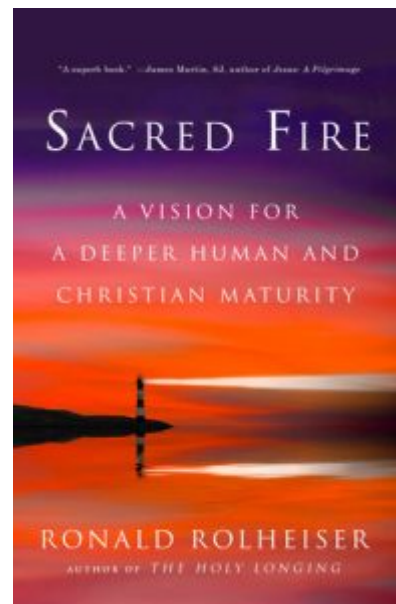


Review: Sacred Fire – A Vision for A Deeper Human and Christian Maturity

Like many life-long Christians, my formative years were shaped by speakers and writers fanning the flames of zeal and purpose. We wanted to know God's plan for our life. It was about learning our gifts, keeping pure, and pursuing Jesus for the life that lay stretched out before us. We would change the world!



There's nothing wrong with that. Three of my four children are now, officially, young adults, and I want something similar for them. Opportunities lie open before them. They don't fully realise their sheer *potential*. So push into Jesus, equip yourself with his Word, become familiar with his Spirit, find healing for childhood hurts, and launch forth! "I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one" (1 John 2:13).

We all grow out of our youth and into our adult seasons. And the discipleship that once formed us no longer fits as easily. We try and make it work. We take our sermons and channel our inner youth: fan your passion into flame, live life for Jesus! We mentor others by setting and pursuing goals, just like we did when the vista was young and wide. And we do the same with our churches: we place our communities on an horizon of opportunities, articulate some mission *action* goals and motion for them to launch forth like the youth we once were.

Occasionally it works.

Our forms of discipleship are youth-shaped, even as we hit our middle age. They don't hit the mark. This is where we need the sort of wisdom Ronald Rolheiser offers in *Sacred Fire*.

Rolheiser's framework is simple. He identifies three stages of discipleship in our walk through life:

1) **Essential Discipleship:** *The struggle to get our lives together.* This is the youth-oriented form of discipleship with which we are familiar. It's for when we are *searching*, "for an identity... for acceptance... for a circle of friends... for intimacy... for someone to marry... for a vocation... for a career... for the right place to live... for financial security... for something to give us substance and meaning – in a word, *searching for a home*" (page 16, emphasis mine). "Who am I? Where do I find meaning? Who will love me? How do I find love in a world full of infidelity and false promises" (page 17)? We are familiar with these things.

2) **Mature Discipleship:** *The struggle to give our lives away.* This covers the majority of adult life, and begins when we become "more fundamentally concerned with life beyond us than with ourselves" (Page 18). The transition from young adult to responsible parent typifies the entry into this stage of life. "The struggle for self-identity and private fulfillment never fully goes away; we are always somewhat haunted by the restlessness of our youth and our own idiosyncratic needs... [However the] anthropological and spiritual task will be clear: How do I give my life away more purely and more generously?" (page 18). This is the substance and focus of the book.

3) **Radical Discipleship:** *The struggle to give our deaths away.* As we age, the default line shifts a second time. The question is no longer "What can I still do so that my life makes a contribution? Rather, the question becomes: How can

I now live so that my death will be an optimal blessing for my family, my church, and the world?" (page 19). Rolheiser touches on this at the end.

Perhaps the quote from Nikos Kazantzakis on the very first page, sums it up: Three prayers for "three kinds of souls".

- 1) *I am a bow in your hands, Lord, draw me lest I rot.*
- 2) *Do not overdraw me, Lord, I shall break.*
- 3) *Overdraw me, Lord, who cares if I break!*

It is the second of these that we need to explore.

In this stage of life, the aspiration is not towards heroism, but towards *eldership* (page 64). Rolheiser doesn't go into it, but my reflection is that eldership has diminished in our collective imagination. Take any popular movie (my thoughts jump to *Happy Feet*) and it pits zealous youth against repressive elders: youthful explorations of real experiences against the oppression of traditions and the narrowness of a self-loathing parental generation. It's an effective narrative; even now, my heart flutters with some longing to be the heroic youngster. But I'm getting old. I also long to cover, care, nurture, and father. I yearn to pass on some of the depths and ancient learnings that I discovered on my own youthful quests, and which I have digested over many years.

Eldership is valuable, so how do we disciple people towards eldership? How do we disciple people in their maturity?

This collision occurs in the church world. We promote (and fund) *avant garde* pioneering programs and strategies that promote church growth. There's a risk of it being seen as just a young person's game. That isn't the case. I realised some time ago, that I simply ain't the green young church planter I used to be (thank God). I'm not going to be able to grow a church, or pioneer something new, through my waning youthful zeal. It will only come through growing into and resting upon

a developing *eldership*. That's the discipleship I need, and Rolheiser has helped me.

I no longer need to explore paths of youthful imagination. I need to fathom the depths of when the patterns of life are "pretty bland, or flat, or overpressured, or disappointing" where underneath the (relative) stability of life "is an inchoate, nagging disquiet, that is stirring just enough to let us know that someday, though not quite yet, there are still some deeper things to sort out and a deeper journey to be made" (pages 65-67).

One of Rolheiser's more powerful images is that of the "honeymoon." Perhaps it sums up the dynamics of a mid-life crisis!

Our route to maturity generally involves a honeymoon or two. Honeymoons are real, are powerful, and afford us, this side of eternity, with one of the better foretastes of heaven. Because of that they are not easy to let go of permanently. Inside of every one of us there is the lingering itch to experience that kind of intensity yet one more time..." (Pages 69-70)

We could be driven by that allure for honeymoon excitement, not just in terms of marital fidelity, but simply as a fantasy of what "success" means to us ("grandiosity" as Rolheiser calls it). Starry-eyed youth run to their honeymoons, thinking to have escaped loneliness. In our mature years, we learn to embrace a "new loneliness, that of seeing and accepting the actual limits of our own lives, a pain intertwined with accepting our own mortality" (page 74).

If there is one bit of wisdom to dwell on from this book, this is it.

All discipleship equips, and Rolheiser does just that: He unpacks workaholism. He looks at "acedia" – that noontday

listlessness and ennui mixed with a daydream of regret and jealousy (pages 79-81), and the answering hope. He looks at forgiveness and how it is needed at the most existential level (page 83). He even unpacks all the seven deadly sins in helpful and insightful ways! Sloth, for instance, is not laziness so much as wilful distraction (I'm looking at you, Netflix). He teaches us to pray (page 169ff), with emotional honesty and life-giving rhythms. And he reminds us to bless and not curse (page 212). Chapter 8 sums it all as "ten commandments for the long haul."

It was gratifying to find myself familiar with some of what he expounds. Gill and I have reflected for some years on how life is so often a divine call to *wait*. Our world is now-and-not-yet, and this can feel like Easter Saturday, or the days between Ascension and Pentecost. Just like Rolheiser, we also have drawn on the road to Emmaus (page 98ff) to grasp the depression and despondency of what this can feel like, despite the (unrealised) company of Jesus on the road. We too have encountered the painful compulsion of Peter (page 105), as we are bound to the one who has the words of eternal life, despite the costly road on which we are led and where often we don't wish to go. In the words of one of the songs that inspired me in my youth, but which I didn't understand until I had lost some blood: **"I know who I am, I know where I've been, I know sometimes love takes the hard way."**

In all good discipleship, we need to be both affirmed and stretched. This book stretches us towards the giving away of life that defines our age and stage. We are stretched towards kenotic living, and laying down of pride and judgementalism, superiority, ideology, and personal dignity (page 124). We are compelled to imagine living as ones baptised into Jesus, not just baptised into John: i.e. baptised into "grace and community" and reliance on the one who can do the impossible. Pentecost comes not to the self-hyped and activated, but to "a church meeting where men and women, frightened for their

future, were huddled in fear, confusion, and uncertainty, but were gathered in faith and fidelity despite their fears.” (page 131). We cannot live our lives out of “sheer willpower” (page 130). I know; I tried that once ten years ago and I broke.

The way of mature discipleship is to give away our life. It is Paul sharing in the sufferings of Christ. It is Mary, watching the crucifixion, not running, but absorbing the pain and refusing to “conduct its hatred” (page 149). Sometimes, the Lord places us as walls upon which the ugliness of a broken world breaks, and upon which the sulfurous sharpness of an idolatrous church sloshes. In our youth we might fight back. But in our maturity, we absorb, we bow, we break, and all that the stooping does is put our faces closer to the Rock on which we rest.

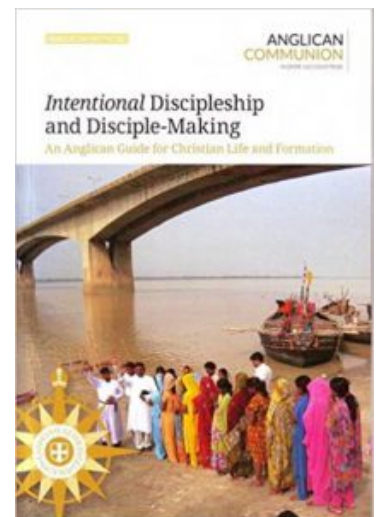
That is not the same thing as despair. Our muted helplessness is not a passive resignation, but its opposite. It is a movement toward the only rays of light, love, and faith that still exist in that darkness and hatred. And at that moment, it is the only thing that faith and love can do. (Page 149)

We need this sort of discipleship. We need this sort of imagining of what mature leadership, mature lives, mature ministry looks like. We need a church that can cope with being out of control, that can lean into decline and devote what is left as an offering of blessing. We need a church that finds faith in pain, and just simply *is* as the winds and waves of the world wash around.

We need to inspire our youth, and delight in their zeal (and their pretensions at times). And us older ones need to aspire to eldership, and give away our lives.

Review: Intentional Discipleship and Disciple-Making – An Anglican Guide for Christian Life and Formation

The word “discipleship” has become such a buzzword in recent years that when it is used, particularly in official documents or vision statements, it’s intended meaning is not always certain.



I have a vested interest in pursuing discipleship in an Anglican context. It is useful, therefore, to familiarise myself with how discipleship is being understood, talked about, and promoted. Practical on-the-ground examples are the most valuable. But perspectives from the heights of the institution are also important. Last year’s Archbishops’ Council report, *Setting God’s People Free* pointed out that the main obstacle to discipleship is cultural intransigence. Sometimes it is possible for papers at the top to cut across the lower tides of avoidance; they can simply state what needs to be stated, even if their immediate effect is not obvious.

This small book, published by the Anglican Consultative

Council in 2016, is a case in point. It is a Communion-level, globally-scoped report. It brings some important insights, especially from the Global South. I'm finding it invaluable as I prepare some thoughts on discipleship for our Deanery strategic planning process.

It is available for download in pdf.

One of the ways we avoid a discipleship culture is by subsuming the term into our existing church culture, rather than allowing it to provoke much-needed adaptive change. That is, we undertake "discipleship activities" or, worse yet, we simply shoehorn the word "discipleship" into the description of our *existing* activities, and we quench the Spirit. In the end, discipleship is about being a disciple/student/follower of Jesus himself. If we think we can do that and remain unchanged. If we think we can avoid having our "self-identity" challenged (page 5), we are deluding ourselves. Yet we try.

Archbishop Ng Moon Hing of South East Asia addresses this symptom from the very beginning, in his foreword:

To follow Jesus of Nazareth into his cosmic reign is simply the most challenging, the most beautiful, the most costly, the most rewarding journey we could ever choose to begin... our following Jesus requires much more than the latest course or introduction to Christian living. Courses have their place... but our apostleship, our discipleship demands much more – in fact it demands everything. (Page vii)

A definition of discipleship is needed for this book to make any sense. The definition it gives is not so much *provided* as *located*; discipleship "encompasses this total God-ward transformation which takes place when individuals and communities intentionally, sacrificially, and consistently live every aspect of their daily life in commitment to following Jesus Christ" (Page 4).

This is a wonderfully Anglican way of doing it: Discipleship is not so delicately defined that it adheres to one time or place, but it is *bounded* so that we know what we're talking about.

It is also wonderfully Anglican to begin from the basis of biblical theology. Discipleship themes are quickly traced through the Old Testament before focusing on Jesus himself, with his "group of 'learners' who were selected to be with him" (page 11). The book does well to go beyond the prosaic picture of Jesus merely as pedagogical exemplar, as if Jesus is defined by his discipleship methods. Rather, the fundamentals of Christ's person and mission are first and foremost. It is *discipleship* that is defined by Jesus, not the other way around. Therefore, true discipleship bears the mark of the cross. It is much more than a spiritualised self-help program, "much more than belief and personal growth in Christian character" (page 16):

For the original twelve there was a literal journey following Jesus up from Galilee into the eye of the storm, Jerusalem – a journey marked with misguided hopes and some trepidation...: we are all on a journey, following Jesus... we are to leave things behind... we are to trust him both for our eventual arrival in the city and also for the surprising details along the way and through the desert; above all, we are to 'take up [our] cross daily' and follow Jesus (Lk 9.23) (Page 15)

From this biblical starting point, we are taken through a cursory look at discipleship in the early and historical church and arrive at a multi-faceted examination in recent and contemporary Christianity. Like the charismatic renewals of that latter 20th Century, there appears to be evidence of similarly transdenominational currents in this area. I find this encouraging.

Consequently, **this book has stimulated my *thinking*.** For

instance, there is a harmony in discipleship between *separation* (as in the monastic tradition of withdrawing from “the accommodation of Christian communities to the ways of the secular world” (page 35), or the Latin American emphasis (page 101) on “preparing Christ’s disciples to act differently”), and missional *engagement* that connects with and promotes a relevant gospel. Popular evangelicalism lacks the language to tackle this.

For instance, I found myself unexpectedly pushing back at how we describe secular “work and other human activities as a form of vocation” (page 65). It’s not that I disagree that secular work is vocational. Nor do I wish to slip into some sort of clericalism that elevates church work as somehow spiritually superior. It’s just that the language does not prevent an apparent lack of *distinctiveness* in the pursuit of vocation. The consequence is our propensity to sacralise *all work* and so fall into the *careerism* of our surrounding culture; to assert the divine right to pursue the career of my choice. Rather, the journey of discipleship necessarily moves us away from careerism; it may take us on either path of secular work or ecclesial ministry, (if we need to make the distinction at all), but whatever it is, whatever we do, it is to be submitted to the call of Christ. Our career is first and foremost shaped by our vocation, our discipleship, and not the other way around.

This book has stirred my consideration of *practice*. The way it draws on the experiences of discipleship in various parts of the world and diverse cultures is stimulating. The common threads recognise that discipleship is *holistic, communal, missional, and deliberate*. Jesus is the beginning and the end.

Churches should be assemblies of disciples of Christ and not pew-warming believers. All sermons should be discipleship-driven and not entertain spectators with feel-good sensation. Christ’s death is costly, and it would be considered worthy

if he knew that his life was laid down for people who became his disciples. It would be sad for him if he knew that it is for pew-warmer Christians. A disciple of Christ will ask, 'What and how shall I serve and live for Christ?' A pew-warmer believer will ask, 'What will Christ do for me?' (Page 89)

These experiences are wells to draw from. They help us get to some practicalities without becoming programmatic.

For instance, the importance of *cultural analysis* is present in the reflection from the Middle East. Cultural self-awareness *is* something that can be learned and practised. It is a skill that is sadly missing in much of the Western Church, an aspect of our normative missional illiteracy. The book speaks of "an adventure for the 'disciple-maker' as for the 'disciple'... discovering where the Spirit of God applauds the norms of our culture, where he accepts some norms as a fair enough starting point and where he says 'not good enough!' about them" (page 91). Similarly, the cultural questions posed by "insider movements" (page 120) poses important cultural questions that can and should be more readily asked; we are all *inside* a culture.

The practical importance of *relational* and *emotional courage* is present in the reflection from Latin America. This pushes back at the Western tendency (or perhaps it's British?) to confuse harmony with polite silence and emotional avoidance. This lesson moves away from an attitude of "waiting for someone else to solve [the] problem." Drawing upon the lessons of the Road to Emmaus, it speaks of the importance of the final movement back "to Jerusalem – to community, joy, dynamism, but also to the conflicts, to the Cross... to the crises" (page 102).

There is one significant weakness, a gap that is almost bewildering: Despite the brief acknowledgement of the

“importance of the parents’ role in teaching each new generation to walk in the ways of the Lord” (page 9, see also page 68), there is very little at all on the place of family, children and youth. The one perfunctory chapter (page 107) is insufficient. A discipleship culture is inherently *intergenerational* and that characteristic deserves more engagement. Our prevailing habit in the Western church of splitting the Body of Christ into homogenous age brackets is fundamentally antagonistic to Christ’s heart for mission. A failure to engage with that diminishes this book.

Nevertheless, the book’s ambition is valuable: It is fundamentally vocational. i.e it issues a *call* that is coherent across all Anglican contexts. Without whitewashing the “rich diversity in the understanding and practice of discipleship and disciple-making” (page 3), it nevertheless affirms a “strong intentionality” and lays it before us: “...the Church needs to be called back to its roots as a community of disciples who make disciples.”

It is therefore yet another resonance to the growing prophetic voice calling for a shift in culture. More voices are still needed.

**Holiness,
Discipleship**

Worship,

Have you noticed our tendency to *mechanise* the human and Christian experience of life?



Back in our church planting days, we noticed that much of the relevant theory viewed a new church as a *mechanism* which could be adjusted by programs and processes, techniques and good management. These things weren't bad ideas but they were more suited to expanding the *existing*, effective at cloning the sending church and often doing little towards connecting with the disconnected.

It was more useful to think of the church truly as a *plant*. Leadership would thus turn towards more organic things such as nurture and care, and a *responsiveness* that recognised that ultimately we were reliant on Someone Else to provide the growth.

One of the current buzzwords in church life at the moment is *discipleship*. The tendency to mechanise has accompanied it: discipleship is conflated with programs and processes, techniques and good guidance. Again, these things have value, but they primarily help individuals and churches expand and improve the *current, existing* rhythms of life. They are less effective in fathoming new depths of ourselves and how we are called by God. At the extreme of it, we equate "discipleship" with spiritualised self-help programs that actually hinder our call towards a richer faith, a deeper transformative trust in God.

The growing wisdom that counters this tendency places discipleship on the foundation of *worship*. This is a thoroughly biblical idea. Everything from the Ten Commandments to the Lord's Prayer and the prevailing

narratives in between acknowledges first and foremost God's Sovereignty, Lordship, and the simple *worthiness* of his adoration. It is the beginning of our response to him. Passages like Romans 12:1-2 demonstrate how the "living sacrifice" of discipleship adheres to worship.

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.

Discipleship derives from worship.

But finding the foundation of worship doesn't totally avoid our waywardness. After all, forms of worship in every tradition can also be treated mechanically and become emptied and disconnected. In the extreme, we are warned in these last days to be aware of actions that "*having a form of godliness but denying its power.*" (It strikes me as less and less odd as I get older and more cynical that the list of blatant vices that precede this statement in 2 Timothy 3 could ever have been mistaken as a "form of godliness").

What, then, does our worship draw upon?

To be sure, it is a grace of God, a manifestation of the Holy Spirit that causes us to groan and cry out *Abba Father!*.

Here, as Romans 8 shows us, is a point of connection, the "Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God." This is an organic, relational, responsiveness. Our worship draws upon a childlike reaching out to God. It is the same spirit as Psalm 42:

*As the deer pants for streams of water,
so my soul pants for you, my God.*

*My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When can I go and meet with God?*

Such a thirst for God in worship is much more than a transcendent experience or a moment of inner awareness. The framework of the Old Testament places this worship in the dust of every day, and a longing for a Torah-shaped shalom. To thirst for God, is to thirst for his *holiness*, to have his *righteousness written on our hearts*.

Discipleship derives from worship which derives from a thirst for holiness.

The renewed pursuit of discipleship is a welcome development within the church. There is a recognition that it isn't the pursuit of programs, but of cultural change. As we fathom the depths of what that means, we find the pure springs of God's glory. How do we bring discipleship to his church? We need to thirst for him first, and hunger after his righteousness.

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Review: Setting God's People Free – A Report from the Archbishops' Council

"This report concludes that what needs to be addressed is not a particular theological or ecclesiastical issue but the Church's overall culture. This is a culture that over-emphasises the distinction between the sacred and the secular

The logo for 'Renewal & Reform' is set against a green rectangular background. It features a stylized white plant with two leaves above the text 'Renewal & Reform' in a white serif font.

Renewal & Reform

and therefore fails to communicate the all-encompassing scope of the whole-life good news and to pursue the core calling of every church community and every follower of Jesus – to make whole-life maturing disciples. We will not raise up cadres of godly leaders unless we create communities of whole-life disciples.” (Page 2)

The Archbishops’ Council has released this report under the *Renewal & Reform* agenda. Hot off the presses (it is dated February 2017) it is refreshingly and provocatively titled “Setting God’s People Free” and is based primarily on the work of the Lay Leadership Task Group. It is perceptive in outlook, insightful in analysis, but self-admittedly limited in application. It provokes a degree of excitement with just a hint of cynicism.

From my “outsider” perspective, reports like these from the Church of England have stimulated and encouraged mission and discipleship in other contexts. This was the case with significant works such as *Mission-Shaped Church*. It is similar here; the leadership of the church is saying what needs to be said, giving a voice and lending language to those who desire a deeper Christian community that is more active and effective in doing the things that matter. The simple *encouragement* that this gives to those on the edge cannot be underestimated.

With my slowly developing “inside” view, these documents now seem a little starker. It is still immensely encouraging that these things are being said, but there is also an awareness of why they *need* to be said. A report like this reveals behind (or in front of) it some sense of the inertial malaise that can be found in the Church of England. It envelopes a justifiable sense of *urgency*.

So what does this report give us? It’s not really anything revolutionary. It’s a couple of things that make deep sense, and, if taken seriously, come attached with a whole bunch of

difficult but positive implications:

*This report identifies the need for **two shifts in culture and practice** that we see as critical to the flourishing of the Church and the evangelisation of the nation.*

*1. **Until, together, ordained and lay, we form and equip lay people to follow Jesus confidently in every sphere of life in ways that demonstrate the Gospel we will never set God's people free to evangelise the nation.***

*2. **Until laity and clergy are convinced, based on their baptismal mutuality, that they are equal in worth and status, complementary in gifting and vocation, mutually accountable in discipleship, and equal partners in mission, we will never form Christian communities that can evangelise the nation.***

We believe that these two shifts would represent a seismic revolution in the culture of the Church. The first is about the focus of our activity and the scope of our mission, the second is about the nature of the relationship between clergy and lay. They are both vital. And they are both rare.

(Page 2, emphasis theirs)

This is an exemplary act of ecclesial self-reflection. These assertions about church culture are based on some decent quantitative and qualitative analysis. It is a conversation that is well and truly at the missional and cultural level. Personally speaking, we have been bewildered in our observation and experience of how these issues are usually avoided or mishandled. This includes misalignment over the meaning of crucial language such as "discipleship" and "mission." This report not only clarifies terms ("Discipleship is not a course of study but is determined by circumstances", page 7) but unpacks what that clarity reveals:

Today... the Church of England finds itself in a situation where the significant majority of the 98% of people who are

not in ordained ministry are neither adequately envisioned, nor appropriately trained, nor consistently prayed for, nor enthusiastically encouraged for mission nor ministry in the ~90% of their waking lives that they do not spend in church related activities. (Page 3)

Yes, huge numbers of lay people serve in positions of influence and leadership in the church, community, workplace and society. However, few claim to have been given a theological framework or to have the confidence to express biblical wisdom, in both word and deed, in these contexts.

We will not raise up cadres of fruitful godly leaders in every sphere unless we create healthy communities of whole-life disciple-making disciples. (Page 4)

What is needed, first and foremost, is not a programme but a change in culture. *A culture that communicates the all-encompassing scope of the good news for the whole of life, and pursues the core calling of every church community and every follower of Jesus – to form whole-life maturing disciples. And a culture that embodies in every structure and way of working the mutuality of our baptismal calling and the fruitful complementarity of our roles and vocations. (Page 5)*

Our contention is that the motivation for Christian leadership must arise not from a slightly greater willingness to 'do jobs' but from a compelling and positive vision of the redeeming work of Christ for all people. It is when people become aware of the great things that Christ has done for them and wake up to the gifts that the Holy Spirit has bestowed on them that a joyful and willing leadership emerges, for it is out of communities of disciples that cadres of leaders will appear. (Page 8)

To all this I give an understated Anglican "Amen, brothers and sisters!" Here is a vision for a missional church that

resonates with our own hopes and passions.

It is not an unrealistic vision. The report is aware of “constraining factors” and rightly names as primary a “theological deficit” (page 13) of “robust and incisive... thinking” (page 14). The counter offer is a “theology of the laity as grounded in the centrality of *mission* and *evangelism*” (page 14) made with full awareness that parochialism and other factors work to prevent such vision from “achieving long-term currency, let alone significantly informing policy and practice across the Church of England” (page 14).

Mission is not about removing people from the world to seek refuge in the Church... but about releasing and empowering all God's people to be the Church in the world in order that the whole of creation might be transformed and restored in Christ. (Page 14).

I am sympathetic to, but not entirely yet convinced by, the engagement with the clerical-lay divide as a primary problem. The report portrays both sides of the frustration and that is useful: some congregations try to make their clergy into messiahs, some clergy already think they are! Nevertheless, the engagement with the issue assumes and perhaps unhelpfully reinforces the division. **After all, the clergy are a subset of the laity, not a separate category. And one of the problems in our formation of clergy is that we don't also (and especially) disciple them as people.** A discipleship culture is rarely prevented by a lack of theological knowledge; it is resisted when leaders are unable to share of themselves because of insecurities, fears, emotional immaturity, inexperience with suffering, or simple lack of exposure to the deeper things of life with Jesus.

Few churches have developed the kind of learning culture that would illuminate the resource and support that is required to develop lay people. Few churches are equipped with the kind

of 'action reflection' approaches that we see in Jesus' disciple-making and in best practice adult learning models in wider society. (Page 18)

Good reports make recommendations and here “eight levels of cultural change” are proposed (page 19). They are only really applicable to “Dioceses and the National Church”, which is understandable as these are the atomic ecclesial components from the point of view of the Archbishops' Council. I am not particularly familiar with the sort of machinations that happen at that level, but the principles seem sound: theological vision, increased lay voice, episcopal priorities, centralised resourcing, liturgical development, structural reform and so on. I'll be watching the commentary on these things with some interest.

There are two recommendations for action in the short-term that attract me. The selection of “pilot dioceses” (page 26) to model the culture has me hoping that my own Diocese of Oxford will be one! And, the provision of resources through a “national portal” (page 26), particularly “the facility for people to join small affinity/learning groups for support, discussion, and accountability” recognises a crucial lack of communal learning that *should* be happening at Parish, Deanery and Diocesan level, but usually isn't.

The emphasis remains however: *cultural change is required*. And that is a fraught exercise.

I have sat on enough boards and committees in my time to understand that clarifying the situation and identifying the problem is one thing; putting forward achievable and appropriate proposals is another. This is only amplified when the problem is a cultural one. There is always an aspect of catch-22 and chicken-or-egg. How do we use culture to change culture? Are the available options – the levers that can be pulled – able to *transcend* the culture or are they

products of it?

There are all manner of obstacles to cultural change. It will take more than this report to overcome them.

For instance, cultural change is resisted by allowing symptoms to control the remedy. Our natural tendency is to alleviate symptoms, and it is often not efficacious. Consider how the report points out that there is “no sense of any centrally-coordinated strategy for the support and development of lay leaders across the Church” (Page 11). This is clearly a symptom of something that’s wrong. But it may not follow that the answer is to rely on a “centrally coordinated strategy.”

Rather, it is likely that cultural change is achieved by some other means, which then *results* in a centrally-coordinated strategy. What comes first? Here, while not wanting to “institute a top down approach” (page 1) we still have a “clear implementation plan” (page 9) from a high-level body! Catch-22.

In general, there are other obstacles to cultural change.

There is the presumptive existent: “We exist, therefore we’re on the right course.” There is semantic deflection: “Of course we’re doing X; when we do it it looks like...” By embracing the buzzwords the real engagement is avoided. We’ve seen this happen with words such as “discipleship”, “fresh expression”, “leadership”, “vision”, “mission”, and “emerging”. Cynicism can easily abound.

I’m not sure the report totally avoids these obstacles. For instance, in trying to articulate a picture of lay ministry in terms of the “sent church” there is an emphasis on volunteerism. However, as I’ve mentioned elsewhere, there is often a cultural disconnect between the social action of individual parishioners and the movement and mission of the church to which they belong. The report mentions Street Pastors (page 10), but how much can we say that that ministry belongs to the institutional Church? There is a danger of

stealing the fruit of others in order to avoid our own barrenness.

Nevertheless, I was both encouraged and moved by this paper.

I am grateful to know that people are thinking these thoughts, and even dreaming these dreams. It's the right conversation in the right room, and it speaks a vision that needs to spread to every room in this House of God.

Mentoring, Spiritual Direction, or Discipleship

One of the most important dynamics in living churches is that of intentional one-on-one relationships that help individuals mature in their faith. We have our Sunday gathered worship times, and our small groups, and prayer triplets



and things like that, but intentional personal *investment* is invaluable. Many of us can reflect on the individuals who have invested in us over the years, be it formally or informally; they are invariably God's gift to us.

These *investing* relationships, however, are not all alike.

There are a number of words and phrases that we use to describe them. The three I want to pick up on here are "discipleship", "mentoring", and "spiritual direction".

Understanding the differences between these is important.

There is a lot of overlap, but the semantics informs the intention of the relationship. And the intention helps guide the expectations of those who are entering into it. It also allows each form of relationship to be valued in its own way.

Here, then, is how I would describe these three forms of investing relationships:

MENTORING: This is a broad category and the word has a high semantical overload. It is also the word that most readily overlaps with secular domains.

Broadly speaking, the mentoring relationship is a *reflecting* one. A mentor helps you to analyse and articulate what is already there. In mentoring, goals are clarified, actions are identified, resources are suggested. A mentor is someone to “bounce off”, to run ideas past, to seek advice from, and to approach with questions. They willingly allow their experience to be tapped.

The process is driven and shaped by the person being mentored. The mentor does not direct, and will not even provide accountability unless it is requested. The scope of mentoring can be quite small, focussing on professional life, or a particular issue or obstacle.

SPIRITUAL DIRECTION: The key to this form of relationship is in the phrase itself. It is *spiritual* in that it considers life holistically and deeply, and with particular attention to our relationship with God. It explores matters of conscience and calling, prayerfulness and petition.

It is *direction* in that the relationship is “directive.” This is not in the sense of a manipulation or domination, but in the sense that a doctor can be directive in pursuit of increased health for the patient. The direction is cooperative and always constructive.

The spiritual direction relationship is about *shared discernment*. The spiritual director assists with self-reflection but also speaks truth from a shared source of inspiration such as Scripture. The director can bring spiritual exercises, or directions to explore: forms of prayer, actions of repentance that need to be considered.

DISCIPLESHIP: For many “discipleship” is not easily grasped. It is sometimes an empty phrase that is used as a churchified version of “mentoring” or a hipper version of “spiritual direction.” However, the best framework for considering discipleship is “apprenticeship”, in the older sense in which a more experienced person shares *life* and *purpose* with an apprentice, not just vocational skills.

Jesus was a discipler. His disciples travelled with him, ate with him, argued with him, and learned from him. Only rarely did he exclude them from his activities and his time. Discipleship is about *sharing life*.

The relationship is shaped by vulnerability and openness. A way of life, and necessary skills, are passed on through allowing the other to observe and participate in the inner life that is then expressed outwardly. Vocation is not just about skills but about foundational motivations and values, about *what moves and guides and what is done in response*.

Someone who is discipling needs to be willing to open their lives and explain and demonstrate what moves and shapes them. They will find themselves challenged by the relationship, as much as they invest in the other person.

In this way the Christian discipler is not making their own disciples, but disciples of Jesus. They bring another into both the interior and exterior of how they follow Christ, and so bring others into that same “fellowship” where Jesus is the guide. Paul’s “*imitate me as I imitate Christ*” expresses this dynamic. Good discipleship therefore doesn’t create dependence, it creates *community at which Christ is the centre*.

Similarly, propagation is *inherent* to discipleship. The sharing of life includes the sharing of the discipling dynamic itself. Discipled people will find themselves discipling others, in their own way. There was wisdom in Jesus’ ways, his discipling ended up founding a movement and changing

culture.

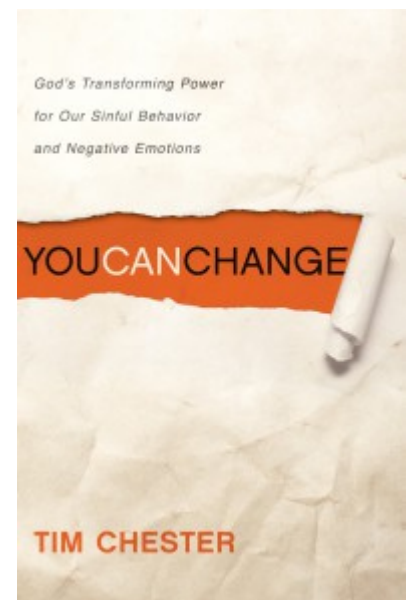
I am heartened that the Church of England, and Anglicanism in general, is (re)embracing the language of discipleship.

The General Synod report, *Developing Discipleship*, (written by Bp. Steven Croft, soon to be the Bishop of our Diocese of Oxford), approaches it with an understanding of the depths and breadths of what it means. Likewise, when we use the phrase we must realise that it is not about lipservice to a trend, nor even about advancing oneself: discipleship allows us to put all things, together, at Christ's feet. It is therefore costly, requires courage, challenges our character, and changes church culture. We should not use the word lightly, but we should certainly pursue it.

Review: You Can Change

Gill and I have read many books during our life in ministry. Many are helpful, a few are frustrating, and quite a lot are downright disappointing. But some are set apart by being theologically robust and wonderfully relevant and accessible.

These are the books that we end up buying multiple copies of and giving away.



It's been a long time since I came across a book that fits into this category. I have found one with Tim Chester's *You Can Change: God's Transforming Power for Our Sinful Behavior and Negative Emotions*. Chester himself describes it as an

“anti-self-help book written in the style of a self-help book” which is probably why I like it so much; it subverts all that pop-psych spiritualised self-discovery claptrap that’s out there.

The book was referred to me after I spoke at a Men’s Weekend Away held by our church. By God’s grace among the fruit of that weekend, a number of men are self-motivated to meet together regularly for peer-led discipleship, nurture and accountability. It was they that discovered this book. It is a fantastic resource.

The felt-need addressed by *You Can Change* is, in the broadest view, the perceived irrelevance of typical church life. In that stereotype the things of church – spirituality, theology, community – are valued and appreciated, but with a frustration that they don’t seem to *do* anything. The gospel of Jesus can, in some sense, be understood, expressed, and even promoted; and yet at the same time it can feel like nothing ever changes. The struggles, temptations, failings and flaws of our very person remain unaddressed and sometimes unabashed. The gospel moves around us at arms length and our maturation stalls in an eddy of “sinful behaviour and negative emotions.”

The beauty of Chester’s book is that he doesn’t attempt to meet this felt-need by filling the gap between gospel and personal experience with his own ten-step branded model of success-for-the-motivated-Jesus-man; he simply reflects on how to *close* the gap by applying the gospel as directly as he can to the areas of personal life where change is wanted.

From the “personal experience” side of the gap he encourages his readers to be considering a “change project” as they read; a type of negative behaviour or emotion, or “it might be a Christian virtue, a fruit of the Spirit that you feel is particularly lacking in your life” (p21). Each chapter ends with questions for reflection that allow the specific area of change to be engaged. It’s the sort of thing that is perfect

to stimulate discussion in a small accountability group. The structure of the book makes this clear; the chapter titles are:

What would you like to change?

Why would you like to change?

How are you going to change?

When do you struggle?

What truths do you need to turn to?

What desires do you need to turn from?

What stops you from changing?

What strategies will reinforce your faith and repentance?

How can we support one another in changing?

Are you ready for a lifetime of daily change?

These questions are answered from the gospel side of Chester's approach. Throughout Chester is Christocentric, cruciform, and fully appreciative of the providential sovereignty of God. Consider:

So whom do you want to be like? What would you like to change? Please don't settle for anything less than being like Jesus and reflecting the glory of God. (p20)

Of significant value is the way in which Chester constantly takes the focus of ourselves and turns us towards God again and again. This is both in what we might call the *light* sense of re-apprehending the love of God, and it is also in the *heavy* sense of realising that our sin is also God-centred – a rejection of him, a rebellion, a hardening.

Wrestling with sinful behaviours is something we all share, myself included, and this is a useful corrective. It is so easy to almost romanticise destructive habits as a *wrestle*, a *battle*, or a *proving ground*. In this way we reinforce our attachment to those destructive ways as the self-affirming thing that I must overcome, thus eliminating any reliance on

God's grace, and so once again pushing the gospel away to arms length.

We want to put things right. We want to think of ourselves as a "former user of porn" rather than a "porn addict."... For us, sin has become first and foremost sin against ourselves. If I sin, then I've let myself down. What I feel when I sin is the offense against me and my self-esteem, not the offense against God. (p25)

In this way Chester has one of the best grasps on a biblical hamatology that I have encountered. As we duck and weave, it simply pokes and prods and reminds us that its not about us. We are not the solution, we must turn to Christ because "external activities can't change us... because sin comes from within, from our hearts" (p42). We need our hearts to be changed, and that has ever been God's work. Indeed, "we become Christians by faith... we stay Christians by faith... we grow as Christians by faith," (p43) "God wants us to walk in obedience, not [our own] victory" (p118).

We're changed when we look at Jesus, delight in Jesus, commune with Jesus. But no one can embrace Jesus if still guilty of sin. And no one will embrace Jesus if still feeling the guilt of sin. So change begins only when we come under grace with its message of divine pardon and welcome. (p50)

We are changed by God's grace, we are saved and sanctified by God's grace. By God's sovereign grace the Holy Spirit simply is at work in us, to change us. Our sin as Christians is not therefore a failure to turn to Christ, its a choice to **pull away from him**. This is Chester's **central comfort** and his **main provocation**:

I used to think sanctification was a bit like pushing a boulder up a hill. It was hard, slow work, and if you lost

concentration you might find yourself back at the bottom. But it's more like a boulder rolling down a hill. There's something inevitable about it, because it's God's work, and God always succeeds. The sad thing is that often I try to push the boulder back up the hill. I say in effect, "Don't change me yet, I like doing that sin." (p55)

If we truly want the grace of holiness, we must get lower, humbling ourselves and leaving the lifting up to God. (p118)

Around this central focus Chester addresses the felt-need questions. There is very little that is novel in his approach. Occasionally he seems to be close to some of the twelve steps. At other times what he proposes is basically a form of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy. But it is all useful, and, above all, applicable.

There are two dangers that Chester avoids really well. The first is the risk of wrong **passivity** – 'if God has done it and is doing it then I don't have to do anything at all.' The second is the risk of wrong **activity** – 'if I can only fulfil this or achieve that then I will be OK.' He doesn't avoid this by silence. There are practical suggestions, and proposed exercises, elements of choice that engage with the nominated *change project*. In summary they are:

- 1. Keep returning to the cross to see your sin canceled and to draw near to God in full assurance of welcome.*
- 2. Keep looking to God instead of to sin for satisfaction, focusing on the four liberating truths of God's greatness, glory, goodness and grace.*
- 3. Cut off, throw off, put off, kill off everything that might strengthen or provoke sinful desires.*
- 4. Bring sin into the light through regular accountability to another Christian*
(p173)

It's the fourth point that has been the context in which I have read this book: the community of a men's weekend and the groups that are subsequently developing. My hope and prayer is that for the men who read this book, myself included, that grace-filled community, which is so utterly absent in our pious illiberal secularist world, will be the place where Christ is met anew, and reflected in our individual and communal life.

The Good and the Bad of the Self-Referential Church

In an article on churchleaders.com Thom Schulz talks about the growing numbers of those who are "Done with Church." His insight is the distinction he makes between this cohort and what we normally mean by the de-churched. These



are not those who have simply drifted away out of boredom or a sense of the church's irrelevance. They are not consumer-Christians, takers-not-givers, dissatisfied with the product and unwilling to ask-not-what-your-church-can-do-for-you.

Rather, these are active, involved, motivated leaders and contributors who have thrown in the towel when it comes to the church machine. They retain a strong faith, and even a strong call to ministry, but find, for some reason, that their involvement in a church organisation is no longer tenable.

As an employed pastor, whose very livelihood and expertise is dependent upon the organised church, who has invested time,

money, health, and youth into the organised church... this is a scary thought. It's scary for two reasons:

1) What does this say about the the organisation(s) to which Gill and I belong, and depend upon, not only for our bread-and-butter, but also for the way in which we seize the depths of life's purpose and aspirations? and

2) I often want to join their ranks, for I share much of the disillusion.

The second of these places me at the beginning of my thoughts into the question of what is wrong. The first of these forces us to the heart of the matter.

The question of what is wrong is a problem with two-sides, **the self-referential church:**

Here's one side of the coin:

You know it when you see it: when the organisation becomes its own ends. There is a caricature: the highly-institutionalised bureaucratic husk in which the performing of sacred rituals is the centre of life. Mission is reduced to the maintenance of those rituals and, apart from acts of service that maintain the necessary infrastructure, only passivity is expected. The time, focus, and energy of individual members, and of the collective as a whole, goes into the maintenance of the organisation's own existence. The self-referential church.

It *is* a caricature of course. While some may readily apply it to churches that are further up the candlestick than most, that is not the marker that I'm using. There are traditional churches who have avoided this plague. And there are many, many evangelical seeker-sensitive churches that have not.

These involve a functionalised "evangelism" aimed at getting bums on seats in order to listen to a weekly monologue and give their tithe. They are served by many hours of volunteers and staff devoted from everything from the building to the

entertainment of youth, from the music and sound desk to the morning tea roster, and everything in between and surrounding.

These churches can just as easily fit the caricature.

The self-referential church: when the spiritual journey becomes a sterile lurch from Sunday to Sunday.

No wonder the motivated ones are leaving. These are the ones who have DNA grounded in the stuff of a life-changing gospel.

They often have had experiences in, with, and through the gathered people of God that have been life-changing encounters with their Saviour and Lord. They have gifts that have been tempered through some fire. And they long to be part of God's mission – to build the kingdom, change the world. They invested in the church with this in mind, even as they were aware that it wasn't all glitz and glamour and breakthrough, it was often about serving in season and out of it, and times of self-denial and menial work.

They leave, **not because of the type of the labour, but the nature of the seed being planted** by the well-oiled machine. When that seed is found to be church-shaped and not Jesus-shaped, well, it's either time to break the machine and fix it, stay in the machine and be broken by it, or leave.

Many leave.

Here's the other side of the coin:

Jesus loves his church. The church *is* the point, for Jesus is about drawing people to himself and making them a people that reflect his truth and his love.

You should see it when it works! A crisis happens, and the community rallies – people are supported, embraced, loved, helped. A lost person is encountered – and they are welcomed, and fed: supported, and embraced, and loved, and introduced to Jesus who does all that also, but in the deeper parts, as exhorters, intercessors, truth-speakers, carers, and leaders

speaking life, life and more life. The church must exist, and needs to exist!

It is necessary for a healthy life-giving church to be self-referential in some sense. A healthy community is one in which the members deliberately invest in themselves, who choose to spend time together, who are honest with one another, and seek to fix whatever fractures appear. Mission and church go together: "by this shall all people know that you are my disciples, if you have love one for another..."

I know of a missional community meeting in a large city. A good church community of this sort should have a clearly defined "out" – an outward looking missional activity. They do some of that sort of stuff, but in the main they have realised that a lot of their "in" is also their "out." In a large city full of disconnected people, their cohesive community, an "extended family" of sorts, speaks of the love and life of Christ and reaches out as much, if not more, than any outreach program.

It can be a joy for a church to come together weekly, and for people to serve one another in that gathering. Sundays can be a highlight, a time of celebration and thanksgiving; and a true way of being fed and resourced and lifted up for life and the work of life. God bless those that help this weekly machinery turn, to bless their brothers and sisters in this way.

Why would you want to leave?

But they are, and we must get to the heart of the matter:

Two sides of the "self-referential" coin. What is the difference?

It's not "mission." The first generation of the "Done with Church" left many years ago. They formed or joined parachurch organisations and mission agencies. They promoted evangelism

or social work. And this blesses and has its blessing. But “mission” is also its own self-referential coin. The organisation that lurches from outreach program to outreach program fits the problem with its “mission” as much as another organisation fits with its Sunday formula.

It is partly bureaucracy. Sometimes bureaucracy serves, and sometimes it demands service. The organisation that is unable to reform its bureaucracy and hold it loosely and flexibly ends up conforming reality to its own shape. This almost defines negative self-referentiality, and those leaders who are unable to fix it, flee.

It is partly traditionalism. Sometimes tradition serves, and sometimes it demands service. The organisation that throws out everything disconnects itself from motivational currents and beaches itself. The organisation that clings to all hides in the lee of a self-made rock and goes nowhere. Leaders who look to where the river runs may end up searching for another boat.

It is most definitely about discipleship. This is the heart of the matter.

Gill and I have been in full-time ministry for 18 years or so now. We’ve seen some fruit. And very little of it is in the church organisation. Whatever outcomes have existed within the organisation are fleeting – congregations come and go, groups band and disband, structures are built and fall – and this is good, because these outcomes are not “fruit”, they are gardening tools or garden beds that have helped the fruit to grow. They work for a time, and then they wear and have had their day.

No, we have found that the real fruit is in people: Relationships that now transcend continents. Lives that have gone from a broken A to a delightful B in a way that can only be the work of Jesus. Strangers welcomed, and life shared,

even if only a little bit. Leaders raised up. Cruel people resisted. Broken people embraced. Authentic community formed, sustained, enjoyed. Family as team, and (in different but related way) team as family.

Church organisations are good at investing in programs: outreach programs, growth programs, educational curricula, administrative efficiencies etc. We have processes and procedures. But these are *nothing* without investment in people, as persons.

You can send someone off for theological education (or bring it to them), but unless you disciple them and walk alongside them you will have, at best, a lonely theological clone; at worst an arrogant know-it-all with knowledge but little of the spirit, correct but rarely right. You can assess someone for ministry, and give them regular reviews; but unless you invest in them, pray with them, mentor them, and walk with them as they seek the path of their obedience to God, all you have done is make them a cog in the machine, not a member of the body of Christ. You can introduce a new program to church; but unless you raise up the leaders, invest in them, help them to see the vision, seize the reigns, and grow in their own gifting, you will only burn your people out and grow bitterness and dissent. You can teach from the pulpit; but unless you also help people to worship and thirst for the things of God, the best you will do is build your own preaching pedestal and further divide Sunday from Monday in the lives of those that matter.

You see, the self-referential church *does* work, but only when it references itself in, with, and through its people. When it references itself by its organisation, or its structure, or any other ecclesial tool, it is fruitless and those who are motivated to see real fruit may, eventually, leave.

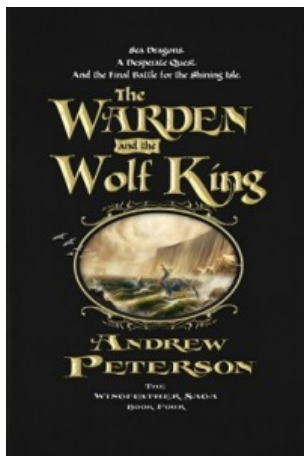
It is why we are tempted to join their number. But it is also why we currently stay: while the fruit of God can be

found in with and through us in our current context – the real fruit, of God at work in real lives including our own – of investing and being invested in, of forming and being formed.

That's the call of life. That's the purpose. That's the task. Whatever happens next, wherever we find ourselves, we'll *never* be done with that.

Review: 30 Second Book Reviews

Some books I've read while I've been off-air, in 30 seconds each:



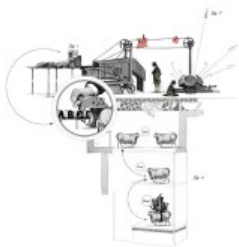
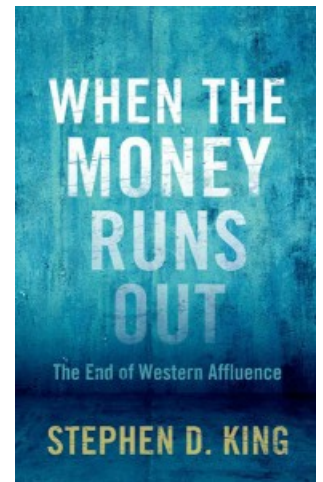
The Warden & The Wolf King (Andrew Peterson).

The last book in the absolutely fabulous Wingfeather Saga. A tale full of adventure through both fantastical lands and through the valleys and mountains of personal identity and purpose. Humour, suspense, and deep deep characters. Challenge and redemption, courage and reliance, solitude and compassion, separation and belonging.

When the Money Runs Out (Stephen D. King).

Subtitled “The End of Western Affluence.”

This book is by an economist, and one with UK point of view no less. A tough read for the lay-person with only a cursory understanding of macro-economics. This book lays out the problems associated with the Global Financial Crisis, and the further problems laid out by the attempts to solve it. Places the GFC in history and compares it with other greater economic crises of the 20th Century and, indeed, throughout much of Western history. In the end King resolves things down to one consideration: the Western World has bought into the lie that our wealth will always increase; in a flattened global economy this by no means certain, and the assumption that it is will make things worse.

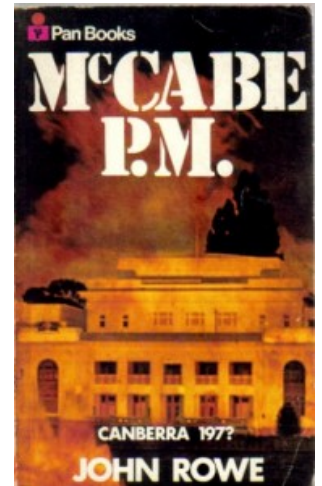


Mike Breen and the 3DM Team

Building a Discipling Culture (Mike Breen and the 3DM Team).

A good follow-up read from *Launching Missional Communities* this book gives a brief outline of the philosophy that undergirds MC's, namely that of holistic, intentional discipleship. Like *Launching MC's* this is a very practical book. In particular, it is the definitive articulation of the LifeShapes tools – mnemonical aids that help discipling relationships be necessarily broad and necessarily deep. For the theologically precise there are a number of “ouch” moments but they are generally superficial or excusable. I continue to find 3dm material resonating with my spiritual and ecclesiological DNA: as if someone has taken what we have experienced and learned over the last decade and a half and actually articulated it. A useful, helpful, fruitful read.

McCabe P.M. (John Rowe). How often do you get to read a 1970's Australian political thriller? I even had to buy this book off and ebay and read a copy that was printed on to *paper*! A friend had mentioned the plot line and it intrigued me – a Liberal politician suddenly becomes Prime Minister in the early 1970's (pre-Whitlam), three months out from a general election. Over those three months a sequence of seemingly-benign occurrences accelerate into a conclusion in which martial law is declared and consideration is being made of bombing Western Australia. It's a "do you really think this couldn't happen here?" story which transcends it's contemporary issues (e.g. militant Aboriginal activism) and style (e.g. sexual revolution pulp fiction). The only disconnection is a bewildering idealism on both sides of its politics – perhaps the only thing keeping us from descending into similar holes in 2014 is the utter cynicism of our political classes.



Center Church (Timothy Keller). A surprisingly disappointing book to read. Maybe that's a bit unfair: this book is self-confessedly not designed to bring scintillating new ideas to the task of growing the church. Consequently it contains a lot of wisdom. And it is perfectly titled – it's all about the "center" and finding the balance: e.g. between church that is separated from society and church that is syncretised; between church that focuses on evangelism, and church that nurtures the existing; about church that holds to the old, and church that finds new forms of expression etc. etc. Good stuff, but I don't find myself often going through a book and finding myself internally saying "well, duh!" But it's still well-written, and did prick my conscience and my passion in places. At the very least it's a solid reminder that the hard yards and joys of

being church is found in the practice, not in the theory.

Currently reading: N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*; Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged*; and wading through Moreland and Craig's, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*.