come to serve God and to minister to one another.

λατρεία (latreia) takes it further. We find this, for instance, in Paul's exhortation to the Romans. If only we heeded it, Sundays would look a lot different! "I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper *worship*." (Romans 12:1) Here worship is a self-offering, a *giving of ourselves* to God. It is this form of worship that we should be modelling for our children, every day, rather than the consumerism that our generation has bought into.

προσκυνέω (proskyneo) is a verb and speaks of adoration and devotion. This is worship in the form of a kiss of reverence, or of lying prostrate. In the gospels, many worship Jesus in this way, including the disciples in Luke 24:52 at the time of Jesus' ascension – "they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy." This is the worship of surrender, and *love*, deep love of God.

To answer your question: The extent that our church culture can align with these forms of worship is the extent to which our focus will move away from the "singing group leader." Rather, the focus will be on a self-offering to God. In fact, the other reasons why we come to church will find their place. We come on Sunday for **worship**, and also **discipleship** and **fellowship**. *Discipleship* is about having our whole lives taught and shaped by Jesus by the truth of his word and the power of his Spirit. *Fellowship* is about doing that together, spurring one another on to righteousness (Hebrews 10:24-25) and being united around Jesus. All of that is *worship*. And in that sense our "worship leaders" will be our pastors, and prophets, and teachers, and all the other gifts at work.

But in the end, just as we said at the beginning, this is a matter of our collective heart. To make that move would

require cultural change, including the need for repentance. Many, if not most, of our churches enable self-centred consumerism. When worship is about me…. If I go to a church *service* so that I can be well *served*… then I will be attentive to how well the *servants* are performing for me. And so I will prefer the high quality choir, or the anointed "singing group leader", and that's where the focus will be. I will value the *performance* because it adheres to my self-absorption.

The irony is, of course, that it's actually in *real* worship, in *the* ministry (leitourgia) of our devoted (proskynew) self-offering (latreia) that worship actually becomes a moment of real fulfilment and self-discovery. I am "fed" by worship when it's not about me, and, consequently, not about the person on the stage.

Musical excellence is not irrelevant, of course, and it's worthy of some investment. But the musical leaders who truly serve (leitourgia) us are marked by humility, and self-effacement (latreia) and turn us to devotion (proskynew), not adulation. It's not easy for them. We love our celebrities, and we will always be attracted to those people through whom we have encountered the presence of God in some way. It is understandable that we will turn to them to seek more of the Lord. We will want to pitch our tents there, as Peter desired to stay on the mountain of Transfiguration. The wise worship leaders will simply echo the voice from the cloud on that day: "It's not about you, it's not about me; here is Jesus… *listen* to him."

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