

This Season As Parable – The posture of faith in a corona closed world.

Like many of us, I've been pondering things in this current pandemic season. I'm finding it helpful to see some parallels between these times and the effect of Jesus' teaching, especially his parables.



Allow me to explain myself: Jesus, famously, made use of parables. Rather than “answering plainly” he would tell a short story. We know many of them by name: The Parable of *The Prodigal Son*, *The Lost Sheep*, *The Good Samaritan*, etc. They have become well-known to us. So well-known, in fact, that we have become immune to their *force*.

Parables are meant to *impact*.

Here's an example from someone other than Jesus: In 2 Samuel 12, the prophet Nathan confronts King David about his corruption. He could have spoken plainly, but I doubt he would have been heard. Instead, he tells a parable, the story of a rich man who oppresses his poor neighbour. David is *drawn into* the story until he is confronted: “You are the man!”

Nathan's parable brings David to a *crisis*. He cannot stay where he is. The status quo is not possible anymore. He *must* respond, one way or another. **He can either respond with hardened heart, or he can fall into faith.** In this case David softens his heart and responds with contrition and repentance. The parable has its impact.

When Jesus speaks in parables he brings his hearers to a similar crisis. They cannot remain unmoved. They will either harden themselves against his word, or they will fall into faith.

In Matthew 13:1-9, Jesus shares the famous Parable of the Sower. It's a beautiful metaphor involving a farmer sowing seed indiscriminately; it lands on shallow soil, weedy soil, hardened soil, and good soil. He later explains the metaphor; the seed is the word of God which can come to nothing in the poor soil of the pleasures and pressures of life, or bear much fruit in the good soil of those who "hear and retain it."

This story prompts his disciples to ask, "Why do you speak to the people in parables?". Jesus responds by quoting the prophet Isaiah:

Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?"

And I said, "Here am I. Send me!"

He said, "Go and tell this people:

***"Be ever hearing, but never understanding;
be ever seeing, but never perceiving."***

Make the heart of this people calloused;

make their ears dull

and close their eyes.

Otherwise they might see with their eyes,

hear with their ears,

understand with their hearts,

and turn and be healed."

Isaiah 6:9-10

Isaiah spoke to God's people at a point when they were wallowing in complacency after a period of prosperity, even as their world was threatened by a looming invader. They had lost

their way. They had forgotten who they were. They were *God's* people but they had become self-assured, oppressive, and unrighteous, just like the other nations. They didn't just need *teaching*, they needed *impacting*. Like Nathan with David, they needed a real *crisis*. So Isaiah was to speak to them in a way that only faith would grasp. Without that soft heart, they would be "hearing but never understanding", confirmed in their hardness.

Jesus speaks in parables to do the same for his generation.

Consider the Parable of the Sower. For those with "ears to hear" with a heart of faith, it is wonderful truth. God's life-giving word is scattered indiscriminately; it's not just for the strong or wise or holy. God has spoken to everyone, in all places and all circumstances. Heard with a heart of faith, this story generates a yearning to be good soil. It impacts faith and leads to more faith.

But for those who can't hear it that way, it will have the opposite effect. For those who hold the word of God as something reserved for the upright and pure, a tool for those who have been schooled in the right Pharisaical school, this parable is a confrontation, even an offense. The response of the Pharisees to Jesus was often condescension, derision, or anger. They heard but didn't understand. The parable reveals their lack of faith.

When it comes to faith (or the lack of it) within God's people, parables have a prophetic *amplifying* effect. "Whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them." (Matthew 13:12)

This then, is my reflection: **This coronavirus season is working like a parable to us**, the church. It is having a similar prophetic amplifying effect. **It is bringing us to a crisis**. It's not just a crisis of medical and economic

management (although that is real). It's not just a crisis of bereavement and trauma (although that is very very real). It is bringing us to a crisis of faith.

In the westernised world we have chuffed along in our churches in a context of comfort and prosperity. It's a bit like Isaiah's day. We have built a religious industry. We have made our appeals to the masses. We have gotten good at offering something decent on a Sunday, and mechanisms attuned to felt needs throughout the week. But that edifice has been shaken; we cannot even meet together at the moment.

Even as we do our best (and there *is* much good) in the netflix world of livestreams and zoom, we recognise that the former status quo is gone. If we can put 90% of our "product" online, just what were we doing anyway? The question is raised. The moment is impacting us.

The impact is also similar to Isaiah's day; it is raising the question of *identity*. *Whose* are we? The difference is literally a matter of faith: We are either God's people, and confirmed in that, or we are self-made with a borrowed Christian aesthetic, and that is what will emerge. It's a parabolic moment.

We can imagine the two different responses:

We could do it without God. We *can* rebuild the edifice. We *can* market the spiritual experience. We can even do a decent job of being a neighbourly community on a par with any decent Mutual Aid Group. We can find our activism of choice that wants to put the world back together again a certain way, and get on board. We may even take some of our current moment with us: the comfort of doing church in our pyjamas is not nothing!

It's not necessarily malicious or morally bad, but in this direction it can all be done in our own strength. Like Isaiah's people seeking help from Egypt... like religious leaders dismissing the up-start from Nazareth and turning back

to their traditions... we will not hear the call to faith in the current moment. Just put it back the way it was, or the way we now want it to be.

In this direction, the trust is not in God, it's all about us. Extend it out and we imagine not just church, but *divinity itself* in the form that we want it, purged of all that we find disagreeable. This can manifest at any point on the church spectrum: From woke do-goodery, to blinkered protestations, to marketing tactics, to immovable emptied traditions, it can be sweet, or acidic, stimulating, or soporific. But it has this in common: My world, My terms. A Christian aesthetic, but God not needed, not really.

I can see our current parabolic moment amplifying this faithless response. Yes, I see it around me, but mostly I mean this with respect to *myself*. I want to *do*. I want to *seize the moment*. I want to *plan the future*. This is *my* time! Let us choose the future that most aligns with our sense of self-security and call that "faithful"!

The real difference isn't about choosing one self-made future as more virtuous than another self-made future. If we look at it like that, we are hearing but not understanding.

Rather, the other effect of this moment is to *undo* us, and *bring us to God*. That is the heart of faith.

We are also seeing this in this moment. People are being undone. They are wondering, seeking, yearning, *thirsting* for something beyond themselves. Perhaps its because we're facing mortality honestly again. Perhaps our pretenses of safety have gone and our simple *smallness* has re-emerged as real. Perhaps life once looked like a rut and rail in a predetermined direction, but now there are *possibilities*. Whatever it is, this moment is undoing us. It is at this moment in the parable that we look up to see the face of Jesus speaking.

Look at the response to Jesus' teaching. Faith often looks

like bewilderment. It's the Pharisees that go off with self-assured certainty of how they want things to be, but the path of faith looks more like confusion. Eyes have been opened, now blinking in the sun, exclaiming both "Lord, at last!" and "Lord, I don't know what to *do*!" The Bible describes this moment in many ways – from *amazement* to being "*cut to the heart*" to declarations of bewailing truth "*I am ruined.*" "*Go away from me Lord, I am a sinful man.*", and "*My Lord, and my God.*"

The faith-filled response is not so much as a position or determined direction, as a *posture*.

It is a posture of surrender. It is cross-shaped, a laying down of everything. It can feel like a refining *death*. Let it be that it is no longer we that live, but Christ that lives within us! We repent. We believe.

It is a posture of response. Jesus says, "Come, follow me!", and we leave our nets and follow him. We are stripped of our security, and led into the unknown. But it's OK, we are led by Jesus. He is of greatest value.

It's a posture that bows to grace in the suffering. Of weeping when needed, and laughing at other times. Of praying "Lord, your will be done!"

It's a posture that waits for him, as the edifices crumble, and the collapse of more substantial things is more than possible. And it ponders firstly, not "What can we make of this?" but "What will our Lord now do?" It is aware of needs, and fears, and griefs, and opportunities, and possibilities; but it doesn't just up and thrust forward. We only do what we see the Father doing. We *wait*.

Above all, it is a posture of worship. We remember who we are, and we are *His*. Our distinctive is our worship: before *anything* (even before we all manner of good things, like a loving community), we are Jesus' people. Everything else

comes from that, or we lose it all, even our love in the end. So we sit at his feet. We stare at his face. We rest our head against his breast. Our love is in him, bearing his name.

Across the spectrum, it has this in common: Lord, your world. Lord, your terms. Lead us, in this moment, lead us. It's all about you, Jesus.

This season is like a parable, it is impacting us with a crisis of faith. The status quo is not possible. And there are two responses for the churches: to harden ourselves in self-assurance and build our future, or be softened in faith and be his right now.

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Is the Gospel a Power Play? The perceived incoherence of belief and humility.

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



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

himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant.”

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

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

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

When we consider these oppressive people, we agree with Jesus' actions. Whatever humility means, it doesn't mean being a doormat, or agreeing with oppression. In fact, **our postmodern world might give us an insight that Jesus appears to be addressing: truth claims are power plays.** By asserting what they declare to be *true* (in how the temple operates, or in the

application of God's law), Jesus' opponents are constructing a social framework in which they get to have power and influence. Jesus is right to undermine it!

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

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

Perhaps we should not only lay aside our voice, but be aware of our own heart and attitude. Jesus was humble, so why should we be so arrogant as to hold that we have any particularly correct insight into the ways of the world, the way of God, and the wisdom of what is and what might be? Jesus was self-effacing, so if we speak his name, we must be doing it for our sake, not his. Evangelism itself, therefore, is a form of oppression. We should lay down our power-claiming truths even within the confines of our heart; we should let go of our beliefs.

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

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

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

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

I'm sure you've heard this rhetoric.

We could modify our sense of Jesus' claim to truth and so have less to believe and say: If he made any truth claims about himself at all, they were probably misinterpreted by his biographers, and later given the authority of holy writings by power-hungry men. Jesus is not *the* way, *the* truth, and *the* life (John 14:6), and if he said it, it only applies within the Jewish world that he inhabited, and he never meant it absolutely. Jesus may have claimed authority in the Kingdom of God (Matthew 28:18) but he meant it subversively, that we might further his Kingdom the way he intended: through dialogue with the oppressed, and inclusion of those discarded by society. The Kingdom of God is made present wherever the compassion that Jesus exemplifies is exercised by any of God's creatures.

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

Both extremes in this dialectic have a degree of appeal. But it's not a coherent resolution. Within the church, we find ourselves lurching between nihilism ("We can't really know or be anything, let us just be, resting in the empty and meaningless") and more explicit forms of control ("This is how

it is, now get on and make the church bigger, don't fail or we will lose influence"). In over-simplification, it's so-called liberalism on one end, and traditionalism (even modern market-driven traditions) on the other.

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

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

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

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

If we really hold to the truth of Jesus, we will be committed

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

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

Dying to Grow and The Point of It All

Christmas can be the time substance gets lost beneath frantic frivolities. Pastors, vicars, and ordinary church folk enter into the annual tradition of trying to talk about deep things (incarnation, salvation, Jesus!) without sounding twee or spoiling the mince pies and mulled wine.



It’s not just a Christmas predicament, though. The same thing is there, more subtly, throughout the rest of the year. Church life is *always* full of frantic frivolities. There may be less tinsel, but the dynamic remains. We can lurch from Sunday to Sunday. The buzz of activities can be a pervasive background. Our Christmas “church gigs” have an intensity about them; we invest in them, advertise them, and are glad when we are rewarded with the right sort of numbers. But that only amplifies what is already present: our drive to perform and get growing results. Throughout the year, in the midst of the

mist of religious supply and demand, we try to talk about deep things, without sounding twee or spoiling things.

I'm not sure it's working that well.

I know I have become wary of activity and busyness.

It's not that I'm into passivity or quietism. I rejoice in the sense of *flow* when a community acts, seeks, worships together. When brothers and sisters are in unity and purpose... well, the presence of Christ is almost tangible. Even as I write this, I can hear the sounds and smell the smells wafting up the stairs from the meal that is being prepared in our downstairs church hall. It's an excellent *activity* with a sense of flow, a weekly expression of hospitality and care, and one of the highlights of my week.

But I also know what it's like when church activities are not like that: when doing is about duty and not much more, and movement is a going around in circles, a spinning of our wheels. This is when we do things *only* because we did them last year. This is when new opportunities are met with a pang of cynicism: "We've done that, we tried that, that just feels like yet more work." When we take things deep and try to reconnect with the point of it all, suddenly the words sound hollow, disconnected, echo-like. We drown in the shallows.

When it's like that, **it's worth listening to Jesus.**

Lately I've been moved to lay aside all my carefully curated church growth strategies and reflect on the words of Jesus in Matthew 16.

Famously, **he has his own church growth church strategy.** It is founded on Peter's confession of Jesus as Lord: "*Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and **on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.***"

More infamously, Peter tries to take control of this building project. He refuses to countenance the thought of the Messiah laying down his life, and counsels the King of Kings to choose a different path. As Jesus points out, he is moved by “human concerns.” Jesus rebukes him and includes this injunction: *“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. **For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.**”*

In Luke 17, the same words are echoed. This time, it is not about the *foundations* of the church, but the finishing touches at the point of our Lord’s return: *“It will be just like this on the day the Son of Man is revealed. On that day no one who is on the housetop, with possessions inside, should go down to get them. Likewise, no one in the field should go back for anything. Remember Lot’s wife! **Whoever tries to keep their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life will preserve it.**”*

How’s that for a church growth strategy? **Whoever tries to keep their life will lose it!**

This has led me to two conclusions:

Firstly, this is a key to our frantic activism, at Christmas time or any time else. So often, we are scrambling to not “lose our life;” we do things to keep from demise. Take any church activity as an example: a Sunday gathering, a carol service, a bible study, an advertising campaign, a diocesan restructure. If it exists as an attempt to justify our existence, prove our relevance, deflect our decline... then we are full of “human concerns” and we are in the way. Often the best thing to do is to cease that activity, or shut something down.

But if those same church activities exist to give ourselves away, for the sake of Jesus... they flow and bring forth life.

They become *deep*, acts of sacrificial worship, reflections of God's grace, of love to the local community, of sharing our very selves one with another. They encapsulate something precious, the essence of the Kingdom of God.

The same activities can either be a clinging to life (and losing it), or a giving of life for the sake of Christ (and finding it). This is the paradox of Christian leadership towards true church growth: How do you build yourself up by giving yourself away? How do you generate something without slipping into empty activism? My thoughts have taken me here:

Secondly, it lifts our eyes towards the ends, not the means. The big word to describe this is "teleological" – from the Greek word *telos* meaning "end" or "point" or "goal." We need to be *teleological* and look to our end, to the point of it all.

The writer to the Hebrews has the sense of it when he exhorts us to "run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith" (Hebrews 12:1-12). Paul has a similar motivation when he "sets his eyes upon the prize" (Philippians 3:14). Both speak of activity and perseverance, but the vision is towards the goal. **The goal is Jesus.**

We need a teleological approach to *mission*. When we think about mission, we quickly go to the activities (evangelistic activities, community engagement etc.) or desired outcomes (increased attendance, more activity). This is a focus on the *means*. **The Scriptures look first to Jesus.**

In Hebrews 2 or 1 Corinthians 15, for instance, we see the goal, the *telos*, of mission. It is *not*, firstly, about church numbers, or even social justice, it is about the glorification of Jesus. *Everything* flows from that. "He must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet," Paul says. Psalm 8 is used in Hebrews 2 to say much the same thing about a "Son of

Man” who is “made a little a lower than the angels” only to be “crowned with glory and honour” with “everything under his feet.” We find justice, we find salvation, we find grace in that truth, and nowhere else.

This gives the focus of mission. The point of mission is the rule of Christ, the honour of Christ, the glorification of Jesus. **True worship is mission. True mission is worship.** This is the point. This is the goal. This is our *telos*. If we don’t do it in the name of Jesus, we will end up doing it in the name of ourselves; we will end up clinging to our life, and so losing it.

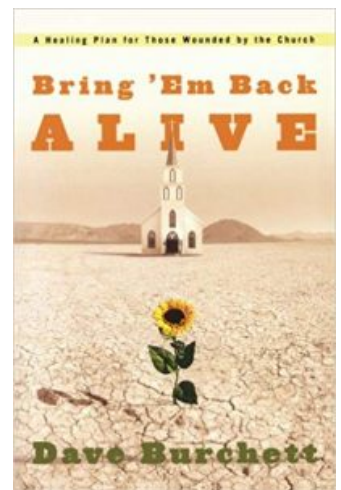
For sure, those mission activities are not a waste. Delve into Hebrews 2 and you will see them find their place in the light of Christ’s supremacy: Jesus is glorified when his people glorify him. This happens when his people are sanctified and set free from the power of sin and death. Therefore, evangelism and outreach are a means of our mission. Pastoral care and discipleship activities are a means of our mission. Confession and repentance and contrition are a means of our mission. But they are, by definition, not an end in and of themselves. But be aware, we can do all these things in a self-facing frantic way, and so lose ourselves.

Our diocese happens to face an uncertain 2020. It’s not alone; the pressure to perform, and survive, and to save ourselves is mounting on the declining Western church. We can cling to ourselves, or we can “lose ourselves” in the truth of Jesus, reigning over all things. We give ourselves to him. We trust him. We repent. We worship. We adore. We devote. We give ourselves to that end. We give ourselves to that goal. We give ourselves and so find ourselves... in Jesus, our Lord.

Merry Christmas.

Review: Bring 'Em Back Alive – A Healing Plan for Those Wounded by the Church

Reading this in my current quest to explore the connection between trauma and church culture, I have found a book that is well-intentioned but fundamentally flawed.



Dave Burchett's *Bring 'Em Back Alive* gets a lot right. He is honest about how church can and has been a painful experience for many. He has a pastoral heart that yearns for the church to reach out to those so wounded. There is some helpful advice for those who care and some useful insights for those who have been hurt. But this book is far from the “healing plan” it is touted to be.

A defining image (page 13) in the book is of the “lost sheep”, the one who has wandered, as opposed to the 99 who remain in the fold. He exhorts us to have the heart of the Good Shepherd who seeks out that one lost sheep. The image draws on Jesus' words in Matthew 18, of course, but it's a somewhat tortured connection with the parable. Not only does Burchett avoid a nuanced exposition, he misses the plain correlation between

the lost sheep and the “little child” of Matthew 18:5 who “enters the kingdom of heaven.” His use of *The Message* as his biblical text throughout severely restricts the depths from which he can draw.

It’s a shame, because Matthew 18 can really help us in this area. The wandering sheep is a “little” one, who exhibits a childlike faith. Jesus has just talked about the consequences for those who would cause such a “little one” to stumble, or sin, or wander. The dramatic image of a “millstone hung around the neck” and being drowned in the sea should give us pause for thought! It is a prophetic parable against those “who look down on one of these little ones” and has more implications for the character of the flock, than that of the little lamb.

And here lies Burchett’s problem. As he rightly appeals to church leaders to value those who have wandered away, he misses this prophetic trajectory against the existing flock, and therefore embraces some worrisome assumptions. I’ve tried to bluntly distill them here:

1. ***The point of reaching out to the wounded is to bolster the strength of the church.*** “How much depth have we, the collective church, lost by not aggressively seeking to find and heal our wounded lambs?” he asks on page 2, in the introduction. Somehow the utilitarian power of the wounding community has become the point.
2. ***The problem lies with those who have left.*** “So many people out there have been given up for lost,” he writes. “They could be found, healed, and returned. If we could only begin to communicate that we are willing to accompany them on the road back, forgive them, love them, and celebrate their return” (page 18). Frankly, this sentence made me angry. The subtitle of the book aims it at “those wounded by the church”, yet here it is the wounded ones that need to be “found”, “returned”, and “forgiven.” This is close to the language of an abusive husband, offering “reconciliation” because he is

gracious enough to forgive his wounded wife.

3. **People leave because of their immaturity.** “Like a thirsty sheep, a bored and unfulfilled Christian who is without spiritual shepherding may wander onto paths that lead away from God.” (Page 36). Which is fine to say, perhaps, if this is a book about being better shepherds. But it’s not, and it infantilises those who have left and diminishes the principles (some of them dearly held) that shape that departure.
4. **Unity trumps holiness and justice.** “The Good Shepherd has a cure for us, and it starts with His prescription for unity.” (Page 48). “Division within the body of Christ is sin. Jesus’s teaching about unity is indissoluble.” (Page 56). His words, in themselves, are not wrong. They are simply not careful enough. Again, he inadvertently echoes the words of an abusive husband insisting that marital unity is more important than any particular transgression on his part. Sometimes separation is necessary for unity. Even Paul (quoted by Burchett on page 53) exhorts Titus to have “nothing to do with” the (truly) divisive person. I know too many people who have appropriately departed their church community, and have then be shamed as divisive or schismatic, when the real wound to the body of Christ was done to them, not by them.

I’ve deliberately painted a stark image here, to make my point. Despite the flaws, Burchett *does* get to some helpful places.

The chapter entitled **The Heart of a Shepherd** is generally good. Occasionally he has the same sentiments as people like Mike Pilavachi who reimagines church as family. “Peter did not advise the shepherd to show difficult rams and ewes the sheep gate”, Burchett writes (page 76), and I hear Pilavachi echoing “We don’t have employees to hire and fire, but sons and daughters to raise.” **Burchett’s one clear point** is well made:

We have a *responsibility to the wounded*(page 78), and we should take it seriously.

The second part of the book is also useful. It is actually aimed at those who have been hurt, rather than those who might seek them out. It's nothing groundbreaking, but it is good, solid, stuff. He would turn our wounded eyes towards Jesus who "understands the pain, betrayal, and anguish that... selfish and sinful behavior causes" (page 117). He exhorts us towards forgiveness (page 180). He gives guidance about living in the present (page 153).

Occasionally, the era of the book shows. Published in 2004, it is just before the heyday of the emerging and emergent church movements. As he scratches on the disaffection of those in church who are "tired of pretending their lives are better than they actually are" (page 90), he has not yet seen the growth of movements that *did* arise from those who left that plastic world. Perhaps there is a glimpse of some generational wistfulness: "...they need to hear from their former flock that we care, we miss them, we need them, and we want them to come back" (Page 91). Having lived and led in that era, what we actually needed to hear was "that we care, we miss you, and we long for you to fly, and do, and build what that the Lord is leading you to do, we've got your back."

I shook my head a little, when he talks about churches setting up classes and seminars for those wounded (by the same churches running the classes, presumably!), so that the "injured lambs" might not "feel alone... having a forum where they can express their hurt, and share their concerns." I don't think he realises how patronising that idea sounds.

You see, in the end, the lost wounded sheep don't want to be found by a hurtful church, even a regretful hurting church. I know this from my own experience. I know this because many of those I've met are wary of being found by *me*; I wear a clerical collar, I embody that which has been the source of

their trauma. They don't want to be found by us, **they want to be found by Jesus**. Yes, they also want community, but they want it real, spiritually authentic. Which means, Jesus first.

Helping the wounded isn't about classes or offers of therapy. It's not about technical change in tired institutions. It's not even about "revivals" of a surge of life into ordinary auditoriums. **It's not our task to "bring 'em back alive."** Yes, we follow Jesus as we search for them, care for them, breathe life into them, back them, cover them, and cheer them on. But it's not about slotting them back in to where they were first injured. It's about the Lord doing something new. When I meet the "little ones" who find no place at the institutional table, laden with looming millstones, I am increasingly realising that the kingdom of God belongs to those such as these.

The Marks of the Apostolic – A Mild Critique of Some Fivefold Thinking

In recent years there has been a resurgence in thinking about the so-called "fivefold" "ascension gifts" shape to ministry. It has been furthered by the likes of Alan Hirsch and Mike Breen. It draws on Ephesians 4:11-12 in which Paul refers to five gifts from Christ, "the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service..."



In general, despite a growing tendency to reduce it to some sort of personality inventory, fivefold thinking is helpful. I have, for instance, used it as a starting point to unpack what it means to be prophetic.

Here, however, I want to focus on the *apostolic*.

There's a lot to commend in typical fivefold thinking about the apostolic. It will usually draw on the root word of "apostle" and the associated verb "apostello" which means simply "to send" with the nuance (in context) of being sent with purpose: i.e. appointed to go and do something. Hence the disciples who were the direct recipients of Jesus' Great Commission are, rightly, "big-A" Apostles. And so is Paul, who received his appointment directly from the risen Christ later as one "untimely born" (1 Cor 15:8).

This can appropriately be applied to aspects of ministry today. There is something about the apostolic, for instance, that pertains to *movement*. The apostolic stimulates movement and seeks to lead a community into places where it needs to go but hasn't. Just as the original Apostles took the gospel into Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth, so the contemporary apostolic desires to *extend* the Kingdom of God in some way. In any new venture – church plant, missionary movement, activist community – you will likely find the apostolic at work, hearing the call of some "Macedonian Man" and heading out to answer (Acts 16:9-10).

The apostolic, therefore, is often associated with words like "entrepreneurial" or "visionary." Mike Breen, answering a blog post question, says, for instance, "*Apostles can't help but start new things.*" A site that expounds Breen's lifeshapes, describes an apostle as a "Vision-keeper for the extension of the church's mission, an entrepreneur/starter... bring strategic skills, risk taking, get things off the ground (church planting?)."

There is some truth to this. But it is also where **I want to push back.**

The apostolic is NOT *primarily* entrepreneurial. In my experience, it's the evangelists who often have the crazy new ideas. Some of them even work!

The apostolic IS *primarily parental.* The original Apostles didn't just break new ground, or go into new territory, they *took the church with them, and birthed and grew whatever was begun.* They bring the body of Christ on the journey, and they hold and cover whatever is formed.

Entrepreneurs can often be the worst at bringing people with them. To be sure, none of us are as friendly as the pastors, but belligerence is not the mark of the apostolic. Neither is a "vision and dump" mentality that says "well, I've started it, now you carry it." I've even heard excuses made for toxic leadership, "It's OK, some people have had trouble responding to the apostolic in him." A corrective is needed.

Healthy apostles don't behave like that. They don't behave like bosses pursuing a vision despite the collateral damage. Yes, they are deliberate, *determined* even. And the movement *is*, often, outward, ground-breaking, map-making, and pioneering. But they take a "family" with them, and they form a household on the way, wherever they have gone. Because that is the point!

I thought it would be useful, therefore, to list some of the characteristics of the apostolic that I see in the pages of Scripture. It's not an exhaustive list, and I'd love to receive other suggestions.

These are marks of the apostle that I see in Scripture:

The Apostolic Way is PARENTAL.

Paul writes the following to the Corinthians:

*I am not writing this to shame you, but to warn you, **as my dear children**. Even though you have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus **I became your father through the gospel**. Therefore I urge you to imitate me. For this reason I am sending to you Timothy, **my son**, whom I love, who is faithful in the Lord. He will remind you of my way of life in Christ Jesus, which agrees with what I teach everywhere in every church. 1 Corinthians 4:14-17*

The language Paul uses of a father with his children or, (in the case of Timothy), his son, is obvious. His heart isn't just to direct or dictate, but to *impart*, through relationship. The gospel is something to be modelled and embodied, and therefore imitated, not simply pursued as a function or task. This marks apostolic ministry.

Paul makes it even more explicit when he applies a maternal image to his ministry, as he writes to the Thessalonians:

*As apostles of Christ we could have been a burden to you, but we were gentle among you, **like a mother caring for her little children**. We loved you so much that we were delighted to **share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well**, because you had become so dear to us. (1 Thessalonians 2:7-8)*

This is why churches and church structures that revolve around programs and pragmatics have a sense of lifelessness to them – a stagnancy even in their busyness and sense of “success”; they have stepped away from the apostolic *sharing of life* to sterile functionalism.

The most apostolic people I know bring movement to the church, not just by *leading* the church, but by *carrying* it. They weep and laugh with it. They are broken by it, delighted by it. They hold it in some place primal, and there they carry it to

the Lord and Father of us all. They imitate him, and are therefore worthy of imitation.

This does, however, lead to the second mark:

The Apostolic Way is PAINFUL.

The cost of parenthood is significant. There is great joy and fruitfulness in it, but also great pain. Any parent can tell you that. God, our Father, reveals the truest sense of this. The Apostle John alludes to this constantly:

*“...to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become **children of God** – children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but **born of God.**” (John 1:12-13)*

“...for God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3:16)

And Paul, writing to the Romans, having spoken of the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of Adoption, by which we cry out “Abba, Father” then speaks of suffering as something of a family trait:

“Now if we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed.” (Romans 8:17-19)

The apostle’s “imitation” of the Father will lead the apostle, and any church that can rightly be called “apostolic,” on a path of suffering. This is not a defeatist trajectory, rather it is the “mind of Christ” – the *kenotic* (self-emptying) way

that Paul speaks of in Philippians 2:1-11. No wonder, when Paul wants to speak of his apostolic power and authority, he sees the madness of leaning on his own strength and learning (2 Corinthians 11:21). Rather, “if I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness” (11:30) so that “Christ’s power may rest on me.” (12:9).

Too often, we look up to a triumphalist form of church leadership. We look to persons who have been successful, who have achieved some empowerment of our organisation, and in them we place our trust. We are not far from accolading the so-called “super-apostles” that had bewitched the Corinthian church. In what I think is the **defining description of apostleship**, in 1 Corinthians 4, Paul pushes back at those who delight in being winners in the Christian world:

*Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! You have become kings – and that without us! How I wish that you really had become kings so that we might be kings with you! For it seems to me that **God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like men condemned to die in the arena.** We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to men. We are fools for Christ, but you are so wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are honoured, we are dishonoured! To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless. We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; when we are slandered, we answer kindly. **Up to this moment we have become the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world.** (1 Corinthians 4:8-13)*

I have learned to look for this “scum and refuse” moment in apostolic movements. If it is not there, I am wary. For instance, the apostolic qualification of a contemporary movement like Soul Survivor doesn’t lie in its many achievements (although I surely delight in them!), but in its

foundation in the Wasteland.

The most apostolic people I know weep for, and because of, the church. In this sense they share in the sufferings of Christ, and lead the people on the same self-emptying path. Their tears take them to the heart of God. They cry themselves to sleep at night, and know the grace of God new in the morning. That is what makes a movement, and it can't be generated by any entrepreneurial technique.

Which reveals a final mark of the apostolic:

The Apostolic Way is Compelled, not Controlled.

In some ways, this is just a natural consequence of the "sentness" of the apostolic. A pioneer cannot predict the path ahead. A pioneer cannot take a controlled path around obstacles and difficulties. By definition a pioneer is not following a map, they are *making* the map!

An apostle goes out with the family of God, not with a plan of *control* ("This is what we are going to do.") but with a plan of *purpose* ("This is why we are going.") And then they have to roll with whatever comes along. So often it is not what they planned; it is almost beyond them, in a direction where they must rely on the Holy Spirit. They are only strong because they are weak.

Paul's plans for the evangelisation of all of the province of Asia were halted. Instead he and his companions are compelled by the Holy Spirit and find themselves bringing the gospel to Europe (Acts 16:6-10). And throughout Acts, we find a similar sense of Paul being out of control: he is imprisoned, driven by storms, compelled to escape violence. Even what seems like an attempt to free himself from prison by asserting his Roman citizenship only leads to further captivity... but still many opportunities for the gospel. So often, it seems, apostolic movement is more rightly characterised by "a wing and a prayer" than clever, entrepreneurial, goals.

The Apostle Peter, as he is (re)commissioned by Jesus at the end of John's gospel, has a foreshadowing of the manner of his death. Jesus tells him "when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go" (John 21:18). John tells us that, most specifically, this statement indicates the kind of death that Peter would have. But it also colours the sense of Jesus' very next words: "Follow me."

So often, the apostle finds themselves "being led where you do not want to go." Their plans go out the window, and they learn to return to the Father's heart. There, in the midst of uncertainty, they follow the Spirit of Jesus, who only ever does what he sees the Father doing.

Paul, in his chains, brings the gospel even to members of Caesar's household (Philippians 4:22). Peter, even in his death, glorifies God (John 21:19). It is not the path they may have chosen, but it is the path chosen for them. The apostle leads the apostolic church in embracing the weakness (and therefore the power) of this way.

Missional Worship: A Mild Critique of the Five Marks of Mission

They came up in a discussion I was having recently: the so-called “Five Marks of Mission”, here taken from the Anglican Communion, in which they were developed over the last 30-40 years.



The mission of the Church is the mission of Christ:

- 1) To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom*
- 2) To teach, baptise and nurture new believers*
- 3) To respond to human need by loving service*
- 4) To transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation*
- 5) To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth*

They are intended to “express the Anglican Communion’s common commitment to, and understanding of, God’s holistic and integral mission.” They’ve got a lot going for them.

They’re not perfect, of course. The Anglican Communion website recognises, for instance, that they don’t fit together like five equal parts.

The first Mark of Mission, identified with personal evangelism at the Anglican Consultative Council in 1984 (ACC-6) is a summary of what all mission is about, because it is based on Jesus’ own summary of his mission. This should be the key statement about everything we do in mission.

And this is a worthy observation. After all, you clearly can’t do 2) (teaching and nurturing) without also doing 1) (proclamation).

The last three are, in my mind, in a slightly different category, because they incorporate forms of activity in which the specific revelation of the gospel in Jesus is not entirely

necessary. What I mean is this: It is conceptually impossible to proclaim the gospel of Jesus and nurture new believers in Jesus without actually having a faith in Jesus. However, it is possible to engage in loving service, transforming unjust structures, and renewing the life of the earth without knowing or speaking the name of Jesus.

This does not denigrate these last three. They are a necessary and important outworking of the gospel in the lives of Christians and Christian communities. Moreover, they are forms of mission where our cause overlaps with many other activists who do not follow Jesus. Not only are they achieving a good in their own right, they also facilitate the first two as we are provided with opportunities to give reason for the hope that we hold (1 Peter 3:15).

In many ways I applaud them. I love it when the church is moved to *do*, rather than to sit apathetically behind rose-colour stained glass windows. As the saying goes, "It's not the the Church of God that has a mission in the world, it is the God of Mission who has a Church in the world."

My critique of the Five Marks, then, is not about what they say, but what they *don't* say. It's more than omission, it's like there's something askew. It's a slant that is often present in conversations about mission. I think of the "Mission Minded" tool that we used during my training years; in many ways it was excellent, but there was something missing. That tool outlined various activities that churches could be involved in, but there wasn't a clear place for something that seemed crucial to church life. That something was *worship*. Where is the *doxological* character of Christian mission?

Christian mission, for it to be something deeper than "mere" activism, must be essentially *worshipful*.

After all, the "chief end of man", as the Westminster Shorter

Catechism states in its very first question is to “glorify God and enjoy him forever.” What an excellent definition of worship! The “chief end” is not the making of Christians and the bringing of justice (although they are necessary corollaries) it is to the glory of God.

The Catechism is not going out on a limb here. Jesus, himself, would have us pray “hallowed be your name” even before we pray “your kingdom come, your will be done.” The hallowing of God’s name is not just prior, it is *integral* to our seeking the kingdom and the will of God.

Similarly, the mission of Jesus is not essentially *pragmatic* but is rooted and immersed in the adoring, loving relationship between Messiah and God, Son and Heavenly Father.

Very truly I tell you, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does.

John 5:19-20

In the big-picture eschatological scope, the glory of God is also the chief point of mission. When Paul speaks to the Corinthians about the end of time, he speaks of Christ’s mission as “putting all his enemies under his feet,” and then submitting himself, and all that is under him (that is, everything!), to God his Father. Christ’s mission is to ensnare all of creation into his own worship of his eternal Father.

But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father

after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For he “has put everything under his feet.” Now when it says that “everything” has been put under him, it is clear that this does not include God himself, who put everything under Christ. When he has done this, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all.

1 Corinthians 15:20-28

When I was young, I was moved towards activism. I was moved towards *doing* mission. In my zeal I misunderstood or even disparaged more “worshipful” aspects of our spirituality such as contemplation, adoration, and prophetic acts. At best, I used “quiet times” and “retreat days” as ways of stoking the fire for the “real work” of reaching people with the gospel or “building the church.” If I used the “up-in-out” triangle, my emphasis was on the “out.”

I was wrong. And I am not alone. The “up” must come first, because it is the heart of both the “in” and the “out.” Even now I run into situations where there is a false dichotomy between “worship” and “mission.” If there is a separation between doing the “work of God”, “drawing people to God”, and “adoring and worshipping God” then, frankly, we’re doing it wrong!

One of my greatest concerns for the contemporary Western church is our *entrepreneurialism*. When that speaks of innovation and focused pursuit of the gospel, I cheer it on. But sometimes it lapses into pragmatism, or even task-oriented rationalism, and, more often than we might care to realise, self-glorification. When we are at risk of asserting control for the sake of our own existence or empowerment, *even as we pursue the five marks of mission*, we risk losing the way of faith. **We must return to worship, attuned to a King who will**

bring all things under the father at the end, by being a living sacrifice now, hallowing his name. *That* is the chief mark of mission – to glorify God.

We are encountering, more than we ever have, a growing number of people who are moved to worship. Sometimes it is through prayer and intercession; they travail, literally groaning as they filled with the Spirit. Sometimes they adore, and rest, and exhibit the peace, sometimes ecstasy, of that very same Spirit. Sometimes they offer words of knowledge and wisdom, speaking prophetic truths that do what all prophetic truths do; they call us back to hallowed ground where Father's name is all in all.

Many (but not all) of these feel homeless in today's church. They feel tangential to the missional machine, un-embraced and unreleased, because the missional return on investing in them is not clear to a "missional church." Yet, I am fully convinced, without their leadership, we have lost our way. Without their heart, we can do "our" mission, and find on the last day that we already had our reward.

This is not a new thing. And I'm not trying to paint a black picture. Different traditions have the tools to do the recalibration of mission around the heart of worship. The Catholic propensity to interweave mission and the eucharist encapsulates, at the very least, the missional value of simply bringing the presence of God to where it is needed and administering his grace. The Charismatic and Pentecostal world values times of "worship and ministry" as a place where the Holy Spirit administers healing, revelation, acceptance, and conviction; a space into which Christian and non-Christian like can be invited. The Liberal claim to self-effacement, to be followers of the Word rather than asserting ourselves, can line up with this. And the Evangelical posture of submission to the Word of God in all things, for its own sake, takes us to where we need to be.

For myself, as I think about mission in my own context, and have found myself being led by worshippers: Let us first turn our face to our Heavenly Father. Let our hearts and our very beings resonate in adoration. Let us cry “Holy Holy Holy” with the choir of heaven. The chief mark of mission is to glorify God, who made heaven and earth.

Q&A: What’s your take on spiritual attack, Satan, demons, and all that kind of stuff?

Anonymous asks:

What’s your take on spiritual attack, Satan, demons and all that kind of stuff?

How do you know what’s actually ‘powers and principalities in the heavenly realms’ and us over spiritualising stuff (ie: ‘I lost my keys... IT MUST BE SATAN!!!!!!’)

[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/>]

Thank you for an interesting question. I'm going to approach it in two different directions: Firstly, by looking at Ephesians 6, which you are quoting. Secondly, by unpacking some of the popular thinking and experiences of "spiritual attack" and seeing if we can make sense of it.



So, firstly, **POWERS AND PRINCIPALITIES IN THE HEAVENLY PLACES.**

You are quoting Ephesians 6:12:

*For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil **in the heavenly realms.** (NIV)*

As with all snap quotes from the Bible, the best way to grasp the meaning is to look at the verse in its context. This verse, for instance, uses a bunch of keywords and phrases that Paul is threading into his letter to the Ephesians.

One of these threads is the phrase "heavenly realms" which, here in 6:12, is the location of "spiritual forces of evil." However, at the beginning of the letter, in his opening lines (Ephesians 1:3), it is also the place of "every spiritual blessing:"

*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us **in the heavenly realms** with every spiritual blessing in Christ. (NIV)*

The phrase "every spiritual blessing" ties back into the fundamental hope and mission of God's people, to embody the covenant promise of God, that Abraham would be *blessed*, and so bless the whole world. God keeps his word, and fulfils his

promise in Jesus. And now the whole world – Jew and Gentile – are drawn together in Christ into that same blessing. This is God’s victory, purpose, and wisdom, and it is also present “in the heavenly realms.” In Ephesians 3:10-11 we read:

*His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities **in the heavenly realms**, according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

What, then, are the “heavenly realms”? The popular caricature is of clouds and cherubs or something like what is imagined in The Good Place. In this imagining, heaven is “up there”, the real world is “down here” and while there may be the occasional cross-over, with souls coming and going and angels and demons intervening from time to time, they are essentially separate. Perhaps this is close to the imagined scenario of demonic key thievery that you allude to in your question.

It’s the same with the word “spiritual.” We take this word and we often make it mean something like “ethereal” or “out there” or “other.” So “spiritual blessing” becomes something pie in the sky and “spiritual warfare” makes us think of some Greek-legend type battle going on in some distant galactic plane; we participate by making sure our little patch of the here-and-now on earth is backing the right side.

I don’t see any of that in Ephesians.

Rather, for Paul, the idea of “heavenly realms” and spiritual things is fully intertwined and interconnected with real-world experiences, and real-world “powers and principalities.” He uses language that draws on a cosmology in which the earth itself is immersed in the “heavens”, plural.

In this framework, one of the heavens is the very atmosphere we breathe. After all, you can’t see the wind, but you can see what it does; it’s an unseen power, intertwined and

interacting with all that exists and all that happens. And so Paul speaks of a spiritual power in Ephesians 2:2 as the “ruler of the kingdom of the air.” He literally means the air. The word “spirit” in the Greek is “pneuma” – meaning “breath” or “wind” – from which we get words like “pneumatic tires.” Your car tyres are filled with the heavens, and your lungs are spiritual pumps. We live, breathe, and are immersed in this spiritual realm.

Paul’s worldview simply extrapolates this. The wind speaks of unseen power, and Paul sees other unseen “powers and principalities” that are, nevertheless, real and present and intertwined with our existence. Think of how we talk about people being affected by “market forces” or having circumstances that change with the “political atmosphere” and you’re starting to get a glimpse of what he’s talking about. We talk about the scourge of “long-term unemployment” or an “epidemic of alcoholism” or an “hypersexual milieu” or “a patriarchal culture” and we have a sense of encountering powerful things that are real but invisible. For Paul these grounded, connected, intertwined-with-reality heavenly realms are a location for God’s activity and intervention.

These “heavenly realms” include “spiritual forces of evil.” I can imagine the winds of the military conflict, or engrained injustice, or the bondage of addictive behaviours, being expressions of demonic activity as well as human sin. That’s Ephesians 6. But I also see God’s assurance to his people: “I have blessed you with every spiritual blessing” in these heavenly realms. God’s intervention in his creation is through his new people, brought together in Jesus. Against the injustice, and cruelty, and diabolical hatred of the image of God in humanity – i.e. against the powers and principalities – God has made his people not to be caged and slaves to fear, but blessed and victorious. We now put on the armour of God, and live and work towards extending that blessing in the power of the Spirit.

So, to return to your question, what's my take on "spiritual attack"? It is the very essence of growing the Kingdom of God. As we worship, and proclaim, and act in accord with God's truth and purpose, we impact and overcome the unseen powerful things that are in the air around us. We look to see lives, families, communities, cities, nations moved by the right Spirit. After all, that is what it means to "baptise nations in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:18-20); it is to immerse *nations* in God's character, under the authority of King Jesus, and "teaching them to obey everything that Jesus commanded us." Just as Jesus rose from the dead, just as the earth and the heavens will be made new at the end, so this evangelistic good-news bringing mission overcomes these unseen evil powers.

I can imagine some of those unseen powers wanting to undermine that work: lie instead of truth, bondage instead of freedom, cruelty instead of justice, chaos instead of peace. When we encounter those strongholds, or when they encounter us, that's what I think of as "spiritual attack." This is where Ephesians takes me.

But secondly, to reflect, just quickly on our **PERSONAL EXPERIENCE OF SPIRITUAL ATTACK**.

Often this comes into play when we have a negative experience: e.g. We experience loss, bereavement, disappointment, hurt, pain, frustration, sinfulness. Maybe we even lose our car keys (I once couldn't find my car keys and missed out on an important family occasion, that certainly felt like a loss). We interpret this pain as "spiritual attack" and somehow deflect the pain and attempt to give it some meaning. Sometimes we are grasping at something that's not there.

Are negative times like these "spiritual attack"? I have a "yes" and "no" answer.

My "yes" comes when I can discern an active aspect of those

powers in Paul's heavenly realms.

I have, for instance, seen good people, doing good things for the kingdom, facing vehement accusation and even hatred. It's a step beyond mere frustration, it is almost irrational; something in the atmosphere shifts and it is conceivable that something unseen is out to get good people, and tear them down. It makes me want to put some Ephesians 6 armour on.

Similarly, I have seen people battling addictive behaviours and the general malaise of life; I have seen them begin to lift their heads, breathe some freedom, get some vision, only to be broadsided by something and brought back down. It's as if something has reached up, like the Balrog with Gandalf, and dragged them back into bondage. It makes me want to pick up some of God's truth, and fight for them.

My "no" comes when I discern other things at work:

We live in a fallen world. Bad things happen to good people. Sometimes, simply, detritus happens, as the saying goes. The focus at these times is to bring it all back to Father God, the source of the evil is neither here nor there.

Sometimes the adversity is a "time of trial." Was Israel's wandering in the wilderness "spiritual attack"? Was David's time in exile "spiritual attack"? Is Job's story a story of "spiritual attack"? I'm not sure I'd even classify Jesus in the wilderness as "spiritual attack", despite the actual demonic presence! Rather, these are often times when the devil must beat a hasty retreat! It is in these times that the Lord builds our faith, bolsters our reliance on him, and draws us to himself. If there is any "spiritual attack" on the church, it is not so much in the adversity we face, but in our addiction to comfort and our demand to meet God on our own terms! Be wary of the evil one when things are easy, not when things are hard.

Thanks for the question.

Q&A: Are prophets today like those in the OT? How do we weigh prophecy?

Alan asks:

Just read your blog. It sounded very true to life in the church. I have a couple of questions.

Is a prophet under the New Covenant different to one under the Old Covenants? The Old Covenant prophets had the potential to write Scripture. The word of the Lord came to them. In the New Covenant the church is required to weigh prophecy and is not allowed to become Scripture. How do we recognise the genuine prophecy from the mistaken or deliberately misleading. For example, it is easy to find prophecies on the internet about the rightness of Brexit. Given the divided opinion of Christians on this issue, how would the church “weigh” such prophecy?

[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/>]

Hi Alan, thanks for the question. What I offer here isn't particularly systematic, but it's how I've wrestled with it.



The tricky thing is in the definition of “prophet.” The term can get used very broadly and also very narrowly, and while neither use is improper, we need to understand what is meant. I’m going to work from broad to narrow:

BROADLY SPEAKING a “prophet”...

- speaks *truth*. This is often in adverse circumstances; a prophet often speaks truth to power. The “speech” may not actually be words, e.g. prophetic “speech acts” are recognised in the Bible, but it *does* involve communication.
- guards *values*. There is an idealism in the prophetic, and lip-service doesn’t count. Prophets tend to understand and call-out motivations as well as actions.
- expects *movement* or *change*. Whatever a prophet says has a landing point, a point of application, a place to repent, or from which to be spurred on.

We can refer to “prophetic people” or even “modern day prophets” in this broad sense. Think of the agitators and dissenters in society, the “activists.” Their activism may be misplaced, or not, but they *are* acting “prophetically”; they are guarding values, speaking truth, expecting change. It can look like environmentalism, or speaking out on the

hypersexualisation of society, or civil disobedience against compulsory school curriculum, or any number of things... you know what I mean.

Interestingly, perhaps, recent thinking about the “fivefold” ministry of Ephesians 4 considers the fivefold to be a recapitulation of human gifting more generally. At this broad level we are recognising the prophetic in humanity more generally. This is certainly Hirsch’s position in his exhaustive, although somewhat flawed, 5Q.

Let’s keep **NARROWING IT DOWN**, though.

The Bible recognises, in both the Old Testament and the New Testament, charismatically gifted prophets.

- They speak truth, as some sense of *divine* truth. They bring a “word from God” in some sense.
- They guard values, as some sense of *God’s* values. They often articulate the gap between our wayward hearts and idolatrous attitudes, and God’s call, purpose, and instruction.
- They expect *movement* or *change*. Sometimes encouraging, sometimes warning, always showing the way for people to draw closer to God. Often kind and encouraging, occasionally a tough-love “Stop! Turn around!”

This is where I would locate the exercise of prophetic gifts in today’s world. It is also where I would locate most of the New Testament prophets.

I don’t like demarcating things here at the “Old Covenant / New Covenant” line, though. There are many examples in the Old Testament in which the term “prophets” means what I think it means here. e.g. 1 Samuel 10:10-11 refers to Saul’s Spirit-filled prophesying; in and around Elijah and Elisha there are “groups of prophets” who are clearly prophets of a less authoritative sort (1 Samuel 10:5-6); Ezra 5:2 talks about attempts at rebuilding the temple being supported by “the

prophets of God.”

In the New Testament, we can see people like Paul encouraging God’s people to exercise the gift of prophecy, because “the one who prophesies speaks to people for their strengthening, encouraging and comfort.” (1 Corinthians 14:3). Indeed, the meaning of Pentecost in Acts 2 is explained using Zechariah’s words that “in the last days... your sons and your daughters will prophesy” (Acts 2:17-18). Prophecy is not only listed in the fivefold giftings of Ephesians 4, but also within Paul’s gift-lists of 1 Corinthians 12 and Romans 12; “If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith” (Romans 12:6).

The example I like the most is found in Acts in the person of Agabus. We encounter him twice. The first is in Acts 11:28 where he prophesies (accurately) that a famine would spread over the whole Roman world. This prophecy prompts the Christians in Antioch to “provide help for the brothers and sisters in Judea.” Our second encounter with Agabus is in Acts 21:10 where he binds his hands with Paul’s belt, as a speech-act, and declares “The Holy Spirit says, ‘In this way the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles.’” It is an accurate warning, it steels Paul’s resolve, and he sets his face for Jerusalem.

It is this form of prophecy that I recognise today. Some would assert that prophecy of this sort is now only expressed as preaching and exposition of Scripture. I don’t disagree that preaching is often prophetic, but I don’t apply the same restriction. Certainly Agabus was doing something different than delivering a sermon.

What I do see are members of God’s people who are moved in a prophetic way to *speak truth, guard values, and provoke movement*. Oftentimes (but not always) their ministry is exercised through insights, understandings, and knowledge that

are also ministries of the Holy Spirit. Sometimes it is a prophetic word for the whole church or for a congregation. A lot of the time it is for a person or family, and the spiritual insights express a profound and personal care in God's heart for the people who are being addressed.

The thing is, of course, that like every exercise of every gift in the church, it is done by fallible people. I have come across prophetic people (in the broadest sense) whose passion has turned into anger, bitterness, or even self-protective apathy. I have come across prophetic people in this narrower sense, who have acted impulsively, immaturely, and without due care. But I have also come across flawed evangelists, preachers, and pastoral carers!

Sometimes prophets get it wrong. And this informs the second part of your question: How do we weigh prophecy?

Firstly, we must recognise the final step in my movement from broad to narrow. There is one more sense in which we use the word "prophecy" and that is with regard to **AUTHORITATIVE PROPHECY**. This is, as you allude to in your question, related to the authority of Scripture.

In the Old Testament God ordains certain people to act as Prophet (with a capital P) to his people. Like every prophet, they speak truth, guard values, and expect movement. In the sense we mean it here, however, these things come with the weight of divine imprimatur. The truth that these prophets spoke was of such weight, that they came to be recognised as authoritative instruction to God's people, and applicable outside of their original context. Their utterances were proven by accuracy, adversity, and consistency; they were true, they were often true despite the resistance of the people who were meant to hear them, and they were consistently true. Take a look at Elijah and Elisha (in 1 and 2 Kings) and the written-down prophecies of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the rest. You will find a consistent exhortation based on the

promises of God and the identity of Israel as God's covenant people.

Any other form of prophecy that does not heed this authority, therefore, is suspect. Ultimately, such "prophecies" are a rejection of God's promises and the call of the covenant, and end up being a rejection of God himself. I don't mean the sort of times when a "prophetic word" is given and it's a little bit haphazard and not quite holding the sword of God's word by the correct end. I do mean the sort of times when we hear "prophetic" words that seek to place us over and above the Scriptures, rather than under them to be shaped by them. This is not fanciful. I have heard people say "the church wrote the Bible, the church can rewrite it." More gently, but perhaps more insidiously, I have heard people exhort that to step away from the Bible is to embrace a positive trust in the immediate inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Such an exhortation is not only self-defeating and self-serving, (it asserts that we cannot trust the Holy Spirit to talk to anyone else, including those who came before us in the biblical era), but cannot avoid undermining the (historic) promises of God, and our identity in Jesus as God's covenant people. Such things are, by definition, false prophecy.

Beyond assessing prophecy by the authority of Scripture, however, it comes down to common sense. Each of us ministers according to the diverse gifts of the Spirit. Each of us started off immature and green, and (hopefully) we have grown in maturity, capacity, and ability. Young prophets need to be guided, just as new pastoral carers, and apprentice preachers. That guidance is not only about things like technique, but about deeper things of identity: a pastoral carer needs to identify when they are risking codependence, a prophet often needs to discern between godly zeal and the churn of their own brokenness. We give more weight to a seasoned, mature prophet, and generous attention and care to those who are first stepping out in faith to offer a word. We embrace all with a

caring, loving, edifying community which desires everyone to grow in gifting.

For my part, I have appreciated when people have called me out on my own brokenness – it was motivated (usually) by a desire to see me heal and grow. In turn, I always try to keep an open door with prophetic people. Sometimes, having received “a word”, I might even say “I’m not sure you’re right, can you go back to God and seek more insight.” Or I might say, “I think you’re holding some truth there, I wonder if you need to hold it some more until God releases you to speak it, and shows you what to do.” Or I might say, “I think you’re catching a glimpse of something, but you need to go through some of your own fire before you can fully grasp it, or have the authority to speak it.” Hopefully, at the right time, these are constructive things!

Prophecy best works when the prophet is in “in the family.” There they have the freedom to speak prophetically, and the context in which it can be weighed up, clarified, and responded to. I have seen big meetings set in one direction, suddenly shift as a gentle but powerful word was shared.

Again, it’s common sense: The mature prophets I know have been through the fire, they have had their edges knocked off, and you can see the fruit of the Spirit in them as well as the prophetic gift. Younger prophets tend to catch the big picture (“God is calling us to love!”) and the more mature prophets begin to get a track record of well-hearted Jesus-honouring specific accurate words.

And this is how I weigh controversial prophecies about things like Brexit and Trump. Is it lined up with Scripture (e.g. are they blessing what cannot be blessed, trying to trump the Bible with their own agenda)? Are they speaking gently, from maturity, or grandstanding out of brokenness? Is the word hope-filled or fear-mongering, even if it is a “hard word”? Is it a word from them alone, or do I see the “family” moved? Is

there accountability and relationship and a willingness to “let it go” and weigh it again? These, I think, are questions of common sense more than anything else.

In the end, which was the point of the original blog post, we need our prophets. We need them in our world and society. We need them in the church. We need them in our lives. We need God’s word.

The Trouble with Prophets

At some point, we all stagnate, and we collectively lose our way. It’s a kind of law of entropy that applies to community, society, and every human organisation. At this point we need our prophets.



A wise person once told me about the lifecycle of every organisation. It begins with **Vision** and purpose and values, which then attracts **People** to pursue the **Actions** that will further the cause. To do it well, these people organise themselves and develop an **Institution** with all its necessary bureaucracy and systems. At this point, things are humming along; we have Vision + People + Actions + Institution all working in harmony.

Invariably, however, the **Vision** begins to wane. Generations shift, priorities diversify, and what was peripheral begins to displace the original heart. **People** are still involved, at least initially, but as the purpose and point becomes less

clear, their energy and numbers lessen. At some point it becomes hard to maintain the **Actions** for which the organisation has become known. All that is left is the **Institution**, and nothing much more.

We've all seen it, board meetings run by the last people standing attempting to do something for a long-lost reason. When we begin to lose the people, we try to put back the people: "Let's appeal for volunteers, let's twist some arms!" When we begin to lose activity, we try and put that back: "Let's do what we did before!" When it's just the institution left, we get tired and fade away. Without a restoration of vision, and purpose, and values, it all begins to stagnate.

This is why we need prophets. They're the people who kick back at the status quo. They're the ones who remind us, "This is not who we are!" They're the ones who guard the values. They tell us when something has become an edifice which needs to be torn down, or when the small and emerging needs to be protected at all costs. While others are caught up in the here and now of activity and institution, or even the present needs of the people, they are the ones who extrapolate the trajectory to its natural consequence, and dare to say, "We should stop!"

We need them. But, to be honest, in my experience, we don't often like them. And we tend to ignore them, condescend to them, or even mistreat them.

Those who attend to the **People** may write the prophetic person off as being harsh and uncaring. Those who attend to the **Activities** and functions, may resent them as a spanner in the works, a stumbling block in the way. Those who attend to the **Institution**, may push them away as rebellious ingrates intent on tearing things down. Sometimes there might be a modicum of truth to their assessment of the prophet, particularly if the prophetic person has not been wise in their dealings. But the prophet is still needed. Or else we

will die.

I've come to this thought partly through a recent series we are running in a small group as an introduction to the Old Testament. We've just come to the prophet Elijah, who prophesied in Israel as King Ahab turned the nation (with all its people, and purposes, and institutions) away from the ways of God. In the face of Ahab's idolatry, and cruelty, and injustice, surely Elijah is a voice of reason, a voice of compassion, a voice of hope in the midst of despair. Yet how does Ahab greet him, when they meet in 1 King 18:16?

"Is that you, you troubler of Israel?"

You see, Ahab turns it around, and the prophet becomes the "troubler."

At some point, we all stagnate, and we collectively lose our way. At that point we need someone to exercise the gift of troubling us, whether we like it or not. Let us not be like Ahab.

Or consider the prophet Jeremiah. The word he brought from the Lord was about passing through the necessary fire of God's judgement. Against those who declared there would be victory, Jeremiah stood and announced defeat! He wrote to those who had been taken away by the invading Babylonians, and he did not stir them to resistance or to recapture the glory they had lost; he urged them to submit and settle down in a foreign land (Jeremiah 29), until they were led of the Lord into restoration.

No wonder they tried to kill Jeremiah! His words were tantamount to sedition. He was trying to shift aside the very substance of the edifice that they had become. You can imagine, even the most soft-hearted listener, walking away from Jeremiah, shaking their head as if to say "Mate, you've gone too far. Don't try and tear us down."

At some point, we all stagnate, and we collectively lose our way. And at that point we need someone willing to show us how to start again, or how to get back to the foundations. Some of what we have built may actually need to fall, lest we end up clinging to dust. We need our prophets. Let us not be like the people of Jeremiah's day.

It's the same today, you see. There are prophetic people throughout the breadth human experience. They dissent against the status quo. They cannot help but speak. It's not just in the churchy world. We have prophetic people insisting that a status quo that leads to climate change is untenable and immoral. We have prophetic people persistently whispering #metoo, niggling and nagging, troubling us, until we notice.

We need them.

Over the years of church leadership, I've been engaged with by many prophetic people. I've tried to listen to all of them. Some of them have been downright wrong; they manifested their own brokenness more than anything else. I hope I didn't just write them off and that I took time to listen. Some of them go off a little half-cocked; they come with a passion and a fire, but we had to dig for the kernel of truth together. I hope I helped them as they helped me. Others are "uncomfortable but wise"; they shared words and spoke of truth that I would rather avoid, but shouldn't. I have learned to value these people, and to ensure they have access and means of communication with me.

Above all, the thing I have learned is this: Most prophetic people are sweet-hearted. They are moved by a longing for things such as shalom peace, or true unity, or justice and truth, and sweet whole-life worship. They see what's in the way of those things, and long to see things move.

They are sweet-hearted, yet I have seen them torn down, and named "arrogant", "overbearing", "destructive", and "hard-

hearted.” I have seen them condescended to, allowed enough voice so that no-one can say they weren’t allowed to speak, but then dismissed. Sometimes their very presence draws out the hypocrisy in the room, as they bear the brunt of it. Those hypocrites tend to be us. If I heed the words of Jesus in Matthew 23:37 it would reveal our heart that would rather kill the prophets and stone God’s messengers than heed or hear. The most prophetic person this world has ever known was crucified, by us.

Which is why prophets weep, and hide in caves. Some of them retreat into silence, and burn until it hurts. Some get together amongst the few who understand; the prophetic voice is reduced to an echo-chamber, and the rest of us miss out. Prophets break. Prophets *feel* the pain of the world. Yet they would point us to life, deep life, true value, and a vision of hope.

Without them we stagnate, and we collectively lose our way.

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Q&A: Can we ignore the pagan background of Lent and its other difficulties?

Sarah asks:

Hi Will,

I have always been muddled by Christian encouragement to observe the man-made tradition of Lent. I have been asked

plenty of times over the years what I am giving up for Lent and I have been asked to teach about Lent in Sunday School and declined. I have attended wonderful teaching sessions that have been given the title "Lent Bible School" and I have been to Lent prayer meetings. This year I had a mailing from a brilliant Christian publisher promoting a book called "Lent devotions for the whole family".

I have never been directly taught that I must observe Lent by Christian leaders, but perhaps even more confusingly, I have been encouraged to think about my personal response as if observing Lent is assumed. It obviously retains its place on the church calendar despite the Reformation and my experience is that it is referred to in passing when we are entering Lent, as if we all know what we should be doing with it.

So, my question is can we ignore the background of:

1. The paganism at the root of Lent from Christianising pagan traditions;
2. The penance involved in confessing sin to a priest to receive absolution on Shrove Tuesday and be shriven by a sinful man rather than God; and the penance also behind self-denial for 40 days.
3. The debauchery associated with partying before Lent seen in Mardi Gras, and, although not celebrated like Mardi Gras in our culture, a feasting before self-denial;

Why are we so casual about all of this? Can we reject what is bad and leave something good? Is it a matter of personal conviction?

Or do we have a duty to actively teach that Christians should avoid anything to do with Lent, to reject the traditions of men?

I'd be really interested to hear what you think. Thank you.

P.S. So you have an idea of where I'm coming from, here is a

summary of my concerns (feel free to cut this if you publish my question!) [I've included some of these by referring to them in my answer -Will]

[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/>]



My last opportunity to be a part of a pancake race, in 2018, was (ironically perhaps) affected by inclement weather...

Thanks Sarah,

As always, really appreciate your questions. Let me respond to your questions from the last to first.

First up, can I agree with you that Lent can seem a little weird. In human terms, it's about a big party on a Tuesday, some inconsequential "self denial" for a few weeks, before suddenly being allowed to eat chocolate again! What on earth has this got to do with how I follow Jesus? It's similar to the experience I had as an Australian on my first Christmas in the UK: what on earth does a bunch of sweets stuck into an orange with toothpicks have to do with the birth of this world's Lord and Saviour!? We're a weird bunch, us Christian folk, sometimes.

But to turn to your comments. You conclude by asking the foundational question of whether we should actively avoid Lent because we ought to “reject the traditions of men.”

My general response to this general question connects with general idea of whether we take a “proscriptive” or “prescriptive” view of Scripture. (It’s actually a false dichotomy, but I’ll get to that in a minute). A *prescriptive* view is, basically, “unless the Bible commands it or explicitly allows it, it is wrong.” A *proscriptive* view is, basically, “unless the Bible prohibits it or explicitly commands avoiding it, it is fine.”

The excesses of the prescriptive view (e.g. not being allowed to sing any other songs except biblical psalms, because anything else is not prescribed) are obvious. When Spurgeon writes (in the supporting material you gave), “When it can be proved that the observance of Christmas, Whitsuntide, and other Popish festivals was ever instituted by divine statute, we will also attend to them, but not until then,” he’s pushing a prescriptive barrow, at least to some degree. In the end, I find this hermeneutic unhelpfully inapplicable to the real world, and I don’t see the New Testament writers, or Jesus himself, treating Scripture (our Old Testament) in this way. **Just because Lent isn’t commanded (or even mentioned) in Scripture (and therefore, necessarily, derives from traditional and cultural practice alone), doesn’t mean it’s bad!** This is my first point.

We might ask, though, whether there is a *proscription* in Scripture that applies. You refer to “traditions of men” and this phrase connects us to Colossians 2:8 – “See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on *human tradition* and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ.” (NIV). Paul’s concern here is the *misuse* of human traditions, as a means of mediating God’s favour (“Do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a

New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day.” – Colossians 2:16, NIV). If we elevated seasons and traditions to this level of importance, we are, in effect, denying (rather than trusting), Jesus: “These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.” (Colossians 2:17, NIV). **In this regard, any *insistence* on observing Lent is, in my mind, wrong, it is *proscribed*.** This is my second point. If someone doesn’t observe Lent (which, to be honest, has included myself on many a year), that does not mean they are doing anything wrong or “lesser.” Your provided quote from Spurgeon has it right, perhaps: “We ask concerning every rite and rubric, ‘Is this a law of the God of Jacob?’ and if it not be clearly so, it is of no authority with us, who walk in Christian liberty.” We have *liberty, freedom* as to whether or not we observe Lent.

However, as something of a post-post-modernist (read that carefully!), I’m wary of the propositionalism behind the proscriptive-prescriptive dichotomy. Applying Scripture is not so much about distilling it down to clinical propositions, it is about being caught up into the narrative of God’s action in the world. Unlike a postmodernist, I don’t hold that this narrative is ultimately determined by my own experience of it, which locates truth in myself. Rather, God, the foundational “Other”, has acted in this world, has spoken his Word of Truth, ultimately in Jesus, as recorded in Scripture, and the history of our planet is moved along according to his story. This connection with divine narrative has both proscription (so that I don’t set my course against the movement of Jesus) and prescription (it compels me to seek the face of Jesus and follow him actively). It doesn’t work if I don’t trust him. It’s into this mix that I look at Lent and wonder if it is cutting across God’s story, or getting me closer to the current, so to speak. Most human traditions do both in some way, and we must exercise discernment.

Which brings me to your next questions (as I work through them

backwards). You ask “Why are we so casual about all of this? Can we reject what is bad and leave something good? Is it a matter of personal conviction?” **To which I say yes, it is a matter of personal conviction. And yes, there is some good that we can accept amidst the bad that we must reject** (I’ll unpack that below). This is my third point.

As to why we are so casual about it... well, in my experience I find that the Christian propensity to be casual about much of what we do is, sadly, not to be underestimated. I long for us all to long for more depth, more truth, more awareness of God (crf. Ephesians 1:17). Regrettably, most church dynamics reward exploration of the stable shallows of human experience rather than the rocky, lively, depths.

Let’s conclude, then, where you begin, by looking at Lent itself.

Firstly, I’m not surprised that there is an intermix of Christian with pagan themes in the tradition. Following the kenotic dynamic of Jesus himself (Philippians 2:1-11) – i.e. the mode in which God *comes to us* – at our best we have always gone to others. At our best, we bear witness to Jesus in, with, and through the language and culture of those to whom we go. Of course, this doesn’t mean an unquestioning embrace of all that is around us, but it does mean speaking into it, reinterpreting it, turning its witness towards Jesus. Paul’s use of the “Unknown God” in the pagan tradition of the Athenians is the sort of thing I’m talking about (Acts 17:16-34). The fact that Lent, connects with Easter, connects with Passover, connects with lunar calendars, connects with Spring and fertility (Lent literally means the season in which the days LENGThen) doesn’t surprise me, or overly concern me. As with each season, moment, or event in the world around us, our job (and our joy) is to discern how it can best bear witness to the new life of Jesus.

Secondly, I’m not surprised that there are connections within

the tradition related to Roman Catholicism, in both its pre- and post-reformation forms. Lent is part of the liturgical calendar that is embraced by a number of traditions. And yes, there are connections with some Catholic practices which I, personally, don't find helpful. I agree that "use up all the food before Lent, have a party, and then make sure you go get your forgiveness from the priest" is both real in folklore, and unedifying for the gospel. But the question is whether these unedifying things are integral to the tradition, or simply misuses of it, and I lean towards the latter. Every generation must discern when its traditions still hold positive meaning, and when they must be allowed to fade away. In the history of Protestantism, many traditions have been done away with, but Lent has (by and large) persisted, and that gives at least some indication that it can have some positivity for the gospel when not misused.

For myself, I find Lent helpful. The aspect of the tradition I draw upon is twofold:

1) The tradition in the early Church was to have baptisms on Easter Day. The candidates were led through a season of catechism (teaching about faith in Jesus) and this culminated in a season of fasting before the day of celebration. I therefore use this season to be deliberate about catechesis, both for myself (I hope to reinvigorate a discipline of personal bible study) and for my church (where I might often offer a course or sermon series that is designed to dig a little deeper).

2) The tradition is that Lent is a season of *fasting*, and in this way it is *penitential*. This doesn't mean *penance* in the sense of alleviating guilty, but it does mean renewing and reflecting upon my *posture* before God. Have I become self-confident, worrisome, fearful; have I excused my own sin, rather than dealing with it? This is not dour or morose, although it can be solemn and sometimes painful; it is a desire to be deepened, stretched, extended. It's a desire for

growth. It's a season for finally dealing with stuff that should have been dealt with before. Psalm 139:23-24 says the following, and it is the essence of what I use Lent for. I put aside the distractions and anesthetic practices (this year, it is giving up the netflix binge!) which I hide behind, and ask Jesus to continue to deal with me and sanctify me:

*23 Search me, God, and know my heart;
test me and know my anxious thoughts.*

*²⁴ See if there is any offensive way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.*

Of course, this could be done at any point in the year, but here is a season which not only acts as a reminder and stimulus, but helps me share that journey with my brothers and sisters as we coordinate the rhythms of our year. There is no compulsion (there is freedom), and it is in accord with the "Lenten tradition" in its best sense, serving gospel purposes. I "do" Lent.

What disheartens me the most is not that Lent exists as a season, nor some of the bad things that have attached to it; rather it is when we use it to dive into the shallows of popular Christianity and play the game of mere lip-service: The giving up of chocolate, "because it's Lent", rather than for any deeper engagement with our walk with the Lord; the use of Ash Wednesday as an excuse for a party the night before. Shallow Christians do that, and shallow churches promote it that way. It's at that point the tradition becomes an idol – the use of God to worship an empty practice, rather than the use of the practice to worship God. Maybe, at that point, the prophetic act is to give up the tradition totally; I think you are alluding to this, and it is entirely valid. As for myself, at this point, I'd rather capture it for Jesus, and have it speak again of the deep work of Word and Spirit that is so needed in the hearts of his people.

Thanks for the question.
W.