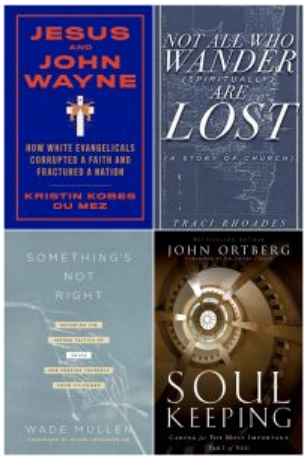
For When The Church Hurts You – Short reviews from my reading pile #1.



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

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

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

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

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

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

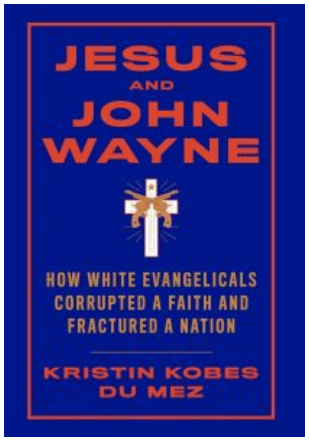
Similarly, by God's grace, we have encountered a number of others who have fallen under the wheels of the religio-industrial complex. Amongst their experiences are the effects of being silenced, ostracised, manipulated, or made subservient to a form of mission that is more about ecclesiastical ego than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

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

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

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

---



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

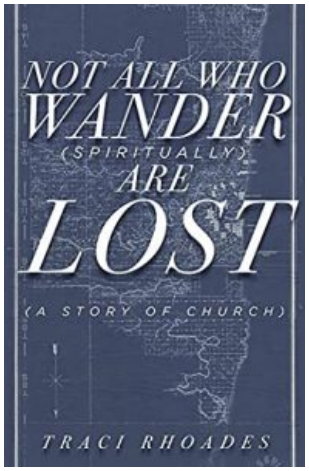
mission-hearted sacrificial church-planting pioneers, I encountered the sadness of a Christian sister who shrugged and said that it was not a room she was welcome in.

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

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

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

I read this book, and feel homeless.



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

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

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

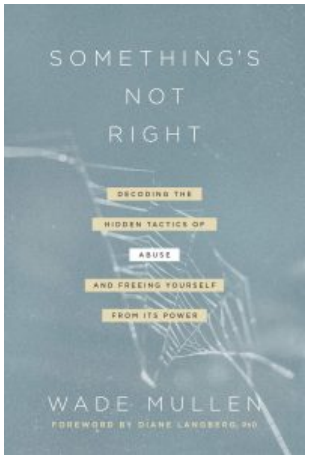
The anecdotes from others are more helpful, and a bit more raw and real (e.g. "a story of a woman who had to leave for a time in order to let Jesus heal her heart.", page 29). Nevertheless, this whole book is more like an easy-listening podcast than a serious grappling with serious things; it's a glorified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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

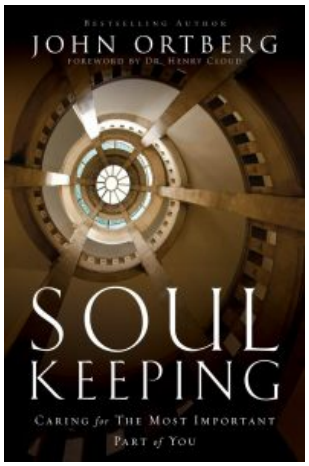
I read this book and I feel validated.

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

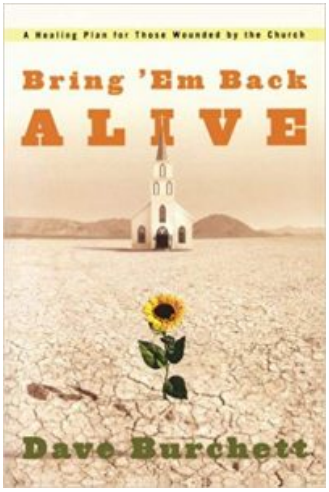
That is grace. There's a reason why it's called the "dark night of the *soul*" (see chapter 16, page179). God moves, so that we might follow. That is love; it is how he woos us and draws our attention to himself. And therefore pain builds maturity, and hope. Ortberg puts it like this: "There will be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

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

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

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.

Q&A: How do we bring about cultural change in our churches?

A Friend asks:

My question is, how do we, who are in Christian leadership encourage and bring about cultural change in our churches? I am sure that it is already a question that you are grappling with and probably have no easy answers to.

In the past I would have simply said the main component is leading by example. Lead and others will simply change. In recent experience I would say that, unfortunately that only seems to work when the people around are teachable and actively pursuing growth.

Previously I would have also said teach from the Scriptures and let them speak for themselves. But again, I have seen time and time again a misunderstanding of those Scriptures even when it is spelled out in black and white.

And then what do you do when there are different cultures in the mix? I don’t mean racial cultures, but church cultures. How do we authentically worship when so many different priorities are given to the various components of what constitutes a worship service or Bible study? How do we

encourage true disciples in a way that is maintainable in Western society and yet still confronting, challenging and deep?

[This is a Q&A question. You can submit a question (anonymously if you like) here: http://briggs.id.au/jour/qanda/]

Thank you, dear friend. What a joyfully fundamental question! Answer this, and you will have answered the cry of the heart of every pastor who takes their calling seriously. Books have been written about this. Even Archbishops' Councils wrestle with the conundrum – I reflected on a recent attempt at "Setting God's People Free" not too long ago.

You're right. I am grappling with it, and I don't have any easy answers. There *is* a whole bunch of theory out there about changing organisational culture etc. In my mind, however, it's like mentoring and spiritual direction; it relies on *discernment* more than anything else and therefore can only truly be known in context and in practice, not in theory. So here follows some random thoughts from what I've seen in the real world:

The **first thing** I want to do in response is to affirm the premise of the question. *Cultural change* is to a church what *sanctification* is to a person. Just as individuals Christians are called to grow into maturity in Christ, so churches are called to grow into maturity as the *Body* of Christ.

The road of maturation for an individual is, necessarily, "a long road of obedience in the same direction" (I think I'm quoting Eugene Peterson there). It involves confronting one's

past, one's brokenness, one's fears and pains. It involves repenting of sin, and seizing the lifegiving ways of God with a firm faith in his grace. It can involve times of trial and failure, as well as the temptations of both success and boredom. This is something we all understand.

That leadership task is first and foremost not about the "professional" tasks of institutional refurbishment and resource management, it is the "pastoral" task of leading a *community* on a long road of obedience. As I said many years ago, this means "we have to talk about the real issues – rebellion, idolatry, lack of belief, hard-heartedness, and unfaithfulness – rather than the excuses of broken systems."

More recently I have reflected a little more deeply on this. Culture itself can be conceived of in terms of the "stories we tell each other", i.e. it is grounded in a *narrative* that encapsulates the collective worldview. A *racist* culture will share a narrative about the inhumanity of different ethnicities, for instance. Similarly, the grounding of an individual person's life can also be thought of in terms of narrative: what story helps us conceive of ourselves within the world? This is why we consider things like "self-talk" when we help an individual to reflect. Individuals and churches share a *narratival world,* i.e. a *cultural context*.

The Christian task is to make sure we are operating out of the *correct* narrative so that we conceive of ourselves and the world according to God's *truth*, and where we find ourselves in *his* story. In fact, we can think of the conversion experience in terms of an exchange of *stories,* where we die to an old narrative of sin and self-centredness, and are raised to find ourselves in another story in which Jesus is King, and we are forgiven and embraced. I alluded to this in a recent sermon on wisdom in Job, if you have some time to listen.

The sad fact is, in these terms, some churches, as much as any individual, need to convert to Christ. That is

the *cultural* change that is needed. And it is an ongoing journey. As the saying goes: "I AM saved, I am BEING saved, I WILL be saved"

But your question is **<u>how</u> do we bring cultural change about?**

<u>Firstly,</u> understand that just as with individual sanctification, it is not entirely humanly possible. "Work out your salvation with fear and trembling," Paul says in *Philippians 2*, "for it is **God** who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfil his good purpose." Work it out, because God is at work in you, *and* in the church. Or as someone wise I know says, "We are Christ's church, and **he** will grow us."

This isn't a cop-out, it's a *focus*. And the practical application is this: **It begins with worship**. Sort out the *upward* focus of your life first, work on the *upward* focus of the church first, and all manner of other things will sort themselves out.

This rubs up against one of your subquestions about authentic worship in competing church cultures. One form of worship can only compete with another if we are worshipping the wrong thing! Yes, we need to attend to our attitudes, and recognise different styles, and compromise a bit about liturgical rigour. But I've only ever seen this work when the attitude has been "we are all here to help one another to worship Jesus."

<u>Secondly</u>, your negative experiences don't mean you had the wrong idea. You talk about leading by example, and about preaching the word. Sometimes they don't seem to "work." That doesn't mean that they are the wrong thing to do.

In fact, they are the right thing to do. Our *story* changes, our *culture* shifts, as individuals and as churches, when we pay heed to what the Lord has to say to us. He has spoken the words of life, and by God's grace, that word is present for us

to read, hear and receive. **Preach the word**, brothers and sisters! Do it without fear or favour, without tickling ears. And by some miracle, and the power of the Spirit, that word will take root and shift our story.

Similarly, **preach with your deeds**. As Paul exhorted *Timothy* set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity.

In both cases, of courses, the preaching may seem fruitless. People are hardened to the word, unteachable; they mishandle the Word of God to suit their own ends. You can't do anything about that. But we preach the word both in and out of season.

As a leader, of course, there is a sense in which we must go ahead. We must preach to ourselves first. We must attend to our own sanctification. It is often the case that churches "catch up" to the culture of their leaders. Unless the leader is willing to attend to the long walk of obedience in themselves, they are likely to be content in their existing *church* culture where their insecurities are stabilised and their sins are acceptable.

So it's an absolute imperative: Sanctification begins with me. Personally, I have to say that to myself, even today.

Thirdly, you ask about encouraging "true disciples… in a way that is maintainable in Western society and yet still confronting, challenging and deep?"

In my experience, what you are hoping for here is blocked by the blindness of the culture that you're hoping to change. In the West our culture is significantly shaped by consumerism and individualism. When the term "discipleship" is used in churches it has often been emptied of its real meaning and held captive by the culture; it is reduced to a product by which consumer Christians are given "nice ideas by which I might build a successful spiritual life." It has elements of truth, but it has a self-righteous posture; there is an

incomprehension that we might have to have our story shifted.

We need to cut across that dynamic somehow, and sometimes we need to be upfront about it. The gospel is encouraging and lifegiving, and it is about being *unmade* as much as it is about being *remade*. The gospel is about conviction and confrontation as much as it is about affirmation. We can set expectations, explaining to people that we are expecting to be *undone* by God, in fact *hoping* to be challenged and confronted with ourselves. Otherwise, what's the point?

We also need to give them the tools to proceed. A good tool is the ability to question our own cultural assumptions, to question ourselves. Help them to affirm what can be affirmed and question what needs to be questioned. Push for the story underneath the top layer. Ask "why?" a lot. "Why do we do that? Why, really?" What's under the facade? "We have words to explain ourselves, but what do we *really* believe?" It's the difference, as they say, between "espoused theology" and "actual theology". The exposition of Moral Therapeutic Deism is an excellent case study in this; it is the *actual* religion of much of the Western church.

Above all, this is a pastoral task. The incarnation teaches us about how God enters into our world in order to bring us out of darkness into his wonderful light. We must have the same attitude of Christ. Enter the culture. Affirm what can be affirmed. Work out where the ugly bits rub against the gospel, and then bring that light to bear, beginning in yourself. Walk the hard road, and when others join you in it, rejoice.