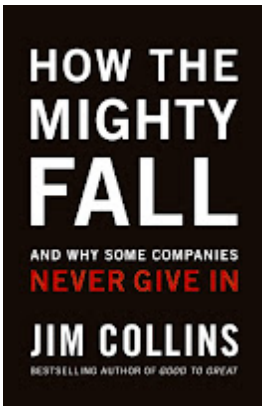
Review: How the Mighty Fall



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.

