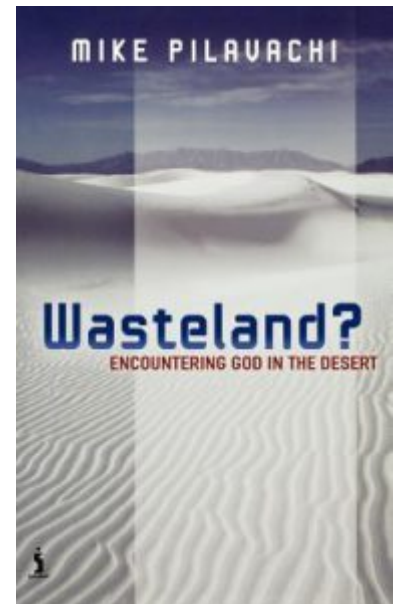


Review: Wasteland? – Encountering God in the Desert

I'd never really heard of Mike Pilavachi before coming to the UK. I'd vaguely heard of Soul Survivor and, to be honest, was a little sceptical, suspecting just another super-spiritual-guru-man-caricature hyping it up. Instead, I have found in my experiences over the last couple of years that there is depth to the Soul Survivor movement, and Pilavachi himself has come to intrigue me. At the front he is part bumbling oaf, part lovable uncle, sometimes authoritatively prophetic and eloquent, other times lurching from anecdote to anecdote, self-effacing and yet stepping out in naturally supernatural words of knowledge and a ministry of restoration. In some ways it seems preposterous that God could work through him a successful and influential movement that reaches 1000's of youth each year, and sustains works of justice and care across the globe.



Now here's something I've learned over the years: you can't trust leaders who aren't dead yet. The more they are full of themselves, either in inferiority or superiority, the more they will injure, harm, or neglect. I include myself in that cohort. But those who have been through fire, who have been stripped away, who have been through wilderness and desert, and have learned to die and surrender all to God... well, I can trust them more. **They look more like Jesus and Jesus is trustworthy.**

Here's the same lesson: church leadership and the work of ministry can be either an act of self-focussed performance, or

it can be an act of God-honouring worship. In his grace, God often uses both, but there is a difference. That difference comes with brokenness, suffering, and wilderness. While we ask God to bless *our* ministry, we are performing, relying on our strengths. When we are stripped away, broken, we find ourselves operating out of *weakness and dependence* in ministry shaped less by our own (sometimes impressive) capability, but by the power and purpose and presence of the Spirit of God.

I think that's what I see in Pilavachi: He's a big man, and I see a bigger God.

All of this to introduce a book I picked up at a stall while attending Soul Survivor this year. Written in 2003, this is a somewhat autobiographical insight into where Pilavachi is coming from. And it's called **Wasteland? – Encountering God in the desert.**

Here's the dynamic I'm talking about:

The great need today is for deep and authentic people... In our attempts to be 'culturally relevant' we could, if we are not careful, become as shallow as the surrounding culture... Jesus came to usher in another way. He called it the Kingdom of God... Why do we prefer to stay in the Christian ghetto where it is safe?... Yet if we are to go further into the world and make a difference instead of being yet another voice that adds to the noise, we have to listen to the call to go on another journey, a journey into God himself. If we are to offer life instead of platitudes we need to catch more than a glimpse of glory... Specifically, if we want to move in the power of the Spirit, to live the life of the Spirit and to carry a depth of spirituality that alone can change a world, he invites us on a journey into the desert. It is sometimes a very painful journey... but it is, I believe, a necessary journey. This adventure is only for those who are committed to being a voice to and not merely another echo of society... It is only for those who are sick of superficiality both in

themselves and in the church. (Pages 13-16)

The desert is a dry place. Nobody goes to the desert in search of refreshment. The desert is an inhospitable place; it is not comfortable. The desert is an incredibly silent place; there are no background noises, no distractions to lessen the pain. The desert is the place where you have to come to terms with your humanity, with your weakness and fallibility. The desert is a lonely place; there is not usually many people there. Above all, the desert is God's place; it is the place where he takes us in order to heal us. (Page 20)

This book simply unpacks this common, but often undescribed, dynamic. It is in the autobiographical content ("I wondered if God had forgotten me?", p19; **"More than anything else, when I came to the end of myself, I came to the beginning of God."**, p20 emphasis mine). And it is a common thread in his exposition of the biblical narrative ("In the desert Moses came to the end of himself. In so doing he came to the beginning of God." p29). At all times it both excites and dreads, and is therefore compelling.

I found *Wasteland?* to be personally challenging. Ministry life is not easy, and can often feel like a desert. Pilavachi has helped me in my own reflection and crying out. For instance, he writes that "dependence and intimacy are the two major lessons we learn in the desert" (p22). Over the last few years I've learned a lot about dependence, but I know I need to learn more about *intimacy* with the Lord who is near to me, even if I can't tell that he is there, even if he is setting my heart on fire. Pilavachi speaks of being determined to "seek God for himself whether I had ministry or not" (p21) and I know I need this example. He gives the forthright truth, "life's a bitch, but God is good" (p79) and I must face my resentment, and the pain of knowing that that truth applies to church life just as much as any other domain. I am encouraged

to continue “plodding” (p86).

The book certainly makes for insightful reflection. I do have a slight question as to whether it would always be helpful to someone who might be in the midst of their wilderness. After all, it's very easy to slip into the despondency of (unfair) comparison: “It's easy for him to write, he's come through it, he's a successful famous Christian!”. And sometimes the descriptions don't totally match what someone might be experiencing: for instance, the wilderness is not always a “place where he slows us down” (p43), I have found it can also be something that feels like a dangerous jungle, a place of anxiety and fear. These concerns are only minor though.

The aspect I most appreciate is how the book has a prophetic character, speaking truth to the church, the church of the West in particular. Consider this provocative truth:

*When we turn from the spring of living water, we try to satisfy ourselves from any contaminated pool. We then become contaminated and diseased. Instead of seeking healing, we live in denial that there is anything wrong. The desert is a place of healing. Before that, however, it has to be the place where we discover that we are sick. When all the props are taken away we come face to face with our bankruptcy. **The gospel has to be bad news before it can be good news.** In the desert we find that we are ‘wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked (Revelation 3:17). Only then can we truly receive the Saviour. It is very dry and arid in the desert. Only when we truly thirst can we begin to drink the living water. (Page 43, emphasis mine).*

*This is the antidote to a faith that owes more to Western consumerism than to the word of God. **It is out of suffering and death that life comes.** If we have not learned that from the cross of Jesus, what have we learned? (Page 83, emphasis mine).*

The lessons he draws from the Song of Songs are profound as he speaks of the longing of the Beloved seeking her Lover. If we resist being moved by the presence of God (which we do), how much more do we resist being moved by a sense of his absence? We would often rather numb out and muddle along in our own strength.

Sadly, for some Christians, for those who have never known themselves as the 'beloved', his presence is not missed. It is business as usual. I heard someone ask once, 'If the Holy Spirit left your church, would anyone notice?' The desert sorts out the spiritual men from the boys. [Like the Beloved in the Song of Songs], will we walk the streets until we find him in a deeper way, will we choose to sit in the desert until we hear him speaking tenderly to us? Or will we take the easy option?... God is not interested in a 'satisfactory working relationship' with his people. The passionate God wants a love affair with his church. A love so strong that we know we could never live without him. The desert is God's means of taking us to that place. (Page 52)

This is an "if only" book. "If only" I could get the spirit of this book into the heart of the church at large. We are so formulaic, pulling programs off the shelf, often to avoid our wasteland by busyness or some self-made productivity. Yet in the wilderness, we can be made into a "voice, not an echo" (p57), a people that can speak the gospel from depth to depth. This is what changes lives. This is what changes the world.

I have learned to consider prospective church leaders with the question "How dead are they?" I have regretted it when I have gone past that question too quickly. I have regretted it when I haven't asked that question of myself. Pilavachi puts it this way: "I am wary of trusting any leader who does not walk with a limp" (p87). In many ways he is a Christian superstar, with big lights, big tents, and big band... but his limp is obvious. In this book it becomes a provocation, exhortation,

and encouragement for all of us. I have come to really appreciate the whole Mike Pilavachi, Soul Survivor thing, with all its chaotic, messy, haphazard, space where God is so often manifestly present. It is that blessing, because of a limp.

Review: 5Q – Reactivating the Original Intelligence and Capacity of the Body of Christ

Just as in family life, when it comes to church life it's sometimes necessary to call a family meeting and have an open and honest conversation around the dinner table. *Who are we? What are we about? And what do we need to adjust in our family dynamic?*



In church life that dynamic is about ministry. And whether we call our leaders “ministers,” “priests,” “bishops,” “deacons,” “pastors,” “teachers,” “preachers,” “elders,” “vicars,” “rectors,” “curates,” “reverends,” “servers,” “carers,” or simply “workers,” the impetus remains the same: At our best, we want a dynamic which grows the church towards maturity. The “family table” conversation means grasping for more than tired old formulae or the latest managerial gizmo.

We commonly recognise that, whatever the nomenclature, we

desire for God to be in us, with us, and through us, by the power and presence of his Holy Spirit. We might adhere to the traditional threefold order of deacons, priests, and bishops, and understood them as a variety of *charisms* – anointings of the Spirit through the laying on of hands. Or we might emphasise the more universally “lay” *charismata* (spiritual gifts) through which the people of faith operate as one body as “*to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good*”.

Alan Hirsch, in his latest book *5Q*, (I think it’s meant to rhyme with “IQ”), picks up on another emphasis – the so-called “fivefold” or “ascension gifts” outlined in Ephesians 4:11-13:

*It was he (Jesus at his ascension) who gave some to be **apostles**, some to be **prophets**, some to be **evangelists**, and some to be **pastors** and **teachers**, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.*

This dynamic involves the fivefold “offices” or “functions” of **Apostles, Prophets, Evangelists, Pastors** and **Teachers**, often abbreviated as **APEST** with Pastor renamed as Shepherd so as not to have two P’s. Unlike other biblical charismatic gift-lists (e.g. 1 Cor 12, Romans 12) these ascension gifts seem intended to form a more complete and coherent shape about our family dynamic.

A simple first glance shows that there is room to explore this in practice. We know what it means for the church itself, and for members of the church to be *pastoral*. We can also grasp when the church and its members act in a *teaching* capacity, or exercise *evangelism*. But we are less able to grasp the *prophetic* and *apostolic* shape of church life. Or, to put it another way, as I have observed, the church loves and embraces

Shepherding and Teaching, appreciates and values Evangelism, generally tolerates the Prophetic (especially if prophets hold back and keep to themselves), and unknowingly yearns for the exercise of the Apostolic.

Emphasis on the fivefold has increased in recent times. Hirsch's book is a worthy contribution, emphasising a holistic and systemic approach rather than a highly individualised pop-psychology. His motivation for a "great recalibration" (xxix) I share, and his yearning "for a new sense of wholeness that only an imaginative vision born... can provide" (xxi) definitely taps into the longings of the wider Western church. His recognition of how "the more dynamic APEST system has never suited the more static, hierarchical, fundamentally non-movemental form of the church that has dominated in the West" (xxxviii) is a frustration grounded in reality.

The whole understanding, of course, rests upon Ephesians 4:1-16. Hirsch's exegesis in the first chapter is more than adequate. In particular, his drawing out of the imagery of the triumph in the ascension makes a powerful point about Jesus gifting the church with (ideally) a regenerated and regenerative human community.

In his ascension, Jesus has "given" APEST to the church as its lasting possession. In other words, the fivefold is part of the church's inheritance in Jesus. (Page 6)

Similarly his *systemic* approach to the fivefold is founded on the point and purpose of "attaining maturity and fullness in Christ" (p8). The corollary, of course, is that if there is an imbalance (or absence) in the operation of the fivefold gifts in the church, *immaturity* is the result (pp11-13). He integrates this into his robust missiology (p80ff), unveiling it's place in how we the (*Body* of Christ) now share in the *Ministry* of Christ, this participation being the essence of the *Fullness* of Christ (p80ff).

New Testament ministry in the Body of Christ cannot be done with anything less than all the dimensions of inherent in Christ's own ministry. Without full APEST expression, a church cannot logically extend Jesus' ministry in the world; neither can it attain to the fullness of Christ or achieve its purposes/mission – it will inevitably have dangerous gaps in its culture. And herein, folks, lies a huge amount of the church's dysfunction! (Page 88)

These are firm foundations.

Hirsch does well to resist our individualising tendencies. It's not until page 44 that he explicitly states that "it is quite conceivable that the fivefold could be used as a means to profiling personality and helping people live into their unique sense of identity as a follower of Christ." The system and the symphony come first.

What we have then, is a properly exhaustive, internally consistent, framework which naturally applies to personality and leadership, and which has strong threads that connect it with the range of human experience and our understanding of God.

Grounded in God, laced into creation, redeemed by Jesus, granted to the church, lived out in the lives of its saints, to the glory of God – here we have a "system" that goes as deep as it does wide. (Page 61)

This is very useful.

As he gets into the five APEST aspects themselves, Hirsch brings in a very useful distinction between what he calls "functions" and "callings" (p94). The distinction allows us to consider the fivefold, firstly, in terms of the church's "innate purpose and functionality" and, secondly, in terms of individual calling or vocation. That is, we can speak of how

the church, exercising the Ministry of Christ as the Body of Christ, to avoid dysfunction, needs to be, in a corporate sense, apostolic (A), prophetic (P), evangelistic (E), pastoral (S), and didactic (T). Any sense of individual calling is best seen as an *expression* of that, an outworking of the Ministry of Christ in one member of the Body of Christ.

And so, having foreshadowed them, Hirsch arrives at his definitions of the APEST functions and callings (p99ff):

Apostolic-Apostle (p99): Is rightly identified as correlating to the missionary “sentness” of the church. “The driving logic of the apostolicity is the extension of the Jesus movement in and through the lives of the adherents, as well as establishing the church onto new ground.”

From my own discernment, I feel that Hirsch overemphasises the functional and entrepreneurial aspects of the apostolic (entrepreneurship attaches more to the Evangelistic in my experience) and he also overlaps with the Prophetic when it comes to the guarding of values. This is a common mis-step in fivefold literature, and can be avoided by looking just a little deeper.

The apostolic is at the heart of *movement* but doesn’t usually generate it by being out in front, but primarily through *covering* and *parenting*. Come close to the apostolic and you find yourself connected in worship to the fathering heart of God, you find something kenotic, poured out for the sake of the body. Paul is a definitive example (e.g. *1 Cor 4:9*, *2 Tim 4:6*). The confusion comes, because, in providing the covering, the apostolic will often lead with the shape of the other functions, so as to guide and bring movement in that area.

Prophetic-Prophet (p102): Is rightly associated with the call to holistic worship, so that “as his people, we are to be the one place where God, and everything he stands for, is revered, cherished, and obeyed.” Hirsch usefully observes a

“vertically” orientated prophetic that feels what God feels and brings about an encounter with him, and a “horizontally” orientated prophetic that calls people to covenant obligations of justice, holiness, right worship, and right living. It risks a false demarcation, but this properly recognises both the “mystical-charismatic” and “social justice” (p105) aspect of the prophetic.

Unlike some commentators, Hirsch doesn’t avoid the *hard* aspects of the prophetic function and calling. “Prophets are often agitators for change” (p105), he says understatedly.

The prophetic vocation is likely the most difficult of all the APEST callings, partly because of the personal vulnerability involved (God is “dangerous”... he is a consuming fire) but also because the prophetic word, like the Word of God that the prophet seeks to represent, is often rejected by people who prefer their own ways. The prophet is likely the loneliest of all the vocations and the one most open to misunderstanding. I think this is why Jesus calls us to especially respect the prophets in our midst (Matthew 10:4-42) (Pages 105-106)

In my experience, the most common dysfunction of otherwise healthy churches, even those who have a sense of apostolic mission and evangelistic zeal is that they ignore or reject the prophetic. They end up forgetting even the elementary teachings about Christ (Hebrews 6:1) and become a self-referential self-absorbed shadow of who they are called to be.

Evangelistic-Evangelist (p106): Hirsch does well to move the understanding of evangelist beyond the Billy Graham caricature. Yes, evangelism is about communication and “getting the message out” but it’s also about “the infectious sharing of the movement’s core message” and “the *demonstration* of good news in word, sign, and deed” (p107).

An interesting thought that Hirsch mentions – one that I will

need to dwell on more – is to consider a *priestliness* in the evangelistic calling. “They have a capacity to make connections with people in a way that demonstrates social as well as emotional intelligence... their function is genuinely priestly in that they mediate between God and people as well as between people and people.” (p108).

Shepherding-Shepherd (p108): The pastoral shepherding image is common in Scripture and Hirsch draws upon it to demonstrate a function and calling that emphasises “social connectivity”, healing and protection. They “champion inclusion and embrace” and desire *formation* in disciples-making that “lives locally and communally” (p110).

The use of “shepherd” instead of “pastor” is not just about having a better acrostic at this point. “Pastor” has become an honorific, the stuff of name plaques on office doors.

“Shepherd” re-engages with the necessary *empathy* and *sharing of life* that “knows the personal details of the particular people in one’s orbit” (p111). All of the functions bring pain when they are done distantly and dispassionately, but shepherding that is merely theoretical and formulaic, or done without any self-giving, is the harshest dysfunction.

Teaching-Teacher (p111): This function is also commonly understood. Hirsch draws us to the rabbinical tradition and the Wisdom Literature of the Scriptures to describe it. The emphasis here is not just on the heady and intellectual love of the abstract truth (the development of a “biblical mind” that means “seeing the world as God sees it, as described in the Scriptures”) but also on the application in real life.

In many ways, teachers are similar to prophets and apostles in that they deal with ideas that shape life... From a biblical perspective, teaching is not about speculation in and of itself (idealism); rather, it is about the ministry of ideas in action (ethos), that is discipleship or formation. Teachers cannot teach what they do not know, and they cannot

lead where they will not themselves go. Therefore, biblical teachers must have real participation in the ideas they propose.” (page 112)

All this is substantial... But what to do with it?

The point of typologies and inventories is to consider and address imbalances, strengthen weaknesses, and avoid the “precociousness” of over-reliance on strengths (p118). It takes maturity to do this, and sometimes maturation is not popular; “asymmetrical churches always end up attracting people who are like-minded and therefore asymmetrical... witness the many one-dimensional charismatic/vertical prophetic movements of the last century... or the asymmetrical mega-church that markets religion and ends up producing consumptive, dependent, underdeveloped, cultural Christians with an exaggerated sense of entitlement.” (p119).

Hirsch’s bold response is to suggest a re-evaluation, almost a reconstitution, of our ecclesiology that is based on the fivefold as the “marks of the church.” (p132). This is bold.

Not only does this counter the ST imbalance of the “protestant marks” of “word and sacrament” (p130), but even challenges the “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic” marks of the Nicene Creed!

I’m not sure I’d go that far, and I think Hirsch’s is over-universalising the fivefold at this point. What is needed is not a reconstitution, but a reinvigoration, a substantiation of what we say and pretend we are into who we actually *are*. For instance, I am currently working on some thoughts about how we have placed *professionalism* at odds with our *vocationalism*. If we could be a church that actually *values* and *practises* vocation (an inherently apostolic function that the church is literally crying out for) rather than just stealing the word for our own mechanics, then we will have reinvigorated something and addressed an imbalance. But more

of that another time.

Nevertheless, the point is well made. Organisations as much as individuals need discipling (p147), and the fivefold framework is a useful world of challenge and comfort in which to do that. It can even be a framework in which to make use of and respond to various tools for ecclesial self-reflection (NCD springs to mind) as well as the various tools and techniques that Hirsch hints at in the latter part of the book.

But it takes more than a brand, even a 5Q brand, it takes a brokenness, a contrition, a willingness to be led by the Holy Spirit through hard places. The Western church has a perverse resistance to such things. My hope is that contributions such as Hirsch's will not be quickly swallowed up as yet another branded technique to exploit for our own ecclesial self-gratification. It has enough substance, enough comfort and challenge, to avoid the pitfalls. Wise leaders will read, mark, inwardly digest, and *apply*.

Hirsch's contribution is therefore significant, and I recommend this book, but only as one dish at the fivefold restaurant. Hirsch is a Michelin-star missiologist, but the discerning leader will also sit at the table of other similar chefs. My recommendation comes with some caveats, you see:

1) I don't often comment on the *tone* of a book, and it may play well in America, but there are times when Hirsch comes across with an air of arrogance that brought me to the brink of putting the book down. It *has* stopped me from pushing the book forwards in some contexts where I would like to promote fivefold thinking, because, frankly, the tone would *undermine* the case. Alan, you are not my Yoda, I am not your padawan (xxiiff, p7, p23, p80, etc. etc.), and you are not bringing forth some hidden ancient "world-renewing energy" (p31) that you have been personally bequeathed (p89) or have discovered (xxiii, p27 etc. etc.) like some great white Luther-like Indiana Jones who "blows his own mind" (p29). You are making a

worthy contribution amongst many worthy contributions. Get over yourself, son.

2) The book is *theological* in the sense that it interacts with the fivefold as more than just a personality typology. But Hirsch's theology, in terms of the discipline, is not great. I agree with many of the conclusions, but the arguments are not convincing.

Particularly this: Hirsch wants to show that the fivefold demarcations are not some arbitrary overlay but are inherent not only within the created order but within the character and operation of God. It's a worthy hypothesis, however, condensed down, his argument proceeds as follows: 1) State what the fivefold demarcations look like in practice; 2) Observe these practices in creation (archetypes, p35, p63ff) and divinity (p55ff especially); 3) Conclude that the fivefold is therefore a derivation of something essential.

This is fallacious, I could also argue: 1) My fruit lollies have different colours and related flavours; 2) I observe these colours in the physical world, and symbolically throughout history; 3) My fruit lollies are therefore full of inherent meaning.

Don't get me wrong, I *do* think the fivefold typology coheres with the wider sense of how personality, community, and divinity operate. I was hoping for some robust theology to help me out. Hirsch's *observation* is useful, but some *derivation* is needed, e.g. demonstrate how fivefold functions are a necessary outworking of God as Trinity. At the very least, begin with Biblical examples of the fivefold offices, and derive the typology from that.

e.g. Hirsch wants to show that Jesus is the perfect embodiment of the fivefold gifts But he describes it this way: "The fivefold typology is therefore not incidental to Christology but indelibly shapes it and gives it content" (p21, see also

p78). No! To be meaningful, it should be that Christology is not incidental to the fivefold typology, but indelibly shapes *it*. Derive *from* Jesus, not *to* him! “Jesus cannot be understood apart from all fivefold identities” (p79) is simply an incorrect statement. I can also understand him as Son of God, as Prophet, Priest and King, as Advocate, as Lamb of God, as the Word/Logos etc. etc.

3) I am always wary of books that attach to products. 5Q is a brand name with a business model. This is not a unique problem – PMC is the same – and I understand why it happens. But the higher road is this: if you want to push along a movement, or have something profound and biblical to say, then put out the base theological material generically, and then you and any other person can use it to help and assist, consult and guide, and so build the body of Christ (towards Ephesians 4 maturity even!). Otherwise it looks like you are monetising truth, and God’s truth at that.

Around the family table, though, as we wrestle with our church family dynamic, the fivefold discussion needs to happen. 5Q gives us something to talk about, and, if we have the courage, to do.

Priscilla & Aquila Today? – Supporting Side-by-side Leadership

In the early 50's AD, the apostle Paul travelled from Athens to the city of Corinth and commenced his ministry there. As he arrived, Acts 18 records one of those divine appointment moments.



...Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. There he met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them, and because he was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them. Act 18:1-3 NRSV

We're not told how Paul came to know of them, but he seeks out a "Jew named Aquila" and his wife Priscilla. He shares in their tentmaking business venture, he joins their household, and they work together in gospel ministry. These companions of Paul are invariably referred to as a couple. They are "Priscilla and Aquila" or "Prisca and Aquila."

Priscilla and Aquila accompany Paul when he leaves Corinth (Acts 18:18). They part ways in Ephesus (Acts 18:19) as Paul travels on to return to Jerusalem. In Ephesus their leadership role is clear. When it happens that Apollos arrives in Ephesus, Priscilla and Aquila offer him both hospitality and guidance:

He began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately. Acts 18:26 NRSV

Paul sends them greetings when he writes his letter to the Romans. He refers to them as ones who "work with me in Christ

Jesus" (Romans 16:3) to the point of risking their lives. Tradition has it that they were martyred together upon returning to Rome.

What an intriguing couple! They are lovers, co-workers, co-ministers. We do not know if they had their own children, but they certainly opened their home and hearth and "parented" (as it were) some of the leaders of the church.

Priscilla and Aquila are indeed a *side-by-side* team, in it together, and always spoken of together. We know of many couples who would seem to be of a similar kind. Gill and I are a couple in ministry. And, while we don't want to inappropriately lay claim to Priscilla and Aquila, they are before us as an example and something of an inspiration.

So what can we learn from them? How can we think about this sort of side-by-side ministry in our own times? It's something we want to explore more.

To explore it, we need to define it, or at least to describe it:

1. We are talking about couples, **married couples**. There are other duos in Scripture who minister together – e.g. Peter and John (Acts 3-4), Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13), Paul and Silas (Acts 16). These partnerships exhibit synergies and complementarities, but for Priscilla and Aquila there is a sense in which the charism extends to the marriage identity also. What I mean is this: when we consider Paul's apostolic ministry we can conceive of it not just in terms of *function* but of *person*; he *embodies* the gospel in a 2 Corinthians 4 sort of way. With Priscilla and Aquila that *embodiment* extends to who they are as a married couple and is expressed in their relationship and their home. Their *family* is apostolic in this sense; it certainly was for Apollos.
2. We are talking about **something other than "I'm right**

behind you” partnerships. By this we mean the form of partnership where either husband or wife (or both) releases the other into their individual ministry. This is much more than the unfortunate stereotype of housewife looking after the children so that a Reverend Gentleman can be about the “the Lord’s work.” We know husbands and wives who self-sacrificially provide the financial, familial, and moral support necessary for the other to be released into ministry. This is genuine partnership and of great value. The demarcation might be blurry, but the side-by-side partnership of Priscilla and Aquila in home, work, and ministry seems to be distinct from this by more than just a matter of degrees. They are released into *their* shared ministry.

3. What we are talking about is perhaps indicated by the increasing phenomenon of couples who are both ordained but **this is not just about ordination.** We know some ordained couples who minister effectively apart, as individuals, in entirely separate contexts. We know lay couples who operate side-by-side, and similarly couples where there is a difference in ordination or institutional training or recognition. We know side-by-side couples who are remunerated differently, and often inequitably. Institution finds it hard to recognise or respond to them, rather, the side-by-side togetherness often derives from a deeply shared journey in the real world.

The subjective indicator is this: when we think of a couple who minister among and with God’s people, do we first think of “X” and “Y” or do we first think of “X and Y” together? As an exercise, Gill and I went through our experience, naming those who we thought of in this way. Invariably they have blessed us. Priscilla and Aquila, side-by-side, exemplify the people that we were thinking about.

Church History is usually a useful discipline to consider

methods and manners of ministry; there is nothing new under the sun and we can learn from those who have gone before. But in this case, it is more difficult. The predominant influencers in early and medieval church history are mostly unmarried, and usually men. Perhaps Martin and Katharina Luther are an exception and mark a turning point, although they are rarely spoken of in the same breath. Early Protestantism through the 17th and 18th Centuries record male leaders who are married, but there is no sense of them being together in ministry. Both Wesley and Whitefield had unhappy marriages, unsurprising given their treatment of their wives.

It's not until the 19th Century that there is a clear emerging sense of partnership. William & Catherine Booth are often described as founder and "mother" of the Salvation Army, and similarly Hudson & Maria Taylor with respect to the China Inland Mission. In the 20th Century, the number is beyond counting (although Loren & Darlene Cunningham, founders of Youth With A Mission are a personal favourite of mine). The 20th Century might correlate with the advent of Pentecostalism, but I suspect other cultural shifts as well.

Question for feedback: *Can you think of side-by-side couples in Christian history?*

Let us know in comments or contact me.

So, on the face of it, we have a fundamental form of vocation that has biblical precedent and contemporary reality, but with little historical understanding or reflection. So how do we offer support to couples who are in ministry in this way? What issues do they face?

Some of the issues are ***internal***:

Nearly everyone wrestles with vocational questions: Who am I? What is this God-given gospel-shaped passion, longing, yearning, that calls me forward? How refined and redeemed is it? What selfishness and sin does it feed when I do not

approach it in submission and surrender? How must I lay it down? How must I cling to it in fervent faith?

The same questions come to the side-by-side couple. They must wrestle with them as individuals, but also together: Who are we? What is this God-given gospel-shaped passion, longing, yearning that calls us forward, together – which neither of us can follow on our own? How refined and redeemed is it? How do we express it healthily or unhealthily? How do we lay it down? How do we cling to it?

It's often a journey of discovery. In our ministry life Gill and I have had to learn to be close: drawing boundaries, negotiating the wedge issues, laying down self and individual ambitions not just for the sake of the other, but for the sake of "us together." We have also had to learn to be open: letting others in so that we're not a "closed shop" but are properly connected with the wider body, and freeing each other so that we can grow as whole individuals. It involves a lot of emotional and relational risk! But that's the stuff of life.

We have had mentors and helpers on this journey. However, there are few general resources to draw upon.

Some of the issues are **external** to the couple:

Institutional systems simply don't cope well with couples. It's true with secular systems (e.g. tax and immigration) and so it is in ecclesial institutions. Generally speaking in mainstream institutions: Individuals, not couples, are selected for ordination (the least effective selection processes give little consideration to the marriage relationship, most give some). Individuals, not couples, are authorised for ministry. Individuals, not couples, are remunerated (and usually only one of them).

There are exceptions, often torturous. We know of a ministry couple who were able to argue for remuneration for the wife's contribution to the work of the church, but only after the

husband was formally released to attend to an external ministry part-time. We know of a large parish in which the ministry team structure slowly evolved to recognise what was actually the case: the vicar *and his wife* were placed in the same location in the team diagram, an internal document.

There are misconceptions. One of the most deflating comments that side-by-side couples hear is, “Ah, two for the price of one!” It’s usually well-meant but not helpful. The “price” of a minister to an organisation isn’t just about money – it’s about giving that minister understanding, support, and an appropriate voice – a *place* in the family. “Two for the price of one” usually means one or ‘tother, and therefore both together, are not going to have that place. Underneath it is, “thanks for tagging along.”

Of course, some institutional wariness is warranted. There are unique issues relating to family welfare, safeguarding, and professional supervision. Of course, there are also couples who are vocationally broken, co-dependent and operating out of injury reflect a negative synergy; there are couples who internalise all decision-making and exclude those who should have a voice; there are couples who are inconsistent, double-minded, and you’re not sure where you stand with them; there are couples who haven’t done the vocational and emotional work. But all of that can be said of individuals also.

So how do we help institutions respond to side-by-side couples, and how might we support and help such couples with these internal and external issues? This is something we want to explore.

To that end, if you are a couple in ministry, **we would love to hear your story**. What follows are some questions that might help you tell it. If you are able to, please contact me, we would love to hear from you. We would also love to hear from you if you have experience of a side-by-side couple in ministry, maybe as a co-worker, a church volunteer, but

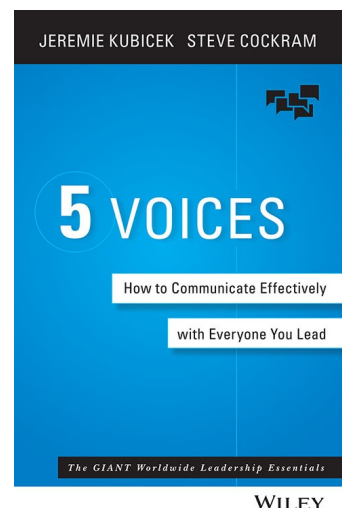
especially as a *child* of such a couple.

TELL US YOUR STORY

1. *Please give us an outline of your story. What is your history, individually and as a couple? Where are you located now?*
 2. *How much do you see yourselves side-by-side in ministry like Priscilla and Aquila? Do you agree with how we've described it here?*
 3. *How do you describe your vocation/call/purpose, individually and together?*
 4. *What have you learned about being together as a couple/family in ministry, but also maintaining your individual identity and vocation? How did you learn those things?*
 5. *What have you encountered that has frustrated you as a couple in ministry? What support have you found?*
 6. *Please let us know how confidential you would like your story to remain: i.e. don't divulge anything, share anonymously, happy to have it shared in full etc.*
-

Review: 5 Voices – How to Communicate Effectively with Everyone You Lead

Personality type inventories and leadership style analyses are a common tool in leadership and management circles. I'm sure this is the case in the business sector. It is certainly the case when it comes to churches and non-profits, with our high volunteer basis, and our emphasis on vocation and personal engagement.



Over the years I have become familiar with Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), DiSC, Personality Plus, and even some of the more esoteric ones such as Enneagram and Motivational Gifts.

I have recently come across Colour Energies which appears to be a condensed version of MBTI and is apparently growing in popularity in management circles. Each has a different focus on nature or nurture, or things such as innate personality and context. All have a fundamental grounding in an understanding of the human psyche as individuals and as a team or system.

All have something useful to contribute, but some more than others.

And now, on a recommendation, I have picked up a book on the 5 Voices. The focus is a link between personality types with communication in a team dynamic. There's a clear application built into the premise (the subtitle says it all) and this is useful. The authors continually point out the benefit of their readers knowing "what it is like to be on the other side of them" (p17).

The Five Voices are, in order of "loudness:"

NURTURER – "Nurturers are champions of people and work to take care of everyone around them... They are always concerned about the relational health and harmony of the group... They are completely committed to protecting values and principles... They innately understand how certain actions,

behaviours, or initiatives will affect people.” (p31)

CREATIVE – “Creatives are champions of innovation and future ideas. They are conceptual architects and are able to see how all the pieces fit together... Creatives are never satisfied with the status quo; they always believe it can be better... They are like an ‘early warning radar system’ and can see the opportunities and dangers of the future before everyone else.” (pp33-34)

GUARDIAN – “Guardians are champions of responsibility and stewardship... They respect and value logic, systems, order, procedure, and process... They have a selfless capacity to deliver the vision once it has been agreed... Guardians guard what is already working.” (pp35-36)

CONNECTOR – “Connectors are champions of relationships and strategic partnerships... They rally people around causes and things they believe in... Connectors believe in a world where everyone can play and get excited about future opportunities... and they work to make it happen... They are usually persuasive and inspirational communicators.” (p39)

PIONEER – “Pioneers are champions of aligning people with resources to win or achieve the objective... They approach life with an ‘Anything is possible!’ attitude... Pioneers believe visioning a new future is always the highest priority... Pioneers brings strategic military-like thinking to achieve the agreed objective.” (p41)

As a simple personality inventory, this system is **somewhat lacking**. Unlike MBTI and DiSC, for instance, where the categories *derive* from a fundamental framework (the psychology of processing information in MBTI, the interplay of task-or-person focus and empowerment in DiSC) the five voice categories seem a little *arbitrary*.

Author Steve Crockram talks about his desire to “repackage” the 16 MBTI personalities (page x), but this is not that. How do you condensed 16 into 5 in a way that maintains the integrity of its derivation? And besides, that work has been done: there is so much material on, for instance, how NF’s interact with ST’s. It is telling that in some of their subsequent analysis they feel the need to *split* the Creative voice into Creative-Feeler and Creative-Thinker (p115).

Similarly, at other times, they need to *combine* the Nurturer and Guardian voices into a single entity. There isn’t a consistent framework, a derivation to look back to in order to justify their conclusions, or reach forward to new ones. The voices are presented as simply “what is”, a product to buy into, or otherwise.

The spiritually minded could perhaps attempt a mapping from APEST/Pentagon/Fivefold terminology: Apostle = Pioneer, Prophet = Creative, Evangelist = Connector, Shepherd/Pastor = Nurturer, Teacher = Guardian. But this is tenuous.

I think this is why I found myself pushing back at some of the over-simplifications. For instance, the Nurturer voice could easily be caricatured as maternalistic, always ready with the empathy. But Nurturers (as an expression of their *nurturing*) also know how to exhibit “tough love”, avoid mollycoddling, and to break symbiosis or transference. They can be *champions*, not just wetnurses. Similarly Pioneers are caricatured as militaristic generals, ready to roll over the top of other people for the sake of the goal. But Pioneers (as an expression of their *pioneering*) also know that bringing the people with them is not just part of the goal, but integral to it. Creative voices can be quiet, but not always so!

Nevertheless, the benefit of the book is significant and it lies, as mentioned, in the area of communication and team dynamics.

The first benefit is that of self-awareness, not only of yourself, but of others in your team. The descriptions of each voice throughout ask questions such as “What do they bring at their best? What questions are they really asking inside?” and considerations of likely negative impacts. They also encourage you to not only work out your *foundational voice* (and so understand your weaknesses and limitations) but also your *nemesis* voice that you will often fail to hear, and often fail to reach.

They suggest “Rules of Engagement” for staff meetings and the like, because there’s “no such thing as accidental synergy” (p128). Having a speaking order of Nurturers, Creatives, Guardians, Connectors, and Pioneers makes internal sense to their system, as well as the assurances and challenges that are put before each voice.

I’m not entirely convinced; for instance, it’s not just about ensuring that the louder voices wait their turn, it’s also about a dynamic in which the quieter voices are willing to step up, in which case something like Lencioni’s Five Dysfunctions of a Team might be a better place to start.

Nevertheless, they fully acknowledge that their Rules of Engagement might (initially) feel a little contrived. The unpacking of the sort of “weapon” each voice brings to a dysfunctional table is useful as a description.

All the weapons deployed every day in any environment where human beings interact. Usually, teams simply accept friendly fire and allow the Nurturers to care for the wounded without analyzing what’s really happening. But where the use of weapons remains unchallenged, teams function at far below their true potential. Where team members understand the impact of their weapons system and become intentional in how they deploy it, team culture and productivity will change immediately for the better. (p108)

Similarly helpful is the role of each voice in vision casting and change management. The gap between Creative/Pioneer and Nurturer/Guardian is stark, and the alignment of each with progressives and conservatives respectively is well-made. The role of the Connector voice in keeping the two ends together is no mere “piggy in the middle” here, but a crucial part of the dynamic.

In a perfect world, Pioneers and Creatives would be out on the front lines, focused on and exploring the future possibilities. Connectors would be trying to message the opportunity, getting everybody on the same page and fully aligned. Nurturers and Guardians are connected and engaged but invariably towards the back because they want to make sure it's safe and that the people, money, and resources are being taken care of. (p169)

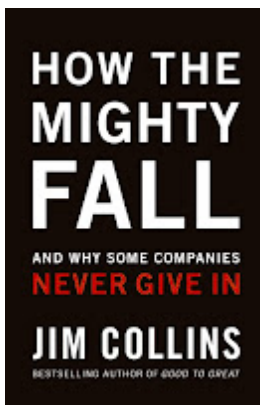
All of this can help the reader to analyse their team health, be self-aware of their own voice, and the voice of others, and to avoid being an unnecessary contributor to dysfunction. What it doesn't do is give you a real way forward in how to deal with dysfunction.

This could have been explored. For instance: How do you deal with a disconnect, when all have retreated to their castles? How do you deal with an other-voice leaning team, when you're well outside of your energising 70/30 principle situation in which you are using your natural voice 70% of the time (p155)? How do you go about motivating team health from an empowered position, a disempowered position, an oversight position, or a “leading-up” position?

To the extent that the 5 voices can provide a common vocabulary, and be a catalyst for personal and interpersonal reflection, it remains a useful resource. Despite its weaknesses, it's a worthy addition to the menagerie of

leadership style products. Add it to the mix, and use it when it's useful.

Review: How the Mighty Fall



I sometimes read books that are from a different “field” than my own. This includes books from the world of corporate management and capitalist technique – an area I tend to avoid due to excessive buzzword compliance and a lingering suspicion that the author has perfectly polished teeth and has dictated the book while wearing a Kylie-mic. I forget who or what recommended Jim Collins’ *How the Mighty Fall and why some Companies Never Give In* to me – and why it was recommended. But I read it, and found it informative and useful.

The basic premise that Collins works from is to reverse his normal endeavour of analysing why some companies go from good to great in order to understand why some great companies have somewhat inexplicably crashed and burned. He considers companies such as Ames, Bank of America, HP, Motorola and compares them with success stories in the same field – e.g. Wal-Mart, Wells Fargo, Texas Instruments. (The complete list is tabulated on Page 141). It’s an intriguing analysis as it demonstrates that “normal” causes of failure – passivity, complacency, lack of innovation etc. – were not evident. The stories he shares are often ones of a “spectacular fall

despite... revolutionary fervour.” (Page 11).

Rather, his analysis identified “five stages of decline” that were more or less evident across the examples of fallen companies. (See chart on Page 20).

1. “Hubris Born of Success”
2. “Undisciplined Pursuit of More”
3. “Denial of Risk and Peril”
4. “Grasping for Salvation”
5. “Capitulation to Irrelevance or Death”

Within each stage he offers examples and some decent considerations of the leadership and management principles that would have helped reverse the death-ward journey. It is here that I found the most relevance. If we are looking at the “mighty fallen” then the institutional church at least fits that bill *prima facie*. The gems of advice are worthwhile. And they are certainly assisting me in how I think about the current review of my Parish.

For instance, the importance of inquisitiveness of a leader that constantly asks “why, why, why?” (Page 39) does much to alleviate the arrogance that characterises the first stage of decline. Collins further unpacks the problem:

“The rhetoric of success (“We’re successful because we do these specific things”) replaces understanding and insight (“We’re successful because we understand why we do these specific things and under what conditions they would no longer work.”).” (Page 43)

Similarly, he talks about manage of people and teams. One particular example interacts with the institutional church’s tendency to fall back to bureaucracy when things need doing or when things go wrong:

“When bureaucratic rules erode an ethic of freedom and

responsibility within a framework of core values and demanding standards, you've become infected with the disease of mediocrity." (Page 56)

In other words, bureaucracy results when you put the wrong people in the wrong place and take away the freedoms of the good people.

In the era of internet preaching personalities, his view of team leadership needs to be strongly heeded by Christian leaders:

"The best leaders we've studied had a peculiar genius for seeing themselves as not all that important, recognizing the need to build an executive team and to craft a culture based on core values that do not depend upon a single heroic leader." (Page 62)

If we can correlate this analysis to the state of the church it's probably appropriate to look towards the later stages of decline. Here there is another piece of advice worth heeding – "Stage 4 begins when an organization reacts to a downturn by lurching for a silver bullet... they go for a quick, big solution or bold stroke to jump-start a recovery, rather than embark on the more pedestrian, arduous process of rebuilding long-term momentum." (Page 89). Church leadership is very rarely about thunderbolts – it is about decent, ongoing shepherding – the teaching of the word, the bringing of it in and out of season and doing the work of an evangelist. It's about getting the basics right and being committed to slogging it out for Jesus.

I think this book applies to the church because in the end it is not so much an analysis of business but a consideration of corporate human psychology intent on avoiding failure and embracing fear. Here is some common sense, some earthly wisdom, and a decent call to both boldness and humility. We

can learn from this.



The Hard Side of Ministry

I earlier looked at comments from Mark Driscoll on loneliness in leadership. He has now released the second part of his reflection. This part is mostly advice and it's pretty decent. I particularly like the following:



...Too often leaders do not practice sufficient times of silence and solitude when such times can be invaluable to working on their life rather than staying at the office and continue working in it until they become angry, unhealthy, depressed, and burned out...

...Rather than picking up the phone, sending an email, or taking action, I have decided to wait twenty-four hours on any non-emergency issue and sincerely and specifically pray for God to go before me to move other people to meet the need or for God to take care of it himself. I have been able to check more than half of the items off my to do list by doing nothing but praying, as God has faithfully revealed himself to care more about my ministry than I do.

Coincidentally Mikey has linked to another Driscoll-related piece on why pastors want to quit. The following reasons have been listed in feedback from pastors. I've been to most of these places:

- **To Protect My Family** – the cost of ministry upon wife

and kids is more than most people know.

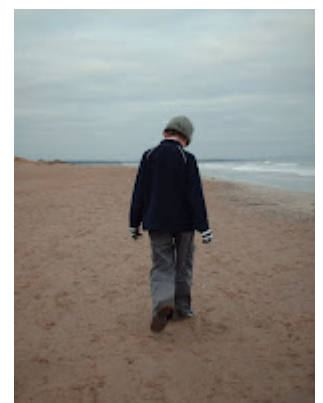
- **Criticism** – although once you’ve been through the fire criticism can start leading to added resolve rather than depressed resignation.
- **The Hard Work of Shepherding** – you can’t just “launch” a church you have to shepherd the flock. Personally, the *need* to shepherd very rarely gets me down – it’s the feelings of inadequacy about how to help others. You can’t live other people’s lives for them.
- **Restlessness** – itchy feet happens, you learn to deal with it.
- **Coveting Others’ Gifts** – Quote: “One pastor named his struggle for what it is: ‘coveting others’ gifts, leadership, fruitfulness.’
- **Lack of Change** – Stagnation, walking through molasses, spinning your wheels against the immovable object.

In the end, it’s great that God is God. Ministry is a series of ordinary quiet miracles.

Photo credit: <http://www.sxc.hu/profile/bigevil600>

Driscoll, Loneliness and Leadership

Others are starting to comment about a recent post by Mark Driscoll entitled “Leadership is Lonely – Part 1.”



It is well worth the read. The following dot-points were thought provoking (honesty-provoking perhaps?)

For leaders and those who love them and can help them see their own sin, especially their spouse, the following self-assessment statements may prove helpful in diagnosing sinful responses to the loneliness of leadership:

- 1. I feel that God has abandoned me to an impossible task and have begun to question his goodness.*
- 2. I become annoyed by my team because they do not understand me or the difficulties I face as their leader.*
- 3. I wish someone would just tell me what to do, give me permission to not do so much, and sort out the complexity of my life.*
- 4. I am annoyed by others because I believe they are stupid, lazy, slowing me down, and simply unwilling and/or unable to keep up with me and all the work I have to do.*
- 5. I question if anyone really loves me and secretly think that almost everyone is simply using me.*

In order of propensity I relate to 1, 3, 5, 2, 4. Unlike Driscoll I think my unhealth takes me towards self-blame and self-deprecation so I'm more likely to drift into melancholy about myself than be annoyed by any supposed stupidity in my team (Besides, there is very little, if any, stupidity in my team!)

Driscoll's initial sentence is intriguing though:

By definition, a leader is out ahead of his or her team, seeing, experiencing, and learning things before everyone else.

Once again we see Driscoll's tendency to not, um, *nuance* his

definitions. Does leadership really mean being “out ahead.” Perhaps, often, yes, leadership requires the input of novel ideas, new discernment, clarity of vision that no one else has yet considered. But that’s not always the case.

A metaphorical consideration: I often spin the image of a bushwalk when talking about leadership. If anyone has ever hiked with their family they will know that to get that family up and over the hill to the glorious vista that awaits requires a combination of, yes, scouting ahead and finding the way, but also letting the young boys run ahead while the even younger daughters require a shoulder ride, pausing to attend to cuts and bruises, walking beside those who are discouraged. When the going gets tough it involves spinning the inspiration of why we’re walking at all – encouraging, sometimes rebuking, sometimes from in front, sometimes from behind.

In this metaphor the leader is not necessarily the one “out ahead of the team.” The leader may not be the “ideas person.” But the leader is required to make the calls, carry them through, and bring the people with them. The leader is not necessarily the scout – or indeed the navigator.

A case-study consideration: I heard tell once of a senior pastor of a pentecostal persuasion who was struggling significantly in ministry. He did not feel that he was receiving the necessary revelation from God that kept in “ahead of the team.” “How can I be a leader if someone else hears the word?” was the attitude. That was an unhealthy attitude. Someone else may “have the word” (in Pentecostal-speak) but the leader is the one who assesses, permits, resources, integrates, and if all else fails, carries the burden of that word.

I prefer the definition of leaders that I heard somewhere else – “Leaders beget leaders.” In that sense a leader will often times have leaders-they-are-leading out there “ahead” with them. Sometimes those other leaders will even “overtake” for a

time, or in a particular area. All that means is that that leader has been led well by the leader who is behind.

Anyway, this is only Part 1 of Driscoll's reflection. Looking forward to part 2.



Leadership Loneliness

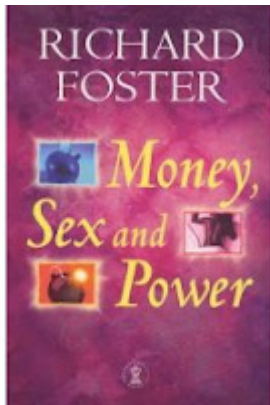
Insightful post at the Resurgence:

Almost every lead pastor I know deals significantly with loneliness. I think the struggle is even more difficult for church planters...

Church planters and pastors must make biblical, life-giving community a real priority. Proverbs 18:1 says, "Whoever isolates himself seeks his own desire; he breaks out against all sound judgment." As pastors, we cannot buy the lie that we don't need the community our people need. Our enemy, the Devil, loves it when church planters/pastors isolate themselves. We become easy prey when we try to stand alone. Our wives and children become easy prey when we try to make them stand alone. Build a strong community for your family.



Review: Money, Sex, Power



Money, Sex, Power by Richard Foster is an “oldy but a goody” book (I was only 10 years old when it was first published) that I’ve had on my bookshelf for years but have never got round to reading. Necessity breeds opportunity and so I dusted off the book to help prepare for a sermon series on “Power, Sex and Money.” I found it to be a

not-too-heavy not-too-light introduction to these topics pushed forward by an evangelical and prophetic heart. Foster lists one of his reasons for writing a book on these topics:

“Historically it seems spiritual revivals have been accompanied by a clear, bold response to the issues of money, sex, and power... When these revivals occur in a culture, there is a renewal of both devotional experience and ethical life. We need a modern-day renewal of spiritual experience that is ethically potent.” (p3)

This intention echoes the beat of my own heart for the formation and transformation of the people of God’s church – a vision that I’m cogitating on publicly on my other blog in a couple of places). And, by and large, I appreciated how Foster goes about delivering his exhortation in this book.

One particular appreciation was his ability to bring each issue back to the core basis of a relationship with God – in terms of both positive and negative engagements with that relationship. And so, for instance, on the topic of money Foster writes:

“The farmers of ancient Israel had a keen sense of reality... They knew and understood on a very deep level that a good harvest was the gracious provision of a loving God... And so, as we learn to receive money and the things it buys as

gracious gifts from a loving God, we discover how they enrich our relationship with God... Doxology becomes the posture of our experience.” (p40)

but only after he has shown us that

“The New Testament teaching on money makes sense only when we see it in the context of the “principalities and powers”... Money is one of these powers. When Jesus uses the Aramaic term mammon to refer to wealth, he is giving it a personal and spiritual character. When he declares, “You cannot serve God and mammon” (Matt 6:24), he is personifying mammon as a rival god. In saying this, Jesus is making it unmistakably clear that money is not some impersonal medium of exchange... Mammon is a power that seeks to dominate us.” (p25-26)

and

“This radical criticism of wealth makes no sense to us at all unless we see it in the context of its spiritual reality. It is one of the principalities and powers that must be conquered and redeemed through the blood of Jesus Christ before it can be useable for the greater good of the kingdom of God.” (p31)

The exploration of the topic of sex I found to be the least helpful of the three topics covered. This was mostly due to style and emphasis rather than theological content. And I remain thoughtful about whether this is because engagement with the topic of sex by the church has become bolder in the last two decades (consider for instance Mark Driscoll’s infamous sermon on the Song of Solomon) – or whether I’m simply having a personal reaction: The last two decades have been extremely formative for me and I have moved beyond some of the more “sex education” (a la James Dobson) aspects of Foster’s presentation.

Nevertheless there was some good gems on the topic of sex – I liked, for instance, his description of how sex in marriage is a “celebration in the bedroom”:

“Frankly, sex in marriage should be a voluptuous experience. It is a gift to celebrate, excellent in every way.” (p138)

The main problem was something of a utilitarian (albeit kingdom-motivated) approach to issues of sex and marriage. I agree with certain comments. The following quote, for instance, echoes my own (rather simplistic) adage often delivered to those searching for a mate – “know where you’re going before choosing who you go with”:

“The basis for getting married that conforms to the way of Christ is a regard for the well-being of ourselves and others and a regard for the advancement of the kingdom of God upon the earth.” (p135)

This ethical criteria, however, means that Foster sometimes avoids a substantial engagement with the *inherent* rights or wrongs of issues such as masturbation (p123ff) and even divorce where, without totally tying up the loose ends, he makes statements such as:

“The basis for divorce that conforms to the way of Christ is, therefore, precisely the same as the basis for marriage. When it is clear that the continuation of the marriage is substantially more destructive than a divorce, then the marriage should end.” (p145)

and

“Jesus therefore spoke of remarriage as adultery, not because there was anything inherently wrong with it, but because of the attitude of contempt with which the man lived with the woman.” (p148)

If he does err, however, he errs on the side of grace and avoids unhelpful legalism. This is also something to be appreciated.

The section on power is based heavily, and effectively, on Christ as the example of how power is to be used by Christians. It is summed up well by his reference to the “marks” of “spiritual power” – love, humility, self-limitation, joy, vulnerability, submission, and freedom (p201ff).

Foster recognises the clear reality of spiritual power – particularly over the demonic and “power and principalities” of the world. But emphasises this Christ-like marks as the basis for that power, for instance:

“... we defeat the powers by an inner renunciation of all things... we have nothing to lose; the powers have no control over us. Suppose the powers take our goods and possessions – no matter, our possessions are only on loan from God; protecting them is more his business than ours... reputation... fear of death... we belong to One who can lead us through death’s dark pathway into greater life... we simply have nothing to lose. We are positionless and possessionless, and this complete and total vulnerability is our greatest strength. You cannot take something from someone who has nothing.” (p191)

I particularly appreciated what basically amounts to advice given to those who find themselves in Christian leadership and must keep their eyes firmly fixed upon Jesus lest they become full of themselves. Some gems of advice include:

“Small things are genuinely big things in the kingdom of God. It is here we truly face the issues of obedience and discipleship. It is not hard to be a model disciple amid camera lights and press releases. But in the small corners of life, in those areas of service that will never be newsworthy

or gain us any recognition, we must hammer out the meaning of obedience

. Amid the obscurity of family and friends, neighbors and work associates, we find God. And it is this finding of God, this intimacy with God, that is essential to the exercise of power. The ministry of small things must be prior to and more valued than the ministry of power. Without this perspective we will view power as a "big deal." (p219)

"Those who exercise spiritual power must be prepared for aloneness... I did not say loneliness... Aloneness means having to decide and act alone, for no others can share the burden or even understand the issues involved... Most poignant of all is the scene in the garden of Gethsemane where Jesus singled out the Three to watch and pray with him. On that holy night they abandoned their Master for sleep, and Jesus was forced to wrestle with the powers alone. We too must wrestle alone. We cannot even depend upon our husband or wife to understand what is occurring in the inner sanctuary of our soul... James Nayler wrote of the aloneness of divine intimacy and power, "I found it alone, being forsaken. I have fellowship therein with them who live in dens and desolate places in the earth, who through death obtained this resurrection and eternal holy life." Aloneness is the price of spiritual power." (p220-221)

The book was written more than two decades ago. But some things never change – even specific things in the last twenty years such as debates on homosexuality ("...homosexuality is so volatile a matter right now in the Christian community..." (p106)) and use of military power ("Military strategists plot, not how to make the world more stable, but how to make it less stable. Terrorism and spy networks are the order of the day." (p188)).

In the end, the usefulness of this book depends upon the readers willingness to be renewed – to be changed by God and convicted of error and disobedience in these heart-felt areas

– to embrace the heart of the a re-engaged ethical “vow” that bring the areas of money, sex and power, under Christ’s authority in our lives. It is in these areas that Christians are often, in practical terms, atheistic in their actual conduct. Read this book, but especially if you think that if you’ve got it all sorted out – it may just wake you up.

