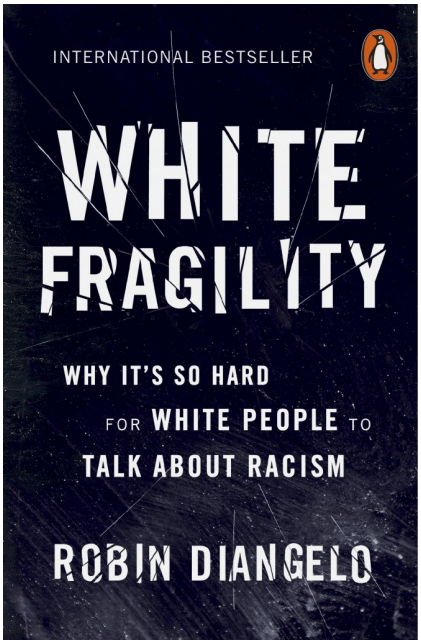
Review: White Fragility – Part 1: Understanding by analogy

I'm reviewing this book with some trepidation. It is far from my field of expertise. It is not a Christian book. It interacts with a topic that invokes emotional as well thoughtful response. It's a serious book about serious things with which we must seriously engage.



The broad issue that *White Fragility* touches upon, of course, is systemic and cultural racism. We might instantly think, therefore, that the focus is on people of colour. That's a telling assumption which raises the exact issue that the author is focused on, as per the subtitle: The problem is "Why it's so hard for *white* people to talk about racism."

The author is Robin DiAngelo, an academic and a professional in the area of diversity training. The illustrative anecdotes she brings from her experience ground her discourse. It's unfortunate that this attaches the book very closely to the US context, but that does not diminish its value for the broader Western and post-colonial world.

My reflections are going to come in a number of parts, spread out over a number of posts on this blog. I will be "wrestling out loud", so to speak, and doing so in response to the DiAngelo's focus. She is articulating an observation about

white people, and I am a white person. I have gone through some difficult introspection as a result of this book, but I am not laying claim to any emotional hardship. In all that follows, I will simply be seeking to follow the aim of my blog; it's a "wild attempt at thinking things through." We live in a racially charged world which white people are often blind to, or deny – this is our *white fragility*. What are the dynamics behind that? How might we own what we need to own up to and act upon it well? I welcome any feedback and critique. I am on a learning curve.

My intention is to engage with this book in three ways. The first part is included below. The second and third part will come in subsequent posts, which I will link here when they are uploaded: Part 2, Part 3a, Part 3b

Firstly, in this post, I am going to try and **understand by analogy.** I will be drawing on my own experience of being an immigrant and of English classism. I want to be clear: I am not pretending that there is any equivalence between my experience and that of people of colour. I am, however, seeking to understand DiAngelo by applying her thoughts to something that is within my own comprehension. I participated in some racial awareness training recently and it affirmed a similar approach; being aware of when we ourselves have been "othered" can, if held well, use empathy as a bridge to understanding.

Secondly, in a subsequent post, I'm going to try and **admit my ignorance.** This book *does* challenge and confront white people, and I am a white person. Having done my best to understand what the author is saying, I will aspire to allow myself to be undone by it, and examine myself racially. At the very least, I will try and find the bounds of my what I do not know.

Thirdly, in a one subsequent post, and then another, I will **seek a dynamic of resolution**. I come to this as someone aspiring to be a disciple of Jesus. This fundamentally forms

and shapes how I will explore and interact with DiAngelo's approach. I will discover much that mutually affirms, and also some philosophical collisions. Please note: I am not looking for a simplistic *solution* here, but what I'm calling a *dynamic resolution*, i.e. a pathway ahead towards what is *right,* to which I, for my part, can aspire.

Part 1 – Understanding by Analogy

When my family and I arrived in the UK in 2015 we found ourselves in the middle of "Middle England." It was a significant cultural collision. We made many mistakes, and we sought to educate ourselves. Our encounter was with the sociological collective that we might generally call "The Middle Class." At the time, I wrote about some of the reading I'd done as I struggled to understand.

I'm mentioning this *not* because I think there is an equivalence between classism and racism. Rather, it is a reflection using analogy; my understanding of one thing will inform my understanding of another thing. I have found myself agreeing with much of what DiAngelo says about white people *because* I have seen similar dynamics within the English middle class. I am also aware that I have only seen these because, as an immigrant, I have straddled the boundary of being on the "inside" and the "outside" of the normative group. But let me say it again: I am not conflating. A white immigrant's experiences are grounded in aspects of identity, (e.g. accent, cultural presumptions), that are often *positively* received and generally excused or overlooked. All that my experience affords, if anything, is a glimpse under the sociological hood.

For instance, DiAngelo asserts from the very beginning that "being white has meaning" (page 2). As a group, white people do not see themselves as a racial category, but rather as a

racial *norm*. This is a confronting truth. Many white people would dismiss it as a nonsense. I may have included myself in that number at one point but, from my cross-cultural experience, I now know what it means for a class of people to be blind to themselves while classifying others. I can grasp a little of the *concept* of whiteness in this regard, even if I can't fully appreciate the impact of it.

Those on the inside of a "normative class" cannot taste the water they swim in. Immigrants do. In order to process the dynamics of their new situation, *generalisations* are needed: We have to be able to make conclusions: "Middle class English people exhibit a certain behaviour." This is necessary in order to navigate the world we have landed in and so minimise social and psychological injury. It does *not* mean that *every* middle class individual person acts that way. Similarly, DiAngelo, generalises about race, and unashamedly so (page 11). It offends the "cardinal rule of individualism" and our visceral white, middle class hatred of being managed as a herd. Yet we *do* act with some herd-like dynamics, and a lack of awareness is part of the problem. Those dynamics are maintained through what DiAngelo calls "socialization"; "we make sense of perceptions and experiences through our particular cultural lens" (page 9). Immigrants have to learn these perceptions, but for the dominant culture they just "are", and are often unexamined.

Why this blindness? In the middle class there is often an underlying foundation of fear and shame: the fear of never quite being secure enough, and the shame of being comfortable when others are desperate. DiAngelo, speaking of whiteness, identifies defining ideologies such as *individualism* and *objectivity*. I can also detect these within the middle class; as a member of that group I learn (i.e. am socialised) to think of myself as fully in control of my own destiny, and able to impartially assess myself and others. By these means I can divest myself of responsibility for

another's misfortune, protect myself from their fate through objective assertions of why they are lesser, and unconsciously invest in a system that will maintain my conclusions. If we disrupt this system, we disrupt some deeply held self-protections; we are *fragile*. I can therefore comprehend why DiAngelo asserts: "We need to discuss white people as a group – even if doing so jars us – in order to disrupt our unracialized identities" (page 89).

> *I could see the power of the belief that only bad people were racist, as well as how individualism allowed white people to exempt themselves from the forces of socialization. I could see how we are taught to think about racism only as discrete acts committed by individual people, rather than as a complex, interconnected system. And in light of so many white expressions of resentment toward people of color, I realized that we see ourselves as entitled to, and deserving of, more than people of color deserve; I saw our investment in a system that serves us.*
> *(Pages 3-4)*

There are other analogical correlations as well. DiAngelo asserts that racism is "a structure not an event" (page 20). I find it interesting, and helpful, that her references to *overt* acts of racism are usually the illustrative *beginnings to* her broader argument; the overt is used to reveal the related, covert, hidden, systems. Again, without conflating, there is a correlation in classism: Overt acts of snobbery are relatively rare, and, after all, "it's not like we put people in the workhouses anymore." We do, however, define success, and restrict the pathways to it, in ways that "help" people to know their place and stay there. I can conceive of what DiAngelo means when she talks about "new racism", "a term coined… to capture the ways in which racism has adapted over time so that modern norms, policies, and practices result in similar racial outcomes as those in the past, while not appearing to be explicitly racist" (page 39).

DiAngelo asserts that the "social forces that prevent us from attaining the racial knowledge we need" include "the ideologies of individualism and meritocracy, narrow and repetitive media representations of people of color, segregation in schools and neighbourhoods, depictions of whiteness as the human ideal, truncated history, jokes and warnings, taboos on openly talking about race, and white solidarity" (page 8). I can elucidate at least one analogical example from this list: My children have gone to a good school and can do so by virtue of our address. We do, however, live in a "poor neighbourhood." At some point the school's catchment was arranged to include this neighbourhood. I suspect it was a deliberate attempt to help the lower classes. But here's the observation: it is the children from the poorer, multi-racial neighbourhoods which are required to travel two miles uphill to get to the campus. It sits and belongs in the middle of a more affluent suburb. This is not an overt act of classism (or even racism in this case); nobody has said "let's make it difficult for the poor kids and the BAME kids to get to school." But somehow it's ended up that way. It's not the only example in the city I live in.

Here's another correlation: DiAngelo asserts, "I believe *white progressives cause the most daily damage of people of color*" (page 5, her emphasis). Her point, as I understand it, references those who see the evil in overt racism, and decry it, yet, in failing to realise their own complicity in systemic racism, end up reinforcing it. The correlation in classism is with regard to those who "care for the poor" in some way. I see this in church circles all the time; even when it is manifested in good things such as food banks, there is, so often, an entrenched "client-patron" model at work. It is unspoken but real: "I am here to help you. I am normal. You are a poor person."

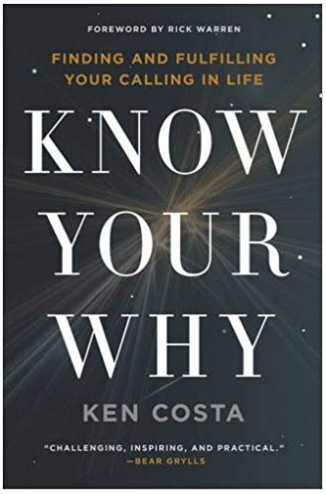
"White equilibrium is a cocoon of racial comfort, centrality, superiority, entitlement, racial apathy, and obliviousness,

all rooted in an identity of being good people free of racism" (page 112). DiAngelo is not speaking nonsense. I've seen this dynamic with respect to class. But now I must seek to understand it with respect to race and my own whiteness. I need my equilibrium disturbed. When it comes to understanding racism, I must admit that I am playing an equivalent part, in racial terms, to what the middle class has played in my immigrant experience. In other words, I am likely to be unaware, and unable to taste the water I'm swimming in.

I must turn away from my known analogy, and do my best to understand myself racially. This will be the content of my second part.

Review: Know Your Why — Finding and Fulfilling Your Calling in Life

Sometimes I read an excellent book that I find deeply frustrating. This is one of those times.



Ken Costa's *Know Your Why* is well written, right-hearted, and helpful. **This is a book about vocation.** If you are interested in what it means to live according to the calling of Christ,

especially if that calling is within the marketplace of the "secular" world, this book would likely bless you. Costa is not only successful in the world of finance and investment, he is one of the key leaders behind Holy Trinity Brompton (HTB) and the Alpha movement. *Know Your Why* could easily be the "Beta" course – a follow-on curriculum about introductory discipleship for real people in the real world. What's not to like?

Yet I find myself set on edge. In this review, therefore, I am taking a lead from my own reaction. I need to be clear about that. I'm not trying to whinge or tear down. I'm exploring my response and attempting to articulate my disquiet. I am checking myself for a critical spirit!

I must admit a bias. I didn't know Costa's background when I ordered the book, and when I made the HTB connection I found myself wearily sighing. Why? Maybe the pages of endorsements from the pantheon of Christian celebrities provoked my cynicism. Nevertheless, why so critical, O my soul? On the face of it, HTB and Alpha should be "my team" to cheer for. They are the face of charismatic Anglicanism, and it's *not* the skin-deep prosperity-peddling Trumpist forms that have a similar appearance in other places. The HTB/Alpha movement has birthed or nurtured new Christians, new church fellowships, worship leaders I admire, and even the current Archbishop of Canterbury. Why can I not sit with this book, that *is* full of some decent wisdom and pastoral guidance, and savour it freely like a fine refreshing tonic? I should be reading books like this as if it is from a friend to a friend. But I can't. And if I try, I'm pretending.

Here's the thing: Every time I find myself walking in proximity to the HTB hegemony, I don't feel like a fellow-pilgrim, I feel like a *customer.* I read books like this looking for resonance with my own journey. I hope to find some guidance, some solace, or even some rebuke and correction from the steadying hand of an elder in the church. Instead, I have

come away from it weary, feeling the same as I do after sitting in a conference room all day.

Am I just being grumpy and over-critical? Perhaps I'm just being a reverse-snob, smarting at receiving crumbs that have fallen from a table set in the shadow of Harrods? Maybe. I do have a reflexive reaction against the presumptive and proud professionalist proclivities of the Western church. But I don't think it's just me. There *is* some substance to my deconstruction.

I can pull apart this book, and **I find gem after gem after gem of really good stuff.** But when I take a step back to gather the bigger picture, I realise that there is something crucial that is obscured. I can't see the cross. **I see very little of the cruciform life.** This book is about *vocation* and *calling.* In it, I can learn about success from someone successful. But **true vocation rests not on success, but on surrender, death, and undeserved grace.** Vocation, in the end, navigates a wasteland of Christ's sufferings and those who walk it need help to die and live in the desert everyday; we only flourish as a desert rose. To extend that analogy: This book is a manual on English gardening techniques. It is pleasant, useful, *correct*, aspirational, lovingly intended, and frequently applicable; but it overlooks what green English middle-class gardens always miss, that living water *costs* you.

Let me show my working:

The good in this book is really good: "At the heart of the Christian faith is a big, fat *why,"* Costa says (page xx), "A calling for us to be *here*, in this place and at this time… to live out our faith and values in the rough-and-tumble of our everyday existence." If only more Christians and more churches would be moved in this way! Costa's pastoral heart is passionate and clear: "I have longed to strengthen those who try to make the very best of their lives" (page xxiv). I would *love* to have a coffee and a long chat with Ken.

The guidance he offers is focused on Jesus, and responsive to a God who cares and gives us his attention (page 3, *Called to Passion*), and in whom we have our fundamental sense of self ("Identity comes before destiny", page 16). He confronts our need for salvation and restoration, and pushes back at the shames and fears that will turn us from God's heart and lead us into stumbling and falling.

> *This realization that life is best savored when lived for Christ is the key to living well. It moves the center of gravity from me to him, and, in that shift, is the very basis of finding my real calling. (Page 17)*

Costa is dealing with *vocation*, and that's not a churchy thing. **He doesn't just break down the sacred-secular divide, he cuts across the premise of it.** "There is only one sphere of influence: the kingdom of God", he says (page 23, *Called to Engage*). "The world tries to atomize society, but we are called to draw together the spiritual, ethical, and vocational aspects of life" (page 27).

I particularly appreciated his dealing with the problem of *distraction* (page 127, *Called to Focus*). This is a standard, but necessary, theme for discipleship in this generation. Here his experience may make him slightly blind to those for whom money issues are not matters of *distraction* (page 132) but actual *existence*. But he takes it to the right place, including the need to turn and be captured by a desire for Jesus; i.e. to *repent* (*metaonoia* in the Greek).

> *No calling is complete without a true understanding of metanoia. Page 138*

But the essential thing is missing or obscured. This is what has frustrated me.

The heart of vocation is cruciform. All vocation takes us to a

moment of death, surrender, and abandonment of self into the hands of God. It is there in *every* vocational story in the Bible. It's Abraham with a knife on Mt. Moriah. It's Moses-of-Egypt shuffling around Midian with his sheep. It's David staying his slaying hand in a cave. It's the rich young ruler facing his idol. It's Peter weeping at the sound of a rooster. It's Paul, blind and helpless in Damascus. It's Jesus hungry for bread in the wilderness, and hungry for life in Gethsemane.

The *exercise* of vocation needs wisdom and skill and Costa is a great help with those things. But the *foundation* looks more like Bonhoeffer, who literally knew the Cost of Discipleship: "When God calls a man, he bids him come and die." In my own experience, and in walking alongside people over the years, vocation is knowing how we are to be "living sacrifices." Any sense of success is a gift and a grace. I don't quite see this essential dynamic in Costa's book.

The examples he uses, in the main, attach to career prospects and business or philanthropic projects. These are good points of application, but vocation is so much deeper than that. Moses didn't come back down from the burning bush excited about his career shift from shepherd to liberator, feeling equipped with a new-found maturity. Jonah's careerism wasn't *enabled* by his refinement in the belly of the whale, it *died,* and was *vomited* back to life, on God's terms! David wasn't moved by his future prospects in the wilderness, he was spiritually rent asunder until the fragments rested in the Lord his God: "You, God, are my God… my whole being longs for you in a dry and parched land where there is no water" (Psalm 63).

Throughout this book, I kept falling into this gap between the exercise of vocation, and its cruciform foundation.

As one example, consider the prophet's wife in the days of Elisha who needed a miracle of provision; she had nothing but

a little oil in the house. Costa wants to turn this into a lesson about recognising what we have, even it is little (page 50, *Called to Flourish);* we should be "prepared to live by an exception." But the story is actually about someone who is at the *end* of herself, and receives a *miraculous* provision. She didn't walk away from her time of indebtedness grateful for her lesson about looking on the bright side; she came out with a testimony of "I had nothing… but God…" Her family had died, so to speak, and had been restored back to life.

Another example: I truly appreciate how Costa devotes a chapter to the seasons of delay (page 63ff, *Called to Wait.*) For Costa, these seasons are a "a kind of spiritual workshop" (page 64). We might learn, alongside the footballer, Pelé, to imagine ourselves "performing like an irresistible force" (page 67). At this point even he realises that he is in danger of slipping into the "power of positive thinking " (page 67). His response is a subtle deflection, to **cover self-actualisation with a Christian aesthetic** rather than deal with the principle: Perform, but of course, don't forget that "the source of our hope and our ability to deliver come from the Holy Spirit" (page 68). Yes, "we need to be firm, positive, and inspired to believe the promises of the Bible" (page 68), but that is the *fruit* of the wilderness experience, not the path that takes us through. The wilderness isn't an object lesson in having our "dreams and determination run together" (page 75). Rather in the waiting we learn to lay it all down, until the Holy Spirit grounds our inspiration in God and not ourselves. If we seek to save our life in the wilderness, we've lost it.

These gaps matter. "I am no longer the arbiter of success in my life" (page 17), Costa wisely says, but the measure of success he applies in his anecdotes are usually, frankly, *worldly*: measures of numbers, influence, and *size*! If it is that, and not the cruciform way, that seizes our vocation, then we are undone. Costa is borrowing his vocabulary (e.g.

the sting of “satisfactory underperformance”, page 56) from his mercantile world, and that is not without merit. But the *allure*, the *pursuit*, of ‘success’ is a subtle idolatry that needs sanctification, not succour. Performance-drive *undermines* vocation. In the church world, especially, we must confront it. One of the ugliest parts of evangelical culture, the wounds of which I encounter time and time again in my walk and in others, is the invalidation of brothers and sisters; their vocations have been weighed and found wanting by some cold measure of performance that is actually extrinsic to the vocational walk of faith. Fairly or not, in caricature or otherwise, the HTB ecosystem is often that measure.

Those with a prophetic vocation would be *least* helped by this book. Costa rightly recognises that he buys into a framework for expressing calling that is “a privilege of the few, and we should always see it as such” (page 81, *Called to Choose*). He is also wise to affirm the simple serving tasks of being a “cog in the bigger machine” (page 58). This book isn’t an insensitive triumphalist treatise! For those who are playing the game, this book will help them win it with integrity. But, for some, the game is rigged. Sometimes the machine needs breaking. At that point the prophetic vocation needs nurture and wisdom. Their “why” would collide with the milieu of this book, I think, and fall through the gap.

I admire his vulnerability in talking about fear and anxiety (page 105, *Called to Courage*). In fact, I found this chapter to be quite therapeutic as I brought to mind some of my own “disappointment and dashed hopes” (page 106). But again, the gap is evident, even in his **theology of failure**. It is good to talk about mistakes, especially painful ones, but, in the end, they are merely *mistakes*. It is *shame* that must be confronted, and Costa *avoids* it. “We will all fail at something at some point, we will never *be* failures” (page 109), he says, and skirts the issue. We can’t cover our failures with a Christian aesthetic of “There, there, think

about Jesus realise that you're *not* the failure." Rather, it is *precisely* at the cross that shame gives way to life. I need the cross when I *am* broken and wrong – when I *am* a failure, and not simply when I've mucked something up. Christ took my shame, and all my *being* is now a gift from him. This is how vocation is built on his grace, and not our own sequence of little discoveries of how to do things better next time.

I appreciate how Costa may struggle with "determinist philosophies" (page 83) such as that of Marx and Freud, but he should also be wary of the opposite extreme of **self-determinism**. He urges us to "set [our faces] like flint" (page 121) as we "throw all that we have into this struggle." But he is quoting from Isaiah 50:7 and the rest of it says this: "*Because the Sovereign Lord helps me*, I will not be disgraced, therefore have I set my face like flint, and I know I will not be put to shame." The proactivity is not from us and our flinty faces, it is from the Lord. We realise our vocation when we realise our *utter existential* dependence upon God. Costa gets *close* to it when he acknowledges that "there could never be a shaking so severe as to dislodge the life that Christ wanted to have in and through me" (page 122) and when he affirms an ethos of "not sink or swim but saved" (page 123). But he presents this as if its our "emergency braking system" (page 124) or some sort of safety net. It's not; it's our *foundation*, and the essence of all that we are and do.

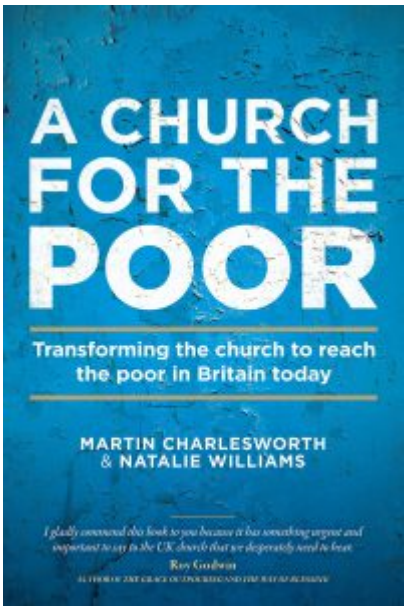
Again, I appreciate how he doesn't ignore the *cost* of calling. He quotes Paul's overwhelming challenges (page 156, *Called to Persevere*). But Paul, in fact, rests his perseverance not in his "indominitable *conviction*", but in *surrender and being strong in weakness*. "When we are cursed, we bless", Paul says, "when we are persecuted, we endure it; when we are slandered, we answer kindly. We have become the scum of the earth, the garbage of the world—right up to this moment." (1 Corinthians 4:12-13). Paul is compelled not by self-confidence, but by Christ's love (2 Corinthians 5:14). Once again, the

difference between Paul and Costa, is cruciform. All visions die; if they don't we achieve them in our own strength. **All perseverance is grounded in our total reliance on Jesus.** We don't "celebrate because our plans are completed" (page 161), we celebrate because, *he* has led us, and *his* plans have become *our* plans. *Our* plans have died, *his* have been completed. To *God* be the glory.

My frustration here echoes a broader angst. These various gaps – a tendency towards self-reliance and performance-drive, deflection by appeal to Christian aesthetics, diminution of the prophetic voice and so on – are a subtle but real characteristic of the wider church culture. They are often manifest in the nuance, and so I hope I am not reading them into Costa's book or picking the nits. There is so much good in what Costa writes; I just want him to bring it all the way in. The gaps are subtle, but they do need addressing. Anyone who takes up this book will gain much from it. But start with Christ and the taking up of your own cross first. That is where the grace of vocation is rooted and grows; and it has deep joy.

Review: A Church for the Poor

This book is about much more than reaching the poor. It is a handbook on mission. Missional illiteracy is high amongst our church leaders. Our structures are strictures on the strength of the gospel. This book, unassumingly, is something of a call to repentance. "Leaders… this book is for you" (p184).



Authors, Martin Charlesworth and Natalie Williams, come from different backgrounds but bring the same passion. They are involved in the *Jubilee+* movement, which I now have an inkling to investigate further. Their foundation is clear: "the coming of God's kingdom involve[s] dealing directly with urgent human needs and social issues – as an outworking of our personal salvation and as a key part of discipleship" (p23).

Their key strength is that they present more than an economic approach to poverty; they explore the spiritual and cultural aspects as well. This is confronting; as church we can deal with economic matters through professionalism and program provision, but spiritual and cultural matters have us collide with ourselves, our weaknesses, and our hardness of heart.

> *The proliferation of church-based foodbanks, debt advice services, job clubs, educational projects, supported housing schemes, elderly support projects and much more are testimony to the energy and vision of churches in the face of increasing social needs of all types.* ***However, the poor and deprived are still sometimes helped at a relational 'arms length'.*** *The church has more to offer those in need than just social action projects.* ***People are more than 'clients' – outcomes are more than statistics.*** *People need friendship and community.* ***People need to be valued****. Many need someone to*

> *walk alongside them as they try to find ways of rebuilding their lives." (pp40-41, emphasis mine).*
>
> ***When the middle class culture is unchallenged the most likely outworking of the church's approach to poverty is to confine its activity to social action projects alone.*** *(Page 137, emphasis mine).*

The authors explore the deeper aspects of poverty – "aspirational poverty – the loss of hope" (p41), "relational poverty – the loss of community" (p43), and "spiritual poverty – the loss of meaning" (p45). Hope, community and meaning is the stuff of the gospel, but there is no false dichotomy between spiritual and temporal matters here. Clearly, real economic poverty causes things like hopelessness and this can be observed: There has been a generational shift from "millenial optimism" (p31) to post GFC austerity (p31) and the new class of "JAM's" ("Just About Managing", p33). The authors' concern is not just to present and analyse statistic, or to pontificate about the latest programs, but to delve into *cultural shifts and values*.

Here they demonstrate one of those basic aspects of mission that shouldn't need to be said, but must: the church at mission does not begin with what it can do, but with *cultural understanding.* "Response to immediate need is one thing, but it can't be sustained and built upon without careful reflection about underlying issues raised by the context" (p34). **We are about cultural change** (what else does *"making disciples of all nations"* mean?) **which begins in us**, and our response to the poor is a touchstone, and often a point of conviction as to how obedient we are being.

> *We cannot use our donations to overseas projects as an excuse to walk by on the other side of the road and ignore the rough sleeper on our high street. Jesus doesn't leave that option open to us: in telling the parable of the Good Samaritan, he*

> *makes it abundantly plain that we're to help the person in front of us. (p35)*

Another basic aspect of mission is that we need to *go* (what else does *"go and make disciples…"* mean?) rather than rely on attractional methods alone. This is the principle of emulating the *incarnational* attitude of Christ, willing to empty ourselves in order to enter into the world which needs the gospel.

> *When people don't come to us – as the working class aren't coming to our churches – we need to find ways to reach out. But we cannot do it with an attitude of superiority. We simply must not approach wanting to draw working class and poorer people into our churches as something we 'do to them'. If we're to see churches that truly reflect all classes and economic situations, we need to be prepared to move into neighbourhoods that have bad reputations, to place our children in schools that may not achieve the best results, to shop where shopkeepers get to know their customers, to listen to people who we may feel we cannot relate to at all. (Page 95)*

Another basic aspect of mission is that the medium is the message, and the medium is *us.* In technical terms, missiology brings ecclesiology and eschatology to life. This is why the tendency for churches to split into homogenous units based on age or background is fundamentally anti-gospel. The gospel doesn't divide and avoid, it unifies and proclaims.

> *Wherever there is division, the church is to demonstrate reconciliation. So we need churches where the working class and the middle class sit together, speak with one another, share food and faith and find community that transcends postcodes and income levels and educational achievements (Page 96).*

> *A mature church has a number of flourishing sub-cultures whose members feel both a security in their own sub-culture and an ownership of the main church culture, which, of course, takes them somewhat out of tehir sub-cultural comfort zone. (Page 120)*

But this mission is not possible until the fundamental posture of the church is addressed, until we consider our attitude, our humility, our willingness to die to self. Charlesworth and Williams provide a constructive provocation that brings us to that place.

This provocation has its roots in their exegesis of how God calls his people to serve the poor in both Old and New Testaments and then in their exploration of church history. In reflection we are left asking questions like: Are we *over, under, or next to* the poor? Our answer is an indicator of our humility before God, our ability to self-reflect and discern the Spirit's leading. It's an indicator of whether our mission builds up ourselves or truly advances the kingdom of God. Our response to the poor reflects the size of our mission heart, and how much we embrace the necessary attitudes of discernment, contrition, and courage so that we are willing to be "jolted out of our own understanding" of what we consider to be culturally normal (p76).

> ***We need to ensure that we are not speaking about inclusivity without putting it into practice.*** *It is one thing to say that we believe all people are equal before God, but another to create a level playing field where people from all backgrounds have the same opportunities. (Page 73, emphasis mine)*
>
> *We need to break down these barriers so that our churches can increasingly reflect the kingdom of God. But in order to do that,* ***we need to reflect on some of the attitudes in our hearts that might prevent our churches from more accurately***

> ***reflecting our society,*** *and welcoming people from all demographics,* ***without expecting them to transition from on social group to another****. (Page 78, emphasis mine)*

In this light, their chapter on "British Culture: Materialism, Individualism, Cynicism" (Page 79) is an excellent mirror. It should be compulsory reading for all those who are considering church leadership; know your blind spots, be aware of your own culture, and discern the distinction between the essence of the gospel and how we have applied it for our own comfort.

> *There is no place in the church for the kind of individualism we see in our society,* ***but we need to be intentional about rooting it out.*** *Cultural concerns with personal space and boundaries may have influenced us in ways that we are not even aware of. (Page 87, emphasis mine)*

> ***Only by going against the grain of British Culture in these areas, can we build churches that really are homes for those who are poor or in need.*** *(Page 90, emphasis mine)*

> *If we are to build churches for all, we need to break out of mindsets that may have been formed by our own background and class or by the media and political narratives that surround us…* ***We need to have a sober assessment of ourselves, asking God to highlight any biases we have and any commitment to middle class values that is unhelpful to reaching others who may not share them.*** *I am trying to learn to let my first question, when I feel uncomfortable or judgmental or fearful around someone , be 'what is going on in my heart?' before I start to ask questions about the person in front of me. (Page 97, emphasis mine)*

> *Are we growing in kindness? Are we looking for opportunities to be generous? Are we more concerned about looking like 'good Christians' or actually becoming like Jesus?…* ***Changing the culture of our churches might also mean taking a cold, sober look at the prejudices of our hearts.*** *(Page 128,*

emphasis mine)

Personally, I was confronted with my own growing cynicism. For me, it is a cynicism with regards to the middle class church itself. Moving in the opposite spirit is hard, but no matter who we are giving ourselves to, "we have to guard our hearts so that the disappointment we rightly feel doesn't turn into a cynicism that wrongly hardens us to others." (Page 89).

Charlesworth and Williams are intensely practical. The entire second half of the book is about applying the spirit of the first.

I was particularly glad that they raise the issue of the "gentrification of leadership" (p104). A key foundation for church maturity is the ability to have "native" leaders that rise up from within. Practically speaking, then, we must deal with our tendency to attach leadership to cultural markers such as tertiary-level training that is (sometimes merely) academic in nature. Our system of severing ordinands from their context not only diminishes vocation and disempowers church communities, it can be an imposition of culture. Rather, real, on-the-ground discipleship is needed, "enabling leaders among the poor to emerge and begin to function in leadership roles within the church" (p146).

Their valuing of prophetic leadership (p111) is also of practical importance. A case in point: I read this book having recently come across Bp. Philip North's prophetic word, "Hope for the Poor" at this year's *New Wine United* conference. Similarly, Mike Pilavachi spoke at the *Naturally Supernatural Summer Conference* drawing on the call for justice in Amos. Gill and I are finding ourselves moved and impassioned by these issues and we look to people such as these for leadership as "prophetic advocates" (p152). Wise churches and wise leaders need to take steps to hear the prophetic, especially when it is uncomfortable. After all, cultural

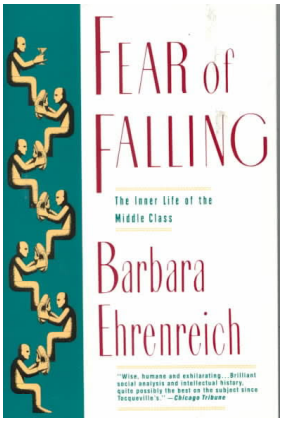
change never happens when leaders are comfortable, “in my experience the real problem has been the lack of commitment by the church leader(s) to care for the poor” (p160).

The role of the diaconate in this prophetic leadership is an interesting examination (p162). The diaconal role, when accepted and embraced, adds capacity to the pastoral role. A deacon is “someone called, equipped and able to work in social action while being appropriately linked to church pastors and the main life of the church.” Gill and I are both ordained deacons, and as I currently wrestle with the fact and substance of my ordination, this is a fascinating thought. The exercise of diaconal ministry can avoid the church splitting into groups of lobbyist/activists who have competed for resources, and can lead *corporate* discernment where the body moves together. Food for thought.

Their hope into delving into practicalities such as these various pitfalls and possibilities is to give encouragement: it can be done! They act as consultants to those who have questions to ask.

I would go further. It can be done, it *must* be done. As the saying goes, it’s not that the Church of God has a mission in the world, it’s that the God of Mission has a Church in the world. Charlesworth and Williams bring us to God’s heart for the poor and so give us a touchstone for our faithfulness. Here we have the very basic principles of mission, the fundamental necessary attitudes to be a faithful church. It’s not rocket science, it requires no preparatory steps. We shouldn’t just learn from what they have to say, we should simply get over ourselves and get on with it.

Review: Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class



The reality that there was a man of God, Jesus, who lived, died, rose again, and is spiritually at work in the world, is good news. We can theorise about it this way and that, but the longer I live the more I realise that the prayer that Jesus taught us: "Your Kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" pierces the insulation of human societal subsistence and touches the live wires of our feeblest condition together with our most optimistic hopes. Jesus Christ, Saviour and King above all powers and winds and waves of human cunning, must be proclaimed not just for the transformation of individual lives, but of communities, societies, entire cultures. What else might his *commission* to disciple and baptise *nations* mean, if not to seek to teach and immerse them in the ways of divine life?

For better or worse, Gill and I have found ourselves embedded near the "Middle" of Western society. This is not to say that our immediate context is monochrome. But it *is* "Middle England" and the prevalent communal mode and manner is professional and middle class. It is not something to be disparaged, even by a farm-boy like myself from out the back of Deloraine, but it something for us to come to *understand* and, in the sense described above, to learn to *evangelise*.

How, then, could I go past a book that spruiks to speak of the *Inner Life of the Middle Class*? And how could I not seize upon the title: *The Fear of Falling*. Because if there was one characteristic we have observed time and time again in our Western world wanderings it is the prevalance of fear: fear of

slipping down the scale, of falling off the class edge; fear of life-defining *numbers*, from bank balances, and returns on investment, to school results and performance indicators. Gill and I have a comparitor: In Australia these numbers matter, but on something of a sliding scale; in the UK's herd-management mentality, they define *thresholds* and binary ups and downs. It is *starker* here, and more indicative of the broader western world I think. And it's life-sapping. Even the literature from my children's school cautioned against student's having an after-school job by appealing to numbers: please consider if £20 extra per week now is worth losing £200 extra per week in one's career down the track. It contains some wisdom I guess, but it's such a flaccidly fearful form of assessing life's experiences.

So would Ehrenreich's book help me understand? It *is* American. It *is* a bit old. It was written in the very late '80s and basically provides sociological commentary for the baby boomers into their middle age. But if, as they say, the currently middle-aged Generation X, is an amorphous bridging generation, here are the cracked foundations upon which one end of the bridge rests. Our children define the other end, and will learn to speak of it, in time.

And so the book is helpful. Ehrenreich's argument is a *journey*, from a post-war class that presumed ubiquity and had little self-consciousness, and then "an emerging middle-class awareness of being a class among others and, ultimately, of being an elite *above* others." (p11). She tells her story using not only categories of wealth and capital, but also of freedoms and control, and the ability to find life's purpose. The common denominators throughout are of a class that can never rest in itself, which requires exertion to maintain capital and prestige from generation to generation, in which life's place, being neither secure at the top, nor can't-fall-any-further at the bottom, are always *tenuous.*

> *If this is an elite, then, it is an insecure and deeply*

> *anxious one. It is afraid, like any class below the most securely wealthy, of misfortunes that might lead to a downward slide. But in the middle class there is another anxiety: a fear of inner weakness, of growing soft, of failing to strive, of losing discipline and will. Even the affluence that is so often the goal of all this striving becomes a threat, for it holds out the possibility of hedonism and self-indulgence. Whether the middle class looks down toward the realm of less, or up toward the realm of more, there is the fear, always, of falling. (p15)*

There is much in this book's journey that raises some of my hackles at the state of the western world. Ehrenreich progresses from the 1950's aversion to affluence, to the psychology of student uprisings in the 1960's, and a growing self-awareness of elitism with respect to the working class of the 1970's. Throughout it all the well-worn paths of western endeavour: academic, professional and financial endeavour, are shown to be based on artificialiaties. Why, for instance, do we expect our children to go through the time and often unreachable expense of obtaining a degree? "So that they can have a decent career" is an insipid, and self-defined answer that speaks nothing about the value of education and free thought, let alone true merit, and fulfilling success.

As Ehrenreich's journey continued I began to sense my resentment at the pseudo-sacred game that is foisted on us. Anything that makes not only women's liberation, but decent work-life balance, and the seizing of life's deeper purposes, compete with housing (and sometimes food!) affordability is simply a mug's game: a cacophony of stressors with diminishing returns. My parent's generation either dropped out of the game, or played to win and turned into yuppies. That misses the missiological trick: to be in it, but not of it, if that is at all possible.

It is Ehrenreich's sixth chapter, on one half of that

generational response, the rise of the yuppies in the ’80s, that had the most resonance for me. Here there is a picture that has not only refused to fade, but has become even more amplified by the tech and financial bubbles and busts that came later. Here we read of a growing gap between rich and poor as the economics failed to trickle-down, and as the status (and remuneration) of the traditional professions waned before the rise of a corporate elite (p200). The tension between mid-level income and mid-level lifestyle (p206) bolstered the anxiety. And the determinators of class, just like now, came down to accidents of fortune (e.g. the timing of the purchase of one’s first home, parental wealth), or the impact of basic human realities such as having children, or investing in or forgoing a vocation (p210).

> *Many of the college students I talked to in the mid-eighties were suffering from what might be called “premature pragmatism.” They were putting aside, at far too early an age, their idealism and intellectual curiosity in favor of economic security, which was increasingly defined as wealth. A young woman interviewed by Newsweek had switched from social work to sales because “I realized that I would have to make a commitment to being poor to be a social worker.” (p209-210)*

The result was a deadening: a pervasive busyness (p232) and an un-intellectual pragmatism (p241). Consumerism took its place in a vicious guilt-reward cycle (p232). In my own words, one could summarise it, echoed in today’s world as a **non-thinking generation trying to assuage its regret.**

At the end, Ehrenreich longs for an expansion of the middle class, an egalatarian “welcoming of everyone” (p263) until there is no other class. This is pure unrealistic idealism, although I am sympathetic. Venture capitalist Nick Hanauer famously made a similar, and more applicable point in 2014 as he ably argued for middle class investment (based on high

income taxes) as *shrewd*.

But our project is of a different kind. Journeys like Ehrenreich's can leave us resentful and frustrated, and *stressed* as the pressures of this world are distilled and unpacked. We have touched on our fears. Now wherein lies our hope?

The Sunday School answer, of course, is "Jesus is our hope." It's in the application that it gets more grown-up. To move against the spirit of this age and work in the opposite direction of the abounding fear involves many things. Against consumerism we embrace *holiness.* But that means facing our fears of losing out; it means repenting of self-satisfaction. Against dehumanising pragmatism, we embrace *vocation* in the priorities for how we use our wealth and time, and how we count the cost. But that means facing the fears of invalidation and inferiority, it means repenting of our protectionism. Against self-referential self-actualising individualism, we seek to *worship,* which brings us unmade before God, to hear his word, recognise our brothers and sisters, and receive forgiveness. But that means facing the fears of what we will see in God's light, it means confessing our sins, daring to heed divine truth, and turning from our passivity and infantilism. In short, it means faith and repentance.

It's this hope for which the new monasticism embraces the threefold mode and manner of life: **purity**, **simplicity**, and **accountability**. I can think of few better antidotes to the middle class malaise.

In the end there is no hope in Ehrenreich's book. But there is hope in Jesus, because, if nothing else, for our society to face it's fear of falling, it will take a miracle.