

The Church as Lazarus – Following Jesus in the Emotional Landscape

Discipleship is not an academic exercise. It is often, substantially, a journey through an emotional landscape. Sometimes those emotions are negative and dark: grief, suffering, pain.



This shouldn't surprise us. After all, to "abide in Christ", is to be *his*. To *follow* him is to live as Jesus did (1 John 2:6) and Jesus was, and is, and was prophesied to be a "man of suffering and familiar with pain" (Isaiah 53:3). Discipleship is about "sharing in his sufferings" (Romans 8:17). There is a *cost* to discipleship, as Bonhoeffer (amongst many others) would say.

I'm not trying to be morose. There is joy, peace, fulfilment, *happiness* even, on the road with Jesus. Laughter abounds. But these are not grounded in some sort of avoidance or escape, but are comingled, intertwined, with all that comes. The joy breaks out from the grief. The tears are wiped away. The peace is beyond understanding. Glory sprouts from the suffering.

A part of my emotional landscape recently has been grief. I have *grieved* this week for some reason. I was confronting myself. I was encountering some of those pains, regrets, fears, and worries that get pushed down until they pop up like fungi in the damp of one's hidden soul.

I was also grieving for the church. This has been a week in which the ugly side of us has been on display, for various reasons. The human sexuality “debate” has yet again be broached. I have had over twenty years of experiencing this particular no man’s land, and yet the vitriol, bile, and lip-curling condescension has shaken me. But my reflection hasn’t really been about #LLF (for those who know what I’m referring to); it’s a more general weariness. We love the church (local and large), and that involves care and belief. Yet the church often looks more like a phlegm-hacking pale-skinned shadow than the vivified vocational verve of the gospel we follow. Amidst self-referential ear-tickling comfort-mongering machinations I have also seen my own disintegrating compromises, conflicting responsibilities, and sheer plain finitude. For better or for worse, realistically or otherwise, that has been my recent emotional landscape.

So where is Jesus on that path? I’ve been finding him in a play of two parts:

The first part is an insight from my wife, Gill. This is not a surprise; she is regularly insightful. She took me to **the story of Lazarus**, who Jesus raised from the dead, in John 11:1-44.

The story may be familiar to you. Jesus is friends with Lazarus and his two sisters, Mary and Martha. While some distance away from them he learns that Lazarus is sick. He declares a hope that “this will not end in death” but it will “be for God’s glory” and his own. He delays his return. Lazarus dies. “Lazarus has fallen asleep; I am going to wake him up”, he says, “Lazarus is dead, and I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe.” There is hope; but Lazarus *is* dead.

Martha comes out to meet him. She presents a rational, theological engagement to Jesus. When Jesus assures her that Lazarus will be raised, she pushes that hope off into an

abstract future: "Yes, I believe that we will all rise again."
Lazarus is dead, Jesus, but we get the theory.

Mary has not come to greet Jesus, but he sends for her. Mary readily emotes. She collapses at his feet, and there is a tinge of bitterness to her voice: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." It's only half a step from "Where the hell have you been! I thought we could trust you! I thought you brought hope!" Lazarus is dead, Jesus, where have you been?

Martha grieves. Mary grieves. And, even though he knows what is going to happen, **Jesus wept too.**

Here's the insight in this story for me: We are grieving for the Western Church like Mary and Martha grieved for Lazarus. Good people have been plugging away at gospel ministry for years, the church has been cared for in its fitness and its brokenness, its strength and decline. We have done our best to be faithful to our task, but in the end, we know, that none of it matters, unless Jesus shows up.

Our gospel preaching is nothing, if Jesus is not in it. Our social action. Our pursuit of what is good and holy. Our cries for justice. Our restructuring. Even our self-giving to one another in unity and peace-making. All of these virtues are not enough, except if the Spirit of Jesus be in them. There are times when we look at ourselves, locally, nationally, within our Western world and there is deathliness about us. And we *feel* the bitter tears. In that landscape, the blurted out "prayer" of the most visceral sort is: "Lord, when are you going to show up? Lord, why are you waiting? We can't change hearts. We can't overcome the power of sin. But you can! Where have you been?" We struggle to even pray "Revive us, Oh Lord" except in Martha-like abstract theory.

The church is Lazarus. And we are allowed to grieve. Yes, there is hope in this analogy, and we don't ignore it:

Lazarus is called back to life, away from the stench of death; a living reflection of Ezekiel 37. Jesus is glorified, and his people believe. And now, Jesus *will* be glorified, life will come. Yes there is hope. But let's not rush quickly there. Right now can be a time for weeping.

The church is Lazarus. And *Jesus* weeps. And that's OK.

It brings me to the second part. I have tried to imagine Jesus weeping: tears rolling down middle-eastern skin, cheeks and beard. Were they gentle tears? Or sobbing? Were they sympathetic tears for Mary, or tears of his own response, akin to the woundedness he cried over rebellious Jerusalem (Luke 19:41)?

My task as a disciple of Jesus is to follow him. How then, may I be led by his emotions? What would I learn if I could watch his passions, see his tears, and hear the prayers he whispers through salt-dripped lips? What may I glean from his demeanour when he encounters stress, grief, injustice, and utter weariness? Where can I go to *learn* from him, and be his disciple?

The gospels are good place to start. But the Scriptures also give us a fulsome emotional repertoire: the Book of Psalms.

Let me get there somewhat theologically: Jesus is the Messiah, the anointed heir of the messianic king David. David points to Jesus. The psalms of David are the prayers of David. They are the prayers of a messiah. Prophetically, therefore, they are the prayers of *Jesus*. The New Testament often uses the psalms this way. Take a look at Hebrews 1:5, quoting Psalm 2:7 – “You are my Son, today I have become your Father.” Keep reading that Psalm and on the lips of David it is somewhat pretentious, but on the lips of Jesus it is simply, right: “I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession.”

So now I can read the psalms, and hear them on the lips of

Jesus in the emotional landscape. In the psalms is faith-filled joy, faith-filled peace, faith-filled anger, faith-filled weariness, faith-filled grief. In the psalms, the Spirit of Jesus is praying, and I can *learn* from what is prayed.

I can see Jesus expressing gentle but firm defiance against political power in Psalm 2:1-3: *"Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One. 'Let us break the chains,' they say, 'and throw off the fetters'"*

I can see Jesus putting faith against fear in Psalm 3:1-3. I wonder if these were amongst his groanings in Gethsemane?: *"O Lord, how many are my foes! How many rise up against me!... But you are a shield around me, O Lord; you bestow glory on me and lift up my head."*

I can see the protective frustration of Jesus in Psalm 4:2-3: *"How long, O men, will you turn my glory into shame? How long will you love delusions and false gods? Know that the Lord has set apart the godly for himself; the Lord will hear when I call to him."*

I can hear the weariness of Jesus and a sinking into his Father's arms in Psalm 5:1-2: *"Give ear to my words, O Lord, consider my sighing. Listen to my cry for help, my King and my God, for to you I pray."* I wonder if these were in his laying-awake, or his mornings when he sought solitude with his Father.

In some psalms I think we see the prayers of Jesus on behalf of his people; the Spirit gives voice to the collective, broken, Body of Christ: *"O Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger or discipline in your wrath... My soul is in anguish. How long, O Lord, how long?"* (Psalm 6:1-3). Is this a glimpse of Christ's intercessions for us before his father (Romans 8:34)?

"O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!" (Psalm 8:1) and I hear my Saviour's delight.

Right now, anyone who cares for the Lord, and for his people, is likely passing through an emotional landscape. Here, as ever, the Lord weeps too. Here, as ever, Jesus teaches us his way.

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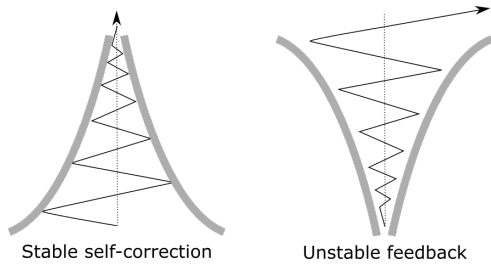
Speed Wobbles in the World and Church

I woke up this morning, the day after the 2020 US election. I'm slightly despondent because it's close to being the worst possible result. I can say that without showing political bias because there's no winner yet! It looks set to be a close, contestable outcome, and I can only see further division emerging.



I've been thinking about it: America, and the Western World, has the **speed wobbles**. Do you know what I mean by that? Speed wobbles happen when you're on a bike, or perhaps a scooter, or some other form of vehicle. At a certain critical moment there can be resonance with the bike's built-in instabilities; the bike lurches from left to right and left to right, again and again. It falls afoul of its own feedback loop of movement until it crashes and causes injury. It doesn't crash into

anything. Nothing happens to it. It crashes into itself.



The physics is graspable. A system is in some sort of equilibrium, running along smoothly until something shifts; the bike-rider adjusts for a change in the road. At this point there is always a form of over-correction. We

start heading too much in one direction, we pull back to the other, go too far, and return back towards the centre. In a stable system these over-corrections slowly diminish until the equilibrium returns. In an unstable system each over-correction amplifies the next and it goes back and forth with increasing crescendo until it all falls apart.

We've got the speed wobbles in the West. There are two over-amplified directions. We have Trumpism on the "right", pulling back from government over-reach but also towards the gutter of blatant mercantilism and nationalist oligarchy; and the Wokeism of the "left" pulling us away from deep-seated social injustice but also towards the gutter of blatant progressive moralism and enforced globalist conformity. In the end, both extremes are terrible options; all gutters connect to the same sewer. So we lurch back and forth trying to avoid both.

The Western church is another example. We've come to look like the world, and so we reflect these two extremes. The gutter at one end is caricature of "evangelicalism" and "traditionalism". The former looks like a consumer-class hypocritical industry; by way of example, take a look at the portrayal of Christian marketing in Amazon's *The Boys* and you'll wince at how it hits close to home. The latter can look like a non-benign fanaticism, complete with the funny clothes. The gutter at the other opposite end is a similar Christian veneer over the worldly spirit. It is a caricature of social activism that becomes a militant more-equal-than-others paganism, preaching a message of autolatry ("You do you, you're perfect as you are") and burning nonconformists at a

de-platformed stake. Again, both extremes are unpleasant reflections of each other.

We're not fully in those extremes of course. But we are wary of them, and usually seek to avoid them. The world is full of good people trying to put a tick in the box next to the candidate who is the least bad. The church is also full of faithful people seeking to avoid the divisive extremes, looking for a common ground somewhere amidst the encroaching shibboleths. As we search we move from left to right, and right to left. At a certain point of instability, the speed wobbles appear.

There are many factors to this instability. Social media is certainly one of them. It forces nuanced adjustments to pick a side: "Are you for us or against us? What's it going to be? If you're not us then you must be them. All lives matter. Silence is violence. Wear a mask. Don't be a sheep!" etc. etc.

So here's the thing. What stops it? Once the speed wobbles start, how do you stop them? Doing nothing is not an option. The instability of the system itself drives the over-reaction. Without intervention a rending apart is inevitable. So what to do?

Many of us have become adept at hauling back in the opposite direction to the currently favoured force. It doesn't work in the end. Usually it just adds to the instability. Many of us have tried the art of the compromise, to do our best to speak of the common centre ground which will "dampen down" the volatility and bring stability. But that won't work if that shock absorption is no longer part of the system. No bike rider can maintain a constant series of equal-but-opposite reactions when it all goes wobbly.

What is needed is a force, a movement, a direction that cuts across the oscillation. On a bike you get rid of the speed wobbles sometimes by slowing down, but also by speeding up, in

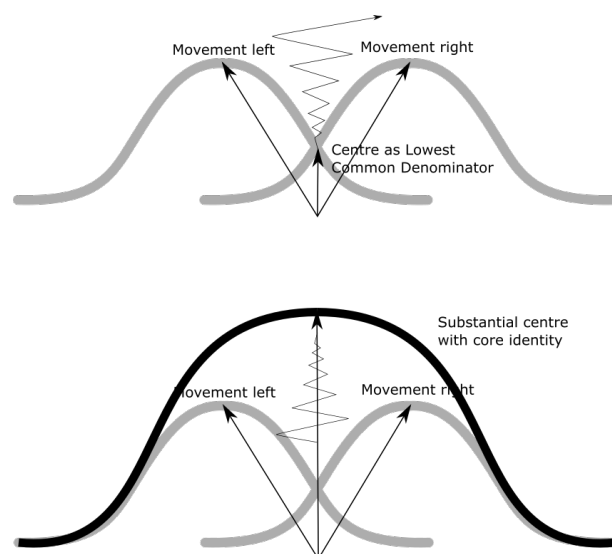
the *forward* direction.

This is how it used to be in the political sphere. I heard a commentator the other day who had studied political manifestos from the 1950's. Political rivalries were just as impassioned then, but this was the observation: It used to be that the political differences were about different ways of applying the *same idea* but now they are about two competing ideas that are different altogether. That common *idea* was the stabilising forward force.

Finding that common idea is hard. It's not enough to long for it in the abstract, to speak of wanting *unity*, or *peace* for instance. Unity around what? Peace in what sense? These things only really exist as an appeal to something deeper, a sense of *identity*. In the UK, for instance, there was once a sense of what it meant to be "British." For better or for worse, the notion of "For King and Country" was a unifying stabilising common ground. The Americans have had the "Free World" as their identity marker. They may not be *great* identities, but they are stabilising ones.

In the church we have a similar difficulty. Our common ground has become abstract. We reaffirm that we are the "body of Christ" and that we "see Jesus in each other, no matter our differences." Such articulations have an admirable intent, but they only work when there's substance underneath the form. Who actually is this Jesus that we can conceive of and see in each other? If we can't agree on that big idea the instability only increases.

It's not enough, you see, to maintain the status quo. You can't re-centre an unstable system simply by reflecting the lowest common denominator in the middle. Look at what the church *does* talk about, either collectively or through its public persons, and you'll see what our lowest common denominator is: climate change, feeding the poor, and generally being good citizens. We agree on such things. But what *aren't* we saying? That's what is missing in the middle.



A broad church, well centred, is a thing of beauty, but that's not the same as a church with two centres and an overlap in the middle. We can do our best to maintain that overlap, but it *is* in an inherently unstable system. The speed wobbles will start, and appeals to unity in the abstract are not enough to provide the centring, stabilising force.

I'm not sure what a positively centrist message looks like in the political world. I'm actually entirely open to the possibility that we've gone past our Commodus moment. It may be that the demise, decline, and fall of the Western world is as inevitable for us as it was for Rome, once it lost its way and didn't know who it was anymore. When I pray for our leaders in the political sphere, and other places of influence, this is the heart of my prayer: Oh Lord, give us the grace of a leader with a positive vision of how we can come to a substantial centre.

I pray something similar for the church world. But, of course, here there is a clearer kerygma. The centre has always been about Jesus. It's always been about worshipping him, learning from him, following him, as we gaze upon him through the revelation of God's word. There is no other Christian identity

other than Jesus. When we are defined by him, in the ancient posture of sanctification rather than the presumption of our self-made existence, we are more and more his.

It is therefore, of course, why as Christians we are now looking to Jesus who is King of Kings, and Lord of Lords, able to still the nations (Psalm 46:10). As the political world around us wobbles into a collision with itself, we, once again, entrust ourselves to one who is a rock on which to stand.

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 reponse 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 *possiblities*. 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.

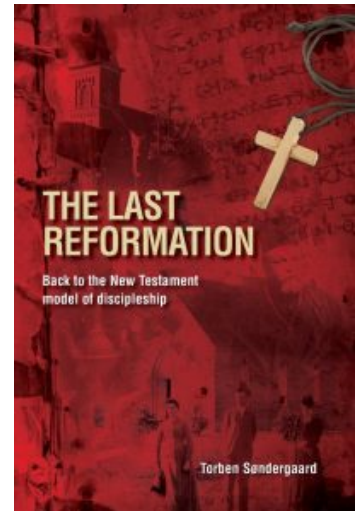
Across the spectrum, it has this in common: Lord, your world. Lord, your terms. Lead us, in this moment, lead us. It's all about you, Jesus.

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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Review: The Last Reformation – Back to the New Testament Model of Discipleship

What's gone wrong with the church? Surely, new life in Jesus and the Kingdom of God are so much more than stultified, sanitised, professionalised institutions? How do we organise ourselves so that there is more freedom for the Holy Spirit? How can we be the true embodiment of the world-changing gospel like we see in the early church of Acts?



That's what this book is about. Torben Sondergaard, a Danish evangelist with a growing influence and impact penned this book some years ago. Amongst other things, it is required reading for those wanting to be trained under the imprimatur of his movement.

I have just finished reading it and I am left uneasy. This is a *divisive* book, for which Sondergaard is unapologetic ("We are going to be accused of destroying the church.", p13). He interacts with some important issues. He taps into a disillusion amongst some of Jesus' people: "There are many who are dissatisfied and frustrated because they are not being used and are not growing in the things that God has put in them" (page 96). His response, I think, is sincere. In the end, however, it is flawed.

I've had to check myself continually. Perhaps my unease is appropriate; as a vicar I represent the sort of churchiness that Sondergaard is rightly critiquing. Maybe I'm biased as Sondergaard attempts to deconstruct my current way of life.

After all, I'm a professional churchman; the church institutions house and feed my family. My expertise, my career, my "marketable skills", let alone my sense of vocation and divine purpose are woven into a form of church from which Sondergaard is pulling loose threads. So I've had to question myself: is my unease with this book just a form of self-preservation? I don't think I've fallen into that trap.

After all, there's a lot that I like. As he assesses the *problems* we face, I am often nodding my head. I love the church. It can and is a location of great blessing. Nevertheless...

1- Church culture often obscures Jesus rather than revealing him. Sondergaard writes, "We do not need to impose our church culture on people in order to make them 'proper Christians.' Rather, when we remove today's church culture, we will see that people are more open to God" (page 21). I, personally, know what it's like to find myself steering someone who is new to the faith away from the church world, and towards contexts where there is a deeper sense of spiritual family and where Jesus is acknowledged and relied upon. The way we do church doesn't always have the presence of Jesus as a factor; it can be a toxic and neglectful environment.

2- Our churches appear spiritually stagnant and ill-prepared. "I look at churches in the West, I can see that they need to be refreshed" (page 23). I have felt this as a pervasive sense of dissatisfaction in the status quo. Even when we are blessed and fruitful, we cannot simply stop as if we've "made it" and be satisfied with the way things are. "*Semper reformanda*," our forefathers said; the church needs continual reformation. We are not pursuing Jesus enough. We are not prepared for difficulty and adversity, let alone persecution, should it come. "The big churches will suddenly become small when they find out that following Jesus has a high price, a price most of them have

never been willing to pay" (page 25).

3- Hierarchy (both formal and informal) beats discipleship in many churches. When I hear stories of people being raised up, nurtured, covered, cared for, and released, they often attend to people and relationships that are usually (but not always) *outside* of church structures. Here there is true accountability, an honesty and freedom to share difficulties, and receive help. However, within the structures, the stories are often different; they tell the tale of arbitrary hoops to jump, faceless people making decisions for you and not with you, power plays and spin. This is where accountability is reduced to box-ticking and number crunching; no-one "has your back" and, rather than freedom to grow, there is a subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) demand for complicity and conformity. When Sondergaard speaks of how "mature Christians get locked up in a hierarchical system that stops them from making progress" (page 43) he touches on these things. I don't fully agree with how he deals with this phenomenon, but it's right to raise the issue.

4- Church culture often has a worship problem. The so-called "sacred-secular divide" is much deeper than the "Monday-Sunday" separation that is usually used to describe it. Rather, it's a cultural *demarcation* that defines claims on our time, money, and *life*. It's as if we say, "Sunday mornings and 10% of my income, and some other contribution belongs to God and the church and the rest is mine." Churches buy into this culture in order to facilitate collective goals and providing a means for people to contribute their bit. This isn't a bad thing, but it can be self-defeating. Regarding tithing: "all our money belongs to God and not just ten percent... tithing can actually keep people in their comfort zones" (page 61). Indeed, true worship is about being a "living sacrifice", a hundred holistic percent. It's about giving Jesus *all* of our lives

– our money, our time, our family, our identity, our career. This is how we worship (Romans 12:1), but we rarely nurture it in our church contexts.

5- Church culture often has a flawed sense of growth. I trained during the latter part of the Hybels-esque “church growth” era, shaped by being “seeker sensitive” and offering “homeogenous unit” activities for the different blocs of children, youth, men, women, marrieds, singles etc. Growth was about presenting a pleasant and non-threatening atmosphere and getting people in the door and onto the seats. Some good things have come from this mindset, but in general it is a failed experiment that breeds passive consumer Christians. I’m not sure it’s necessarily true that “pastors and leaders... are mostly focused on how to get non-Christians to come to their church” (page 65) but I agree that “they should be looking to God to find the best way to equip the Christians who are already there” (pages 65-66).

I even resonate with some of Sondergaard’s experiences. Gill and I have been pioneers and church planters, and we have seen, time and time again, how something exciting and new can easily fall back into the rut grooved out by expectation and weariness. “This is not different at all! This is exactly how we held meetings in the other church.” (page 37).

Moreover, Sondergaard has given me some helpful food for thought. His treatment of fivefold ministry is generally very good (and even lands the apostolic in the right place at 1 Corinthians 4 – page 120). His emphasis that the fivefold gifts are most effectively expressed as *itinerant ministers equipping local churches* is intriguing, and I’ll give it further thought.

Yet despite all this, **I am still uneasy about this book. His solution to these problems is flawed.**

Sondergaard's solution is his titular "last reformation". He sees the need for a dramatic shift of the size and significance of Luther and Wesley, that would, unlike them, "transform our whole church *structure*" (page 12, emphasis mine). This imagined realignment of structure is shaped around his understanding of the early church in Acts: smaller household-sized communities, with a flatter organic leadership structure, that fosters spiritual activism (including the supernatural ministries of healing the sick and casting out demons), and which avoids the hierarchy, inertia, and control of larger organisations.

It's a worthy vision. Structurally, it seems very similar to the house-church movement of the '70s and the broader cell-church movement in general. It resonates with the "missional discipleship" movement of the '00s, and the emphasis on "oikos"/household sized "missional communities." In terms of missional ethos, it is similar to contemporary embedded communities such as Eden and parachurch organisations such as YWAM bases.

So again, **why am I uneasy?** I've distilled it down to three concerns:

1- His vision is self-defeating. There's more than a hint of pathos at times ("I felt we could not put up with the rejection any longer." page 41). Believe me, I *get it*. But a firmer foundation is needed. Here's my concern:

The early church model in Acts is intriguing and attractive. However it was far from perfect, even in those early primal years. Read the first few chapters of Revelation and you'll see how spiritually ineffective they could be! Moreover, the evolution of the early church, even before Constantine, was not due to a hardening of heart away from the will of God. It was moved by a desire to remain true to Jesus (apostolic succession, canon of Scripture), to flourish in faith amidst persecution

(liturgical rhythms, appointment of pastors and leaders etc.), and to combat heresy and defend belief (trinitarian theology, apologias). Inevitably these lifegiving currents were, naturally, *systematised*. The assumption that the early church was great and it became increasingly bad does not entirely match reality. Sondergaard doesn't seem to grasp this. e.g. He makes the curious observation that in the early Church "No one but Jesus was the Head of the fellowship, and it was clear to everyone" (p135), and doesn't recognise that the Holy Spirit manifested that leadership through Councils of elders (Acts 15) and the sending of corrective letters from people in authority (Paul's epistles)!

Even if Sondergaard were able to re-manifest that early church purity (on his terms of purer structures), it would inevitably (on those same terms) apostasize, just like the early church. You see, it's already happening. Sondergaard is growing a movement. He has written a definitive book that is essential reading. He is playing the part of apostolic overseer and doctor-theologian. Within this movement, he defines what is orthodox, and what is not. As the movement grows, it will require *infrastructure* to organise and (ta da!) *hierarchy* to ensure that the core values of the movement are held and acted upon. None of that is bad! As long as you realise that this is what is happening and play your part well. I'm not sure he sees it.

What I think I see here is something I've observed in other contexts – a form of *ecclesiastical nihilism*. "I'm not your pastor", someone says by way of pastoral advice. "I'm not the leader", they say, leading the way. "We trust in the Holy Spirit alone," they say, by way of articulating the Holy Spirit's guidance. "We are not full of ourselves", they say, by way of self-description. The only way forward is to not pretend: you *are* a pastor, a leader, a discernor of God's will. You do help shape our identity and place;

now do it well!

Similarly, to Sondergaard, who imagines when people “once again begin to meet in homes and on the streets where there are no big names, programs, or organizations” (page 83) while writing a book with his name on it, offering pioneering training programs, and fronting an organisation: Don’t pretend you have discovered a pure form of doing church (which would necessarily need to be purer than the early church that, eventually, ended up with us!). Don’t pretend you have somehow avoided the pitfalls of structure and hierarchy and the pressures of collective identity; admit that you’ve actually got those things... and do them well. Stand on the shoulders of those who have literally done before what you are doing now. A little humility would not go amiss.

Relatedly,

2- He’s honed in on the wrong problem. The problem is *culture* not *structure*. His critique of church *culture* is worth hearing. But his *structural* proposals are not novel, nor are they *essential* to the changes we need.

Sondergaard often plays existing church systems as a straw man. For instance, he rightly envisions a situation when smaller communities of faith can reproduce themselves quickly and efficiently. But he asks things like this: “Why are the churches so afraid of new fellowships if all the numbers show that this is the solution to reaching the world?” (page 45) *They’re not!* They might not be very good at it. And the big monolithic techniques of resource church mega-plants may not be my cup of tea... but *everyone* recognises that “church planting” or “fresh expressions of church” (when defined well) are essential to the way forward. And some even manage to do it.

Similarly, “Imagine that a matured married couple... come to

the pastor and say: 'We've really been seeking God, and we feel that it's time for us to move on... We would like to have your blessing.' Do you think the pastor will bless them?" (page 54). Well, yes! Sondergaard implies that the pastor would withhold the blessing in order to manipulate continued membership and financial support. Really? If that happened, that wouldn't be a structural problem, but a competence problem! And if it was pervasive, it would be a *cultural* one.

In every structure, I can find (or at least imagine) a church culture which alleviates all the concerns such as spiritual stagnation and lack of discipleship. I even see existing churches doing things that Sondergaard aspires to. e.g. I know of a church who is more than "happy to see people start their own [church] families in the neighbourhood instead of waging war with them." (Page 51, NB. it's either "happy to see" or "waging war" – there's the straw-man false dichotomy again). Similarly, in every structure I can find – including house church movements like Sondergaard – I can find spiritual lethargy and even toxicity.

We don't need to reform the skeleton of the church – it's structures – we need to reform the *heart* of the church. We need to fall in love with Jesus again, and to embrace that love and devotion individually, collectively, corporately. I have encountered that heart in the smallest of home churches, and in the biggest of cathedrals; in the most organic of prophetic communities, and in the most structured of liturgical settings. It's not the structure that matters, it's whether or not those in the structures devote them to Jesus or not. Sondergaard briefly touches on this peripherally ("many... issues would be resolved automatically if people would simply repent and get saved", page 134), but it is the heart of the matter.

3- His vision is too small. Reformations of the church have

both discontinuity (a big shift from what was before) and continuity (it is still rooted in the ancient works of God). Sondergaard emphasises a discontinuity and achieves it because he takes a narrow field of view. His awareness of the nature and character of the Body of Christ doesn't see the beauty and depths of existing traditions.

I can see how Sondergaard's vision would rest well within some of the charismatic and pentecostal traditions. But even I struggle with his over-realised eschatology. I am no cessationist. I've got a lot a time for "Naturally Supernatural" activities, when done sensitively and well, such as Healing On The Streets and Healing Rooms etc. But you don't have to look too much at Christian history to recognise that those who say "Jesus is coming back very soon, and *I am convinced that we are the ones who will see His return*" (page 15, emphasis mine) should be heard with a raised eyebrow.

Similarly, he is has a closed hand on some issues that should be held more loosely. For instance, he anathematises infant baptism (p15). This is fair enough, I guess (I am open-handed on this issue!). But to assert that it is important to some churches merely because it "brings in money" (p57) is not only insulting, but blatantly untrue. I doubt any church I have been a part of has even broken even on providing the ministry of Baptism, let alone made a profit.

All this does is narrow the vision. Is there a place in this last reformation for my reformed brother and sisters, who emphasise the study of Scripture, and value the expertise of learned teaching? Is there a place in this last reformation for my contemplative and traditional brothers and sisters, who value how the Spirit has actually been at work in the church over the last millenia or two, and who draw upon those good, ancient forms? I can't really see it.

In conclusion, this is a difficult book to read. For those who are in some sort of denial about the state of the church, it would be usefully provocative. But my unease at his “solution” remains.

Sondergaard says he is “not out to criticize pastors but to see them as victims of this system. I feel sorry for them, and *I want to save them from it*. The problem is not them, or any other people! No, it’s the whole church system we have built up.” (page 55, emphasis mine). I appreciate much of this sentiment. I have been a victim of the system, and, I suspect, a perpetrator of it as well. I love the church, in, around, and beyond the institutions of which I am a part. Which is why, occasionally, I look at it and despair. But I only need one Saviour, and he is the church’s Saviour as well.

Q&A: Should we make more of Baptism in the Holy Spirit?

MK asks:

It’s taken me an age to get to this point, but certainly for some, baptism is just the start. Simply recognising another broken person wants to be fixed. Sometimes, of course, a recognition that parents see their child needs to be fixed which the child confirms later. There is another baptism we need, that from the Spirit. This one must necessarily come later as our brokenness is being mended. Nonetheless it seems crucial. We don’t seem to make too much of this in ‘official’ church, but should we?

[This is a Q&A question that has been submitted through this blog. You can submit a question (anonymously if you like)

here: <http://briggs.id.au/jour/qanda/>

This is an interesting question, and it goes where angels fear to tread... to some of the most precious parts of our Christian experience, and the words that we use to describe them. As a church we *should* be making more of these experiences, but we often struggle for the language, and the courage.



There is a pastoral dilemma, you see. In our insecurities, often the exuberant expression of one person's testimony can feel like an invalidation of our own. And "Baptism in the Holy Spirit" is fraught in this regard. I think what you have described is an excellent expression of the Christian journey, but we must be careful in how we talk about it... but sometimes we are too careful and we avoid the difficult conversation.

Here's the problem: the word "Baptism" is being used in multiple senses – to speak about both the *beginning and promise* of the Christian journey, and also for the ongoing *experience* of the Christian journey.

Baptism rightly describes the beginning. Baptism with water in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is a sacramental *beginning* of the Christian journey – it so symbolically embraces the promises of salvation and covenantal inclusion that we can look upon it as the foundation on which our faith experience is built. It incorporates a "fixing" as you say, either for ourselves or as an embrace of our children.

That "fixing" includes the understanding of being "born again" (Baptism symbolises a dying and resurrection), of having the Holy Spirit come and dwell within us (an important declaration in the act of *confirming* one's Baptism), of being *regenerate* by the grace of God, and of taking our place within

the Body of Christ.

Our Baptism with water is therefore much more than “John’s Baptism” of repentance only. Yes, it is a sacramental symbol of repentance, but it is also a baptism *into Christ*. John himself says “I baptised you with water; but He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit” (*Mark 1:8*), and he is referring to the new *beginning* that Jesus will bring about.

Similarly, in Acts we see a couple of occasions when new Christians had only received John’s Baptism. Paul’s experience in Ephesus in Acts 19:1-6 describes this:

While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus. There he found some disciples and asked them, ‘Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?’

They answered, ‘No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.’

So Paul asked, ‘Then what baptism did you receive?’

‘John’s baptism,’ they replied.

Paul said, ‘John’s baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus.’ On hearing this, they were baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied.

Paul baptises them “in the name of Lord Jesus”, as the foundation and beginning of their faith, and the Holy Spirit coming upon them is part and parcel of that. Amongst the baptised people of God there are no gradations, and no one is a second class Christian needing another dose of God’s grace, if you know what I mean.

It’s in this sense of beginnings that I prefer the use of the word “Baptism.” The “official church” does talk about this lot, and usually reasonably well.

Nevertheless, “Baptism in the Holy Spirit” describes a genuine experience, which I share and affirm, even if I might use slightly different language. And, yes, it’s usually something we don’t talk about well at all. Indeed, often we prefer stability and order, and so we inhibit new experiences, misconstrue and misunderstand them, or seek to restrict them to controllable structures and programs. In so doing, even when well-intentioned, we discourage growth and maturity.

The genuine experience that we’re talking about here takes many forms. It invariably involves a sense of God being closer than he has before, of being filled, touched, moved, even overcome by the Spirit of God. It often comes with a sense of freedom, restoration, healing, and sometimes an increase in boldness and courage. I think this is the sense of “being mended” that you are talking about.

It’s an experience that for some can be almost spontaneous and unexpected, for some it comes as an answer to prayer in the midst of trauma or darkness, for some it’s because someone has laid hands on them, others have experienced it in ecstatic worship, others have found an encounter in times of deep contemplation. It is an experience that is often accompanied by the manifestations of the Spirit that we see in Acts and read about in places like *1 Corinthians 12* – tongues, interpretations, prophesying and all the other sorts of gifts of the Spirit.

For some it is a unique one-off phenomenon, for others it’s like a new chapter in their “deeper walk with thee.” It is not wrong to call it a “baptism” with the Holy Spirit, in the broad sense of an “immersion” in the Holy Spirit, a filling up, an overflowing etc. But I try to avoid the “baptism” language so as not to confuse with Baptism as the sacrament that speaks of being included in Christ.

The two senses come close together sometimes though. I have observed that an experience with the Holy Spirit can feel like

a fundamental new beginning. I observe this in three ways:

1) Sometimes, in people's experience, their actual Baptism was not a matter of faith. It had meaning, but it was the meaningfulness of ritual, social expectation and so on. In experiential terms, their Baptism was akin to "the Baptism of John." The subsequent encounter and "Baptism with the Holy Spirit" coincides with a coming to faith. They have an experience of regeneration and renewal and the presence of God. Theologically, I would affirm this as a "coming to life" in faith of what was previously done in ceremony. In experience, it would feel like a new beginning, an initiation in itself.

2) Sometimes, it is an experience that precedes receiving Baptism in water. People come to faith, and encounter the Holy Spirit in a real and tangible way. In this experience the encounter is a new beginning, and the sacrament is a means of catching up to what God is doing, just like in *Acts 10:47*.

3) For others the experience so marks a significant step in their walk with God, that it feels like a new beginning, a refreshing, revitalisation of faith. This is especially so if there had previously been resisting of the work of God in their lives, or if they had received a fundamental shift in their understanding of God through the reading and hearing of Scripture, prayer, or prophetic word. This sense of a new beginning can also come with the "laying on of hands" in a commissioning into a ministry (e.g. *Acts 13:3*) or to impart a spiritual gift (e.g. *2 Timothy 1:6*). In all these cases, the encounter with the Spirit is a *significant moment*, and precious, but it's a part of the journey, a fresh chapter in something already begun. Something broken has become significantly, experientially mended.

In all of these experiences I don't *mind* if people call it a "baptism in (or of/with/by) the Holy Spirit" but often I find other language to be more helpful.

But your question is a necessary provocation. Whatever language we use, we *must* make more of these experiences. We must talk about what's it like to journey with Jesus through the realities of life. This *experience of God*, as opposed to the mere theory, must be part of our preaching and teaching, our praying, our sharing, our testimony, our pastoral care, our intercession etc. We must be willing to pray for and help people encounter the Holy Spirit in their lives in real and substantial ways, and help provide the language to describe it.

Instead, it seems to me, that our tendency as the church at large is to practise a form of ongoing abandonment as we act more like a boarding school than the family of God: We'll give you some rites of passage, teach you some theory, and expect you to act your part – but for everything else you're on your own. "Discipleship" in this caricature is a classroom, and "vocation" is about appointment to house captain or something.

Rather the Holy Spirit calls us to an intimacy with God and a vulnerability, a depth that can we come to share with one another. As we receive him, are "overcome" by him, and yes, in that sense "baptised" in the Holy Spirit, we come to see God, and see one another. We walk with each other, share those experiences of brokenness and restoration (this is discipleship), and we call out to one another what we can see the Holy Spirit is doing and gifting in us and through us (this is vocation).

So yes, we should make much more of these experiences, providing the context, the space, the protection, the understanding, the language, and the simple *care* for people to grow and encounter God. Sometimes I think we would rather be organised, but at what cost?!

Thanks for the question!