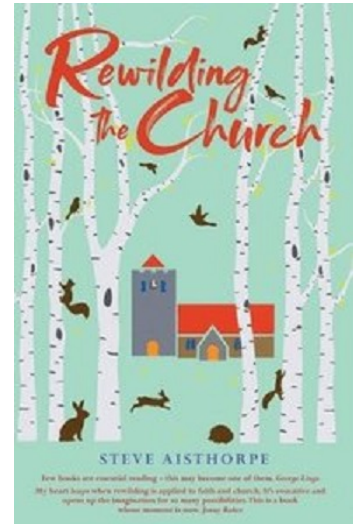


Review: Rewilding the Church

It is very easy to raise questions about the state of the church. It's harder to provide the answers. This is a decent book, that does the easy bit, but not the hard bit.



You don't have to spend too much time in the ecclesiastical world before encountering a sort of divine discontent.

The *ideal* of the church is so profound, when you dig into it, that St. Paul could only fathom it by calling it a *mystery*. God intervenes in this world *through his people*, through his children, drawn together across time and place, by the Holy Spirit, and counted as united with Jesus himself. All that has come through Jesus to this world – salvation, forgiveness, healing, hope, truth, love, joy, sanctification, peace... – is instantiated, implemented, manifested through his people. We are a “*peculiar people*” reflecting in our very being together, the reality of Christ's resurrection and victory, and the essence of life eternal.

To be fair, this ideal is far from a pipe-dream. I have a testimony, just like millions of others, of tasting some of this in the life of God's people. I have encountered Jesus in sacrament, song, the proclaimed word of God, and the outpoured care and provision of spiritual brothers and sisters. I have known what is like for Church to be lively, dynamic, provocative, restorative, and free!

Like many, of course, I have also encountered the church as a

mere shadow of this; stultified, institutionalised, divided, toxic, and sometimes even downright ugly. I was thinking about these things years ago.

How do we respond to this gap between the ideal and the real? How do we cope with it? How do we seek to *change* it? This is the age-old question that Steve Aisthorpe takes us to with *Rewilding the Church*.

Aisthorpe draws on a defining metaphor. He looks to **the ecological movement of rewilding**. This philosophy seeks to restore the vibrancy of ecosystems not through ongoing strategic management of fauna and flora, but by allowing the space for nature to run its course; it entrusts the land to the original, wild, uncontrollable, organic mechanisms that existed before domestication.

Advocates of rewilding argue that much of what is done in the name of conservation is little more than the preservation of man-made landscapes through human intervention and and management. It's time, they assert, to step back and allow the processes within nature to reshape the environment. Pages 1-2

The application to Church life is clear. The metaphor imagines a domesticated church, beset by an “appetite to plan, manage, contain, and control” (page 2), and in need of rewilding in order to realise that elusive ideal. It’s quite compelling.

At first and second glance, it aligns with many of my own thoughts about the plight of the church: We have become fear-and-performance-driven; much of our ecclesiastical structure is an attempt to provide a controlled, and thus usually dead-on-arrival, outcome. There is stability, but little faith, in following a map. A truly Kingdom Church will be blown by the Spirit, and will learn to chart new waters; it will know *why* it’s going on the adventure it is called to, but will not always be able to fully articulate what that will look like or

where it will end up. Aisthorpe's metaphor articulates something similar: "We cannot convey a vision or an outcome... we must convince people of the integrity of the process" (page 12).

Similarly, I have been known to say that my church growth model distills down to "those who seek to save their live will lose it." That is, it is grounded on *surrender*. Aisthorpe's metaphor resonates:

I am... suggesting that in our well-meaning efforts to create, facilitate, organise, manage and control, we are sometimes in danger of surrendering authenticity for mere reality... By creating and maintaining congregational models that require certain functions and roles, we forego community that emerges from the gift of its people, shaped by the context of their lives and the realities of the wider community. The distinction I am making may seem obtuse or subtle, but it is certainly important. It is the difference between a community with Jesus at its heart and a club for followers of Jesus. In one we are firmly in control; the other is the result of surrendering the driving seat. (Page 27).

His chapter on "culling the invasive species" is excellent in this regard. Through this part of the metaphor he deals with the invasive idolatry of *busyness* that feeds much of the toxicity of modern church culture. "For the kingdom that Jesus proclaimed and demonstrated to flourish and expand, " he says, "we don't need to *do* more and we don't need to be cleverer; it is neither ingenious tactics nor nifty strategy that is required... we need to respond by culling what is unhelpful, live lives of simple and courageous obedience, and trust God that what emerges will reflect the splendour of his kingdom" (page 158). He channels Eugene Peterson's *Contemplative Pastor* in this section, and conveys its richness.

Most fundamentally, (and here he draws significantly on Hirsch

and Frost and their *ReJesus*), he centres it on Jesus, the “Wild Messiah”, about whom it is all about. I often perceive the church as beyond renewal, revival, or even reformation, and in need of *resurrection*. Aisthorpe speaks, with Hirsch and Frost, of a “refounding.” “Rewilding the Church is not a call to spend more hours on our knees,” he exhorts, “although for some it might mean that... it is a refocusing of our attention on Jesus, a reinstating of him at the heart of everything” (Page 57). When we lose Jesus, our “self-identity has been eroded” (page 39) and we need to answer that deepest question of “who do we think we are?”

Rewilding the Church begins here: knowing ourselves to be beloved, putting our roots down deep into Christ, allowing our self-identity to be reshaped in the light of Scriptures, discerning his purposes and stepping out into the adventure of faith. (Page 38)

I have resonance, agreement even, in my engagement with this rewilding metaphor. His perception of the ills of church – that gap between the ideal and the reality – seems to align with my own. He even touches on the problems of missional language (page 46) that I could have used in a recent article on being post-missional! We have the same vista before us. But it begs the question: What now? What do we with this? What next in the pursuit of God’s kingdom, to the bridging of the gap between what is and what can be?

At this point the metaphor begins to ring a little hollow, and his suggestions take on that tinge of theory slightly disconnected from the dirt-under-the-fingernails practice of pastoral ministry.

His weakest chapter, on “tuning in and joining in”, is the clearest illustration of this. It has much that is virtuous; essentially he calls us to discernment and following the Spirit, to a “conscious setting aside of preconceptions and a

determination to discern what God is doing and our role in that" (page 74). This is wisdom, and, in the face of a tendency for churches to grab their nearest Alpha course and launch forth into another round of having always done it that way, it is prophetic and useful. But taken too far, as I suspect it might be, it can become an unworkable, deleterious, deconstruction.

Similarly, I admire the work he has conducted in researching the spirituality of the "dones." I've even ordered his *The Invisible Church*. He recognises that legalism and dogmatism are part of the problem, and he rightly exhorts towards "creating environments where asking questions and exploring doubts are positively encouraged" (page 130). Yet he fails to recognise that there are limits to such an approach, which if transgressed, inhibits and hinders and unbalances the kingdom's ecosystem.

Let me unpack this: What I think Aisthorpe has done is taken a small step off the edge into a prevalent postmodern fallacy that relies on two impossibilities.

The first fallacy is this: that it is possible to approach the church as a blank slate with no preconceptions. For sure, the kingdom of God rarely comes by means of a bulldozer, a brash leader with hardened ideas of how things should be. It is far worse, however, when it is attempted with a pretense at blank neutrality. There is a form of unhealthy (even arrogant) piety that purports to purely "leave space" for the "Holy Spirit" or the "natural processes" of wild mission. *Everyone* has an agenda, a preconception of how things should be. It is healthy to admit it, and much better to bring that agenda forward carefully, gently, and with humility.

This flaw is in Aisthorpe's metaphor. Every example he brings of ecological flourishing embodies a preconception; it *presupposes* what that flourishing looks like. There is a hidden pre-judgment of what should or should not be the end

result of the “rewilding”, of what would be considered a “successful” attempt at rewilding, or what might be considered to be a failure. Every ecologist has a hope, a dream, a passion for what a renewed ecosystem might look like. Everyone has an agenda on their own terms.

But of course, the point of the metaphor is to consider the church: Consider a pioneering venture, a church plant or a fresh expression, launching out like an expedition into the uncharted waters of organic local ministry. The “rewilding” metaphor may help us remember that the team can’t control everything; they don’t know what lies around the corner, who will be their “people of peace”, and what aspects of their work will resonate and take hold. Flexibility, adaptability, and humility will be required. But so will a sense of vision, purpose; and understanding of *why* the venture is being started, and *why* it is worth the cost. These are preconceptions that must be owned, explored, amended, and released, not wished away by some pretence!

The second fallacy is related, and it’s this: that it is possible to approach the mission of God as a neutral observer. The rewilding metaphor purports to be a “hands off” approach, and its strength is in its departure from the artificial cultivation of “natural” environments. But it is not really hands-off, is it? Human agency is *involved* in the reintroduction of native species, the elimination of invasive species, and in “creating the environment” in which a new (and usually “better” in some preconceived sense) balance is achieved. Human agency is present, and can’t be pretended away.

Consider, again, his otherwise very helpful chapter about “noticing who’s missing”. He picks up on his research into “the dones” who have left church behind in their Christian discipleship, and, as mentioned above, exhorts us towards creating an environment which allows for “asking questions and exploring doubts” (page 129). It’s a great push back at

dogmatism. But notice the tension: At the same time as he wants to allow for questions and doubts, Aisthorpe also has a *kerygma*, a *truth* to assert: We must “refocus our attention on Jesus and the vision he imparted, the kingdom, his certain intention to redeem all of creation and to restore his seamless reign” (page 134).

What’s it going to be? Questions and doubts? Or truth-claims about Jesus? For sure, it’s both, but the rewilding metaphor doesn’t hold that tension. Just as an ecologist cannot pretend that they are not present in their environment; Aisthorpe cannot pretend that the epistemological certainty of the gospel of Jesus – the Way, the Truth, and the Life – can be removed from a church environment of questioning and doubting. To be fair, I don’t think he does, himself, pretend; but his metaphor gives succour to those that do, and they are invariably damaging to the church.

It is good for all mission-minded congregations to listen hard, question well, explore and wrestle with doubts and assumptions. But no-one does this in an absolute sense; no-one cuts themselves off from their epistemological foundations. Those who claim to be moved solely by “listening” are usually unhealthy pursuers of their own certainty; and being self-deceived they tend to hurt and exclude and roll over others blindly. Rather, the strength of the gospel is that it has a certainty in an objective life-giving someone other-than-us, Jesus. In the certainty of *him* is a truly safe place in which to wrestle with our questions and doubts.

So what’s underneath all this? To be fair, I’m probably amplifying the problem here. Aisthorpe’s book is genuine and temperate, and he only takes a small step into these murky waters. Maybe he has simply run into the problem of all metaphors, that they can be extended too far. I’d love to have a longer conversation with him. His insights intrigue me.

What I’m detecting however, and responding negatively to, is a

crack left open for a more insidious miscomprehension of the place of human agency in the church, in mission, and in the world at large. It's the flip-side of toxic traditionalism (crf. page 174) and just as bad. It is prevalent in the more Greenbelt-y ends of the Christian economy, which I'm sure is Aisthorpe's area of influence.

In this view of humanity, we are not merely *corrupted* and *corrupting* (as in the classical views of sin, guilt, and shame), we are *innately corruption itself*. We don't *have* a problem, we *are* the problem. By definition, humanity *unwinds* the environment; we are the problem, in ourselves.

The classical view of the human condition at least has a "solution": At the worst (and most worldviews have it) it is answered in some form of judgement and retribution. In the gospel, gloriously, it is answered with *grace, forgiveness, regeneration, renewal*.

This other view has no grace. Can we call it some form of "nihilistic humanism? It's answer is not the *redemption* of human agency it is the *elimination* of it. It's "gospel" is the diminishment, even the eradication, of humanity itself. If we remove ourselves, the world will be pristine.

We detect this view in our post-postmodern "wokeist" world and as we smart against "cancel culture" and other intersectional diktats. There is no grace. There is no redemption. There is just the elimination of voice, and even of personhood. Where corruption is perceived, in, for example, the recent furore regarding J. K. Rowling's opinion on the essence of womanhood, it can only be solved by eliminating that voice: She should shut up, she should be nothing, her privileged existence is almost an affront. The best we can do is to rid this world of our corruption; to rid this world of ourselves.

Aisthorpe's metaphor allows space for this nihilistic humanism. The rewilding metaphor buys into it: The best form

of human agency in ecology is not to act. The best form of leadership is to not lead. The best form of being church is not to be, but to dissolve into the mystery of doubt and of questions without answer. Run to the end of this road and we deny the value of the very humanity that Christ himself inhabited; we deny Christ.

The gospel is *not* a flip to the other extreme in which human agency is absolutised. It is possible to conceive of a *dominion* ecology in which the *telos* of the environment is subservience to human passion. We can easily imagine, in a Trumpist world, the essence of church being nothing but the articulation of dogmatic norms defining human worth around legalistic performance. This also denies Christ.

Rather we must come to the middle: The gospel speaks of *sanctified, renewed, Spirit-led, life-bringing* human agency. God is an *interventionist* God, not a leave-it-alone-to-its-own-devices deity. God intervenes *through* humanity. This is ultimately, of course, in Jesus, who fulfils the heart and soul of human vocation; from the creation covenant of Adam, through Mosaic holiness, and Davidic leadership as a shepherd after “God’s own heart.” The *telos* of the gospel is not grasped in the disappearance of humanity-as-corruption, but in the emergence of humanity-redeemed.

All creation is groaning, Paul says in Romans, as if in the pains of childbirth. For what? To lose the shackles of it’s human parasites? No! “The creation waits in eager expectation for the *children of God* to be revealed.” (Romans 8:19). The children of God will not rape or pillage or ecologically destroy, but neither will they abandon, remove themselves, or deny their image of God by ceasing to be. They will act with careful, loving, Jesus-shaped agency; tending, nurturing, *intervening*, growing, proclaiming life and truth.

As for creation, so for the church. Both church and creation are eschatologically linked. I long for a true rewilding of

both. In the truest sense, we are also creatures, and we also belong there: we hear our Saviour and the call to his wild.

I see glimpses of this call in Aisthorpe. But in the end, his rewilding is more of a *taming* of God's people towards a trajectory that's not entirely benign. There is wisdom and good to glean from this book, but the church's deepest longings are not answered here.

Is It Time For The Post-Missional Church?

Useful observations about the world are often made when things shift and change. We can compare the new to what came before. For instance, we talk about "post-war Britain"; it was different, but related, to the Britain of earlier generations. We can make similar observations about the shifts and changes in how we do church.



In recent decades, the greatest shift has been into postmodernity. This worldview took the building blocks that made up "modern man" and reconstructed them. In the modern world the church's posture was intellectual defence (apologetics), explanation and persuasion. Robust debates and gospel explanation from the likes of Billy Graham were the tools of the time. The question we sought to answer was "Is Christian faith reasonable?"

The postmodern world launched out from modern rationalism and a positive view of human progress and took us to the

subjective human experience of truth, and a re-emphasis on belonging and community. The church followed; we began to emphasise the *experience* of the gospel. Early (ca. 1970s) movements formed closer knit relationships, through things like cell church, and enthusiastic charismatic experiences. **The missional church** is grounded in these modes. They became systematised and commercialised through the 80's and 90's, giving rise to the "seeker sensitive" and homogenous-unit (special-focus group) structures that are the defaults of most evangelical churches today. This is the world of the Alpha Course, and the default Sunday pathway for growing up through creche, pre-school, children, and youth programs towards our eventual ecclesial self-fulfillment.

We have also seen a late-stage postmodern pushback at how this became commercialised and conservative. Charismatics have morphed into contemplatives. Greenbelt, which once played the now-oh-so-mainstream Michael W. Smith and Amy Grant, now sits at the feet of secular sages such as Russell Brand. The "emerging" and the "emergent" parted ways. Steve Chalke, Tony Campolo, John Smith (for you Aussies), all jumped to the left. It was a shift in expression, the rise of postevangelicalism, but it was still postmodern underneath.

Throughout the postmodern age we have been playing in a pluralist world. The question we were seeking to answer was "Does the Christian faith belong, and can we belong to it?"

The world is now shifting into post-postmodernity. The pluralist project is dead; we live in a world of competing metanarratives that are overt in their attempts to totalise and win. So-called "wokeism" coerces through cancel culture and an attempt to establish its own pseudo-religion of signalled virtue. So-called Trumpism, at the other end of the spectrum, does the equal but opposite. Each is anathema to the other, and the demand is to pick a side. The question that is forced upon us is this: "Is Christianity actually ethical and moral at all?"; which is to say, are those Christians on the

“right” side?

In the post-postmodern world, our postmodern missional response no longer cuts it. The techniques for weaving worldview and experiences together to spin the narrative, change hearts and minds, and win converts, are now ubiquitous in every sphere, and usually harmful. Our missional methodology buys into that game, whether we mean it to or not. Amidst the cynicism are the real stories of people who are victims and survivors of mission’s cold pragmatism. We used to target the “unchurched and de-churched” who needed to be “won back”; now we have the growing phenomenon of the “dones” – those who have left the church, not because they have lost their faith, but because their faith has lost its place and people. I know from our experience what it means to walk alongside a new young Christian, and realise that the path of discipleship they needed was away from the programmed precision of their local church.

It’s time for a post-missional church. Somehow we need to follow Jesus into and through the post-postmodern world, to somehow transcend the culture wars, and by some miracle reach a cynical generation. It seems impossible, it’s hard to imagine; but that’s always the case when things start to change and shift.

There *is* a real danger of slipping into either triumphalism or nihilism. I hear and see both at work. The existential question of the post-postmodern world ties virtue to a reason for being; “I am good, therefore I am,” is the mantra of the day. With nihilism, the church is rendered as bad and therefore meaningless and unworthy of existence; it’s when we agree with the world that the church is toxic, in the same category as toxic masculinity, heteronormativity, and other privilege, and so our moral duty is to fade away and rid the world of our corruption. The alternative takes us to triumphalism; we validate our existence by asserting our infallible, unquestionable, virtue, and we thump our Bibles

against the fake news. Both options are untenable; they don't really look like Jesus.

We must discern a way forward. That is a big question, and I don't have the answer. But we *can* look to the changes and the shifts, and pick it up as prayerful project.

This is something I want to do, and I'd like to do it in community. Would you join me in observing the shifts and changes around us, and by imagining a post-missional church? Here is my attempt at an initial brainstorm of comparison. Note that these are observations of what has been, and what might be, not assertions of how it should be. I'd very much welcome your input and thoughts. Get in touch with me in the comments or through my other points of connection.

Characteristics of church (initial brainstorm):

	<u>Modern /</u> <u>"Christendom"</u> <u>Church</u>	<u>Postmodern / Post-</u> <u>Christendom /</u> <u>"Missional" Church</u>	<u>Post-Missional</u> <u>Church?</u>
<u>Placement in</u> <u>Society</u>	Established institution presumed to exist.	Institution in the marketplace, competing for market share.	Heavily localised, perhaps even fragmented; akin to "pop-up" economy. Relationally unified.
<u>Structure</u>	Hierarchical, pastor-centric.	Semi-hierarchical; devolution to smaller groups as an asset for the larger whole.	Personality and cause-based. Structures reflecting networks of trust akin to social media.

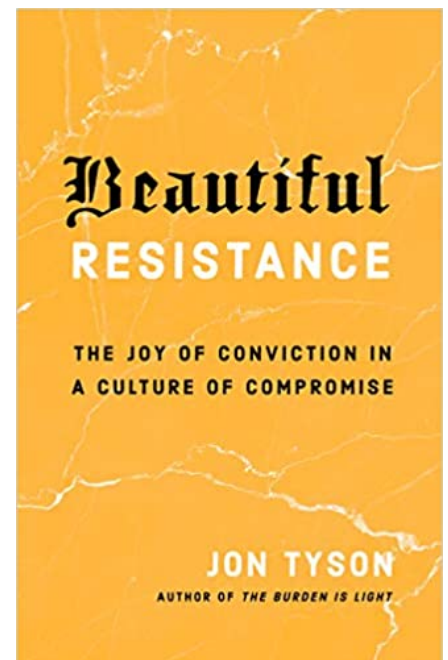
<u>Resources</u>	Institutional responsibility, legacy finances, tithing.	Congregational giving, side-business investments, and “raise your support” employment.	Bivocationalism. Also patronage (i.e. directed assistance to person or cause, rather than tithes into a common pool).
<u>Goal</u>	Keep people in church, help them know Jesus.	Help people know Jesus, get them into church.	Be with people who want to know Jesus, make that church.
<u>Source of spiritual authority.</u>	Qualification and Authorisation; expressed in didactic teaching, liturgical worship, elevation of an order of leaders. We look to who is in charge. We are exhorted to “learn the truth.”	Experience and Pragmatism; expressed in dialogical teaching, stimulating events + small groups, elevation of “effective” programs and people. We look to who or what works for us, and are exhorted to “walk in your gifting and destiny.”	Kenosis and Sacrifice: expressed as a recognition of costly faith, elevation of those (both contemporary and ancient) who have had a proving experience. We look to who has been through the fire, and are exhorted to “lose your life so that you might save it.”
<u>Modes of discipleship.</u>	Standardised, formal, and curriculum based.	Formalised action-reflection, mentoring, coaching.	Rhythm of life, monastic, familial.
<u>Aspiration in worship.*</u>	Service	Growth	Adoration
<u>?</u>			

* = Subsequently added in edit.

Photo credit: SimonAr

Review: Beautiful Resistance – The Joy of Conviction in a Culture of Compromise

There's a few ways into Jon Tyson's Beautiful Resistance. Here's one way:



We've been encountering, for a while now, the phenomenon of committed Christians who are "done with Church." This isn't the cliché of people backsliding from faith, it's more vocational than that: We were a generation that encountered Jesus and pursued the gospel and his Kingdom. Many of us did this; we gave ourselves to the institutions, submitted, learned, did our bit, and some of us were even "successful." Inevitably, however, comes the time of deconstruction. Church and gospel collide. We have that moment when we look towards Jesus and the path of discipleship and we realise that we are looking *away* from his people, and not towards them. At that point there is a crisis. We weigh up whether to throw in the ecclesial towel or not, *because* of our love and hope, not against it.

This book speaks to our generation.

For the better part of two decades, I have had a complex relationship with the institution called the church. Jesus called her a bride, one of my atheist friends called her a wench, and I have experienced her as both... I am also grieved by my failures and personal contribution to the staining of her reputation. (Pages 9-10)

I'm sure that you have felt the same desire to escape the drama of the church in our modern life of faith. At night you probably have deep questions about whether staying involved is worth it. Worth the misunderstanding, worth the heartache, worth the credibility hits, worth the sacrifice. And I am sure that some around you have come to the conclusion that it is not. They have wavered and shrunk back, preferring spirituality over religion, and given up on the institution known as the church. Maybe you are reading this at a time when you are struggling to see the point of the church when she is stained by so much compromise. Maybe you would like to retreat to that easier place of spirituality without religion. But I'm guessing that deep down in your heart you actually long for more. (Page 166)

Here's another way in:

Our generation has struggled to find its native leaders. We have leaned back into older faces: the likes of Packer, Wright, Stott, Willard, and Chalke (depending on where you see your home). Those are good giants with good shoulders, but the road to our own voice has been complicated.

Our voice fledged twenty years ago or so. Remember the battle of the "Mars Hills"? We had Rob Bell who drew us in with Nooma but sold out and faded out with Oprah and insipid universalism. We had Mark Driscoll who drew us in with keeping it real and relevant and somewhat M-rated, but who badgered us like the bully on the school bus and ran headlong into his own

belligerence. The leadership of our generation, sitting at the pivot point between the Boomers and the Millennials and beyond, needed to grow up.

I think we're beginning to find those maturer voices now. The sort of voices with a couple of more decades in them that have been through some wastelands. I'm thinking of people like John Mark Comer and Pete Greig and others of similar ilk (nominate your own in the comments). These voices speak fluent postmodern – truth is to be *experienced* not just *thought* – but have avoided the naivete of intersectional deconstruction. They speak to formation, and not the reductionism of getting numbers onto pews, or into heaven. They are beginning to hit the balance between winsome relevance and being prophetically distinct. Jon Tyson is one of these voices.

It might be confirmation bias on my part, though! Like me, Tyson is Australian. Like me, he is called as a missionary to the Western world. Like me, he has left his hemisphere and set up camp in a foreign land. He's been a lot more successful than me, but good on him; unlike other ex-pat Aussies, it doesn't seem to have gone to his head.

This book is Tyson's significant contribution to a spirituality of mission that takes the context of the Western church seriously. It hits the sweet spot between pastoral call to individuals, and apostolic call to churches to live out and pursue the truth of the gospel. He makes us ponder if "Christ or culture will have the ascendancy in our generation" (p1).

The *resistance* Tyson speaks of, is therefore *responsive* to *who* we are as God's people and *where* we are in this broken world. He frames the whole book with an anecdote from Bonhoeffer countering the power of Nazi Germany with the "beautiful resistance" of humble discipleship. In the same light Tyson ponders about "*our* cultural moment and the compromise rampant in our day" (p4). The chapters he leads us into summarises what follows:

*Worship Must Resist Idolatry
Rest Must Resist Exhaustion
Hunger Must Resist Apathy
Hospitality Must Resist Fear
Honor Must Resist Contempt
Love Must Resist Hate
Sacrifice Must Resist Privilege
Celebration Must Resist Cynicism*

The chapter on **worship** recognises that our Western world has no “reference point for idolatry” (p24) and therefore offers no guidance for our desires and passions. The unresistant church adopts the same passions as the world, and we end up with a “church more informed by... cultural preferences than [God’s] Word” (p33). Tyson’s exploration of this issues touches my centrist heart; his ability to identify and counter the idolatry of both left and right extremes is admirable. He has the cultural insight of a missionary; he has had to come to grips with the “ecosystem of power and approval” in his context of New York similarly to how I’ve has to wrestle with a sense of the English middle class. Tyson envisages the beautiful resistance:

The church exists as a counterformative community to confront our idolatry. So we don’t go to church for entertainment. No, what we’re really working for here is transformation into the image of Jesus. (Page 38)

The chapter on **rest** speaks to how we “ache for peace in the world, but many of our lifestyles are a form of violence to ourselves and those we love” (p46). There are many people speaking right now about the weariness and pressure and distraction of contemporary life. Tyson takes us to the difference between mere “relaxing” and true “rest” which comes with a movement “from fear to trust... from anxiety to peace.. from control to surrender” (p54).

We need a framework of Sabbath that makes Jesus's invitation to rest a reality in our lives. (Page 51)

The chapter on **hunger** is about “confronting our spiritual numbness” (p64). This is a topic that should be talked about more in church circles! The age-old conundrum for anyone pursuing mission is this: How can we get people to simply *care* more? We pursue techniques and programs, and we have forgotten that it is, in the end, a *spiritual* task. Tyson's advice is to “begin again with fasting” – literal, physical fasting – as a resistance to the stultifying culture that wraps everything around what we feel, and what we want (p71). It's a worthy thought; “we have tried every other type of solution... “this kind” will come out only through prayer and fasting” (p75).

I urge you – let your hunger resist your apathy. (Page 77)

The chapter on **hospitality** addresses a culture of *fear*. This book, although dated as 2020, was written pre-pandemic and before the death of George Floyd; the relevance of it has only increased. Tyson explores the process of exclusion (p82), again with admirable centrism that sees the fear-centre of both the progressives and the conservatives. He allows the scandal of an inclusion, exclusively centred on Jesus: “...hospitality wasn't one of Jesus's strategies; it was *the* strategy... Jesus was able to model what our culture is craving – spaces of welcome where strangers, enemies, outsiders, and others can become our friends (pp86-87).

Jesus created pockets of love in a culture of fear that formed a new kind of community in the world, something he called “the church.” The church was to exist not as a haven from the world but as a place of hope for the world. (Page 87)

The chapter on **honour** is in the same vein. It recognises the

complexity of shame and dysfunction within Western cultural contexts: “the elderly are dismissed, traditions are mocked, the past is erased, hopelessness settles in, prejudice is assumed, and conflict is inevitable” (p110). This is the cultural minefield set before anyone who seeks to engage in community life. In answer, Tyson takes us to Jesus’ “filter of honor for all he encountered... regardless of the contempt their culture showed them, he saw differently” (p105).

I can't help but imagine the power and beauty of a community that saw everyone through an honor filter. What would happen if every person's story, calling, sacrifice, gifts, and future were held in view? If people were seen as crowned with glory and coheirs with Christ? I believe conflict would be transformed, young people would be filled with vision, the elderly would be respected, teh marginalized would be empowered, adn the invisible would be seen... This community would be unlike any other – this community would be like the kingdom of heaven on earth. (Page 109)

The chapter on **love** takes us to the countercultural sense of *agapé*, or “enemy love.” It resists hate, but not in the sense of current rhetoric where “hate” and “love” are weaponised in the culture wars. Rather, Tyson would have us follow Jesus into these societal battlegrounds, with surrendering love: “The arena can be transformed again. But only if we’re ready to act on our faith” (p122). There is suffering in this type of beautiful resistance.

Our enemies hurt us. Our enemies abuse us. Our enemies do violence to us. This can cause horrific trauma and require deep healing, boundaries, and grief. Jesus, however, experienced all this suffering and still insisted on love. (Page 126)

The chapter on **sacrifice** counters the prevalence of unseen privilege. His exploration is both *honest* and *gracious*; he

recognises the reality of privilege, but avoids language which *shames* in response. Toxic privilege is rooted in fear, the answer is humility and grace. "We can serve without fear because the kingdom is a gift, not something we earn. From that position of security, we can humble ourselves without any anxiety" (p137). We are shaped by the mind of Christ in Philippians 2; where we have privilege, we give it away. "Servanthood resists privilege, and the kingdom takes root" (p141).

Jesus redefined greatness as the distribution of our unearned cultural advantage on behalf of others. Rather than fighting over rights and responsibilities, Jesus calls us to redirect our privilege for others. (Page 139)

And finally, the chapter on **celebration** is a resistance to *cynicism*. The sentiment of pointlessness is pervasive in our community, and our churches. I certainly encounter it, not just in myself, but in a younger generation; what have we bequeathed? They are launching from the nest into a cloud streaked with GFC, climate crisis, and pandemic. The answer is not pseudo-idealism, the "telling of positive anecdotes that will makes us feel better" (p144). The answer is hope, in the service of a "joyful God" in which we put our confidence, including confidence in his truth (p150).

Jesus insisted that the work of God demands celebration. He is in the world, bringing good news, welcoming the outsider, restoring the lost, binding up the broken. The question is, Will we join the feast or issue excuses? (Page 155)

Throughout it all, there is a common thread. This book is a work of *applied ecclesiology*. **This is a book about how to be the church**, without guile.

I found it fanning some lingering embers back into flame. The Church *is still* the temple of God, a place for his presence

(p13). The Church *is still* the body of Christ, existing to express God on earth (p18). Indeed, “there is a rumour going around the West that, in spit of the avalanche of change and often-repeated accusation of irrelevance, a church has actually survived. Yes she is stained; yes, she is broken; but she is here. Her Lord is working within her. The bride is becoming beautiful; his presence is becoming tangible; the body is becoming functional. Beauty is rising and resisting the brokenness” (p20).

Tyson prays “Lord, bring your body to life” (p20), and I remember praying the same thing years ago, in the sweet land of immature zeal. Now, in the present, wedged between ecclesiastical nihilism on one side and triumphalism on the other, I, for one, need to re-voice those old and true prayers, from lips now tempered with struggle and salted with sweat and tears. Tyson is a brother to me at this point, giving me some words to use, and thoughts to think.

I read this book while on a recent holiday. During this we visited the Holy Island in Northumberland and chanced upon Cuthbert’s island, just off-shore, accessible only at low-tide. In its day, it was a place of solitude, a place of prayer, a place of spiritual travail. You could feel it in the rocks.



I don’t know much about Cuthbert. But I know he prayed there, at and soon after a time of collision in the British church between the Roman body and the Celtic spirit. Cuthbert invested himself at the Lindisfarne Priory as the Irish monks retreated, and answered the call to a spiritual travail for the soul of nation and church.

We found ourselves praying there, reflecting on the collisions

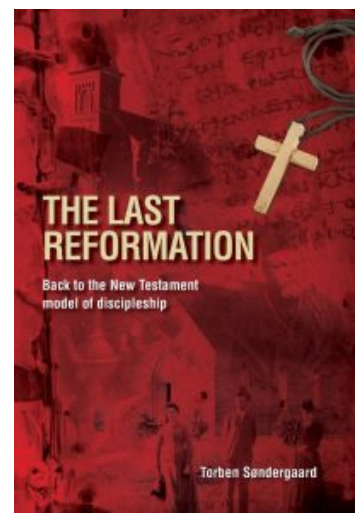
we see in church, world, and between the two. It was something of a vocational recommitment for me. Tyson's words were in my reflections and I realised I had found something anthemic in them. It isn't complicated. It's just that we need to be God's people.

It is time.

We are God's people, we are disciples of Jesus. Within this broken, loved world, it is our time for beautiful resistance.

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

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



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

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

I’ve had to check myself continually. Perhaps my unease is appropriate; as a vicar I represent the sort of churchiness that Sondergaard is rightly critiquing. Maybe I’m biased as Sondergaard attempts to deconstruct my current way of life. After all, I’m a professional churchman; the church institutions house and feed my family. My expertise, my career, my “marketable skills”, let alone my sense of vocation and divine purpose are woven into a form of church from which Sondergaard is pulling loose threads. So I’ve had to question myself: is my unease with this book just a form of self-preservation? I don’t think I’ve fallen into that trap.

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

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

toxic and neglectful environment.

2- Our churches appear spiritually stagnant and ill-prepared. “I look at churches in the West, I can see that they need to be refreshed” (page 23). I have felt this as a pervasive sense of dissatisfaction in the status quo. Even when we are blessed and fruitful, we cannot simply stop as if we’ve “made it” and be satisfied with the way things are. “*Semper reformanda*,” our forefathers said; the church needs continual reformation. We are not pursuing Jesus enough. We are not prepared for difficulty and adversity, let alone persecution, should it come. “The big churches will suddenly become small when they find out that following Jesus has a high price, a price most of them have never been willing to pay” (page 25).

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

4- Church culture often has a worship problem. The so-called “sacred-secular divide” is much deeper than the

“Monday-Sunday” separation that is usually used to describe it. Rather, it’s a cultural *demarcation* that defines claims on our time, money, and *life*. It’s as if we say, “Sunday mornings and 10% of my income, and some other contribution belongs to God and the church and the rest is mine.” Churches buy into this culture in order to facilitate collective goals and providing a means for people to contribute their bit. This isn’t a bad thing, but it can be self-defeating. Regarding tithing: “all our money belongs to God and not just ten percent... tithing can actually keep people in their comfort zones” (page 61). Indeed, true worship is about being a “living sacrifice”, a hundred holistic percent. It’s about giving Jesus *all* of our lives – our money, our time, our family, our identity, our career. This is how we worship (Romans 12:1), but we rarely nurture it in our church contexts.

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

I even resonate with some of Sondergaard’s experiences. Gill and I have been pioneers and church planters, and we have seen, time and time again, how something exciting and new can easily fall back into the rut grooved out by expectation and

weariness. "This is not different at all! This is exactly how we held meetings in the other church." (page 37).

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

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

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

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

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

1- His vision is self-defeating. There's more than a hint

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

The early church model in Acts is intriguing and attractive. However it was far from perfect, even in those early primal years. Read the first few chapters of Revelation and you'll see how spiritually ineffective they could be! Moreover, the evolution of the early church, even before Constantine, was not due to a hardening of heart away from the will of God. It was moved by a desire to remain true to Jesus (apostolic succession, canon of Scripture), to flourish in faith amidst persecution (liturgical rhythms, appointment of pastors and leaders etc.), and to combat heresy and defend belief (trinitarian theology, apologias). Inevitably these lifegiving currents were, naturally, *systematised*. The assumption that the early church was great and it became increasingly bad does not entirely match reality. Sondergaard doesn't seem to grasp this. e.g. He makes the curious observation that in the early Church "No one but Jesus was the Head of the fellowship, and it was clear to everyone" (p135), and doesn't recognise that the Holy Spirit manifested that leadership through Councils of elders (Acts 15) and the sending of corrective letters from people in authority (Paul's epistles)!

Even if Sondergaard were able to re-manifest that early church purity (on his terms of purer structures), it would inevitably (on those same terms) apostasize, just like the early church. You see, it's already happening. Sondergaard is growing a movement. He has written a definitive book that is essential reading. He is playing the part of apostolic overseer and doctor-theologian. Within this movement, he defines what is orthodox, and what is not. As the movement grows, it will require *infrastructure* to organise and (ta da!) *hierarchy* to ensure that the core

values of the movement are held and acted upon. None of that is bad! As long as you realise that this is what is happening and play your part well. I'm not sure he sees it.

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

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

Relatedly,

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

Sondergaard often plays existing church systems as a straw

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

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

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

We don’t need to reform the skeleton of the church – it’s structures – we need to reform the *heart* of the church. We

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

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

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

Similarly, he is has a closed hand on some issues that should be held more loosely. For instance, he anathematises infant baptism (p15). This is fair enough, I guess (I am open-handed on this issue!). But to assert that it is important to some churches merely because it "brings in money" (p57) is not only insulting, but blatantly untrue. I

doubt any church I have been a part of has even broken even on providing the ministry of Baptism, let alone made a profit.

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

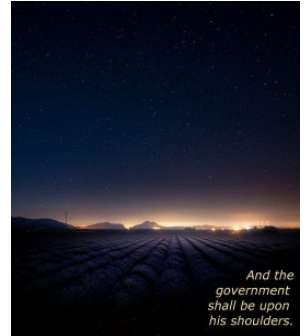
In conclusion, this is a difficult book to read. For those who are in some sort of denial about the state of the church, it would be usefully provocative. But my unease at his "solution" remains.

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

Dying to Grow and The Point

of It All

Christmas can be the time substance gets lost beneath frantic frivolities. Pastors, vicars, and ordinary church folk enter into the annual tradition of trying to talk about deep things (incarnation, salvation, Jesus!) without sounding twee or spoiling the mince pies and mulled wine.



It's not just a Christmas predicament, though. The same thing is there, more subtly, throughout the rest of the year. Church life is *always* full of frantic frivolities. There may be less tinsel, but the dynamic remains. We can lurch from Sunday to Sunday. The buzz of activities can be a pervasive background. Our Christmas "church gigs" have an intensity about them; we invest in them, advertise them, and are glad when we are rewarded with the right sort of numbers. But that only amplifies what is already present: our drive to perform and get growing results. Throughout the year, in the midst of the mist of religious supply and demand, we try to talk about deep things, without sounding twee or spoiling things.

I'm not sure it's working that well.

I know I have become wary of activity and busyness.

It's not that I'm into passivity or quietism. I rejoice in the sense of *flow* when a community acts, seeks, worships together. When brothers and sisters are in unity and purpose... well, the presence of Christ is almost tangible. Even as I write this, I can hear the sounds and smell the smells wafting up the stairs from the meal that is being prepared in our downstairs church hall. It's an excellent *activity* with a sense of flow, a weekly expression of hospitality and care, and one of the highlights of my week.

But I also know what it's like when church activities are not

like that: when doing is about duty and not much more, and movement is a going around in circles, a spinning of our wheels. This is when we do things *only* because we did them last year. This is when new opportunities are met with a pang of cynicism: "We've done that, we tried that, that just feels like yet more work." When we take things deep and try to reconnect with the point of it all, suddenly the words sound hollow, disconnected, echo-like. We drown in the shallows.

When it's like that, **it's worth listening to Jesus.**

Lately I've been moved to lay aside all my carefully curated church growth strategies and reflect on the words of Jesus in Matthew 16.

Famously, **he has his own church growth church strategy.** It is founded on Peter's confession of Jesus as Lord: "*Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and **on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.***"

More infamously, Peter tries to take control of this building project. He refuses to countenance the thought of the Messiah laying down his life, and counsels the King of Kings to choose a different path. As Jesus points out, he is moved by "human concerns." Jesus rebukes him and includes this injunction: "*Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. **For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.***"

In Luke 17, the same words are echoed. This time, it is not about the *foundations* of the church, but the finishing touches at the point of our Lord's return: "*It will be just like this on the day the Son of Man is revealed. On that day no one who is on the housetop, with possessions inside, should go down to get them. Likewise, no one in the field should go back for*

*anything. Remember Lot's wife! **Whoever tries to keep their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life will preserve it.***"

How's that for a church growth strategy? **Whoever tries to keep their life will lose it!**

This has led me to two conclusions:

Firstly, this is a key to our frantic activism, at Christmas time or any time else. So often, we are scrambling to not "lose our life;" we do things to keep from demise. Take any church activity as an example: a Sunday gathering, a carol service, a bible study, an advertising campaign, a diocesan restructure. If it exists as an attempt to justify our existence, prove our relevance, deflect our decline... then we are full of "human concerns" and we are in the way. Often the best thing to do is to cease that activity, or shut something down.

But if those same church activities exist to give ourselves away, for the sake of Jesus... they flow and bring forth life. They become *deep*, acts of sacrificial worship, reflections of God's grace, of love to the local community, of sharing our very selves one with another. They encapsulate something precious, the essence of the Kingdom of God.

The same activities can either be a clinging to life (and losing it), or a giving of life for the sake of Christ (and finding it). This is the paradox of Christian leadership towards true church growth: How do you build yourself up by giving yourself away? How do you generate something without slipping into empty activism? My thoughts have taken me here:

Secondly, it lifts our eyes towards the ends, not the means. The big word to describe this is "teleological" – from the Greek word *telos* meaning "end" or "point" or "goal." We need to be *teleological* and look to our end, to the point of it all.

The writer to the Hebrews has the sense of it when he exhorts us to “run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith” (Hebrews 12:1-12). Paul has a similar motivation when he “sets his eyes upon the prize” (Philippians 3:14). Both speak of activity and perseverance, but the vision is towards the goal. **The goal is Jesus.**

We need a teleological approach to *mission*. When we think about mission, we quickly go to the activities (evangelistic activities, community engagement etc.) or desired outcomes (increased attendance, more activity). This is a focus on the *means*. **The Scriptures look first to Jesus.**

In Hebrews 2 or 1 Corinthians 15, for instance, we see the goal, the *telos*, of mission. It is *not*, firstly, about church numbers, or even social justice, it is about the glorification of Jesus. *Everything* flows from that. “He must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet,” Paul says. Psalm 8 is used in Hebrews 2 to say much the same thing about a “Son of Man” who is “made a little lower than the angels” only to be “crowned with glory and honour” with “everything under his feet.” We find justice, we find salvation, we find grace in that truth, and nowhere else.

This gives the focus of mission. The point of mission is the rule of Christ, the honour of Christ, the glorification of Jesus. **True worship is mission. True mission is worship.** This is the point. This is the goal. This is our *telos*. If we don’t do it in the name of Jesus, we will end up doing it in the name of ourselves; we will end up clinging to our life, and so losing it.

For sure, those mission activities are not a waste. Delve into Hebrews 2 and you will see them find their place in the light of Christ’s supremacy: Jesus is glorified when his people glorify him. This happens when his people are sanctified and set free from the power of sin and death. Therefore,

evangelism and outreach are a means of our mission. Pastoral care and discipleship activities are a means of our mission. Confession and repentance and contrition are a means of our mission. But they are, by definition, not an end in and of themselves. But be aware, we can do all these things in a self-facing frantic way, and so lose ourselves.

Our diocese happens to face an uncertain 2020. It's not alone; the pressure to perform, and survive, and to save ourselves is mounting on the declining Western church. We can cling to ourselves, or we can "lose ourselves" in the truth of Jesus, reigning over all things. We give ourselves to him. We trust him. We repent. We worship. We adore. We devote. We give ourselves to that end. We give ourselves to that goal. We give ourselves and so find ourselves... in Jesus, our Lord.

Merry Christmas.

Missional Worship: A Mild Critique of the Five Marks of Mission

They came up in a discussion I was having recently: the so-called “Five Marks of Mission”, here taken from the Anglican Communion, in which they were developed over the last 30-40 years.



The mission of the Church is the mission of Christ:

- 1) To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom*
- 2) To teach, baptise and nurture new believers*
- 3) To respond to human need by loving service*
- 4) To transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation*
- 5) To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth*

They are intended to “express the Anglican Communion’s common commitment to, and understanding of, God’s holistic and integral mission.” They’ve got a lot going for them.

They’re not perfect, of course. The Anglican Communion website recognises, for instance, that they don’t fit together like five equal parts.

The first Mark of Mission, identified with personal evangelism at the Anglican Consultative Council in 1984 (ACC-6) is a summary of what all mission is about, because it is based on Jesus’ own summary of his mission. This should be the key statement about everything we do in mission.

And this is a worthy observation. After all, you clearly can’t do 2) (teaching and nurturing) without also doing 1) (proclamation).

The last three are, in my mind, in a slightly different category, because they incorporate forms of activity in which the specific revelation of the gospel in Jesus is not entirely

necessary. What I mean is this: It is conceptually impossible to proclaim the gospel of Jesus and nurture new believers in Jesus without actually having a faith in Jesus. However, it is possible to engage in loving service, transforming unjust structures, and renewing the life of the earth without knowing or speaking the name of Jesus.

This does not denigrate these last three. They are a necessary and important outworking of the gospel in the lives of Christians and Christian communities. Moreover, they are forms of mission where our cause overlaps with many other activists who do not follow Jesus. Not only are they achieving a good in their own right, they also facilitate the first two as we are provided with opportunities to give reason for the hope that we hold (1 Peter 3:15).

In many ways I applaud them. I love it when the church is moved to *do*, rather than to sit apathetically behind rose-colour stained glass windows. As the saying goes, "It's not the the Church of God that has a mission in the world, it is the God of Mission who has a Church in the world."

My critique of the Five Marks, then, is not about what they say, but what they *don't* say. It's more than omission, it's like there's something askew. It's a slant that is often present in conversations about mission. I think of the "Mission Minded" tool that we used during my training years; in many ways it was excellent, but there was something missing. That tool outlined various activities that churches could be involved in, but there wasn't a clear place for something that seemed crucial to church life. That something was *worship*. Where is the *doxological* character of Christian mission?

Christian mission, for it to be something deeper than "mere" activism, must be essentially *worshipful*.

After all, the "chief end of man", as the Westminster Shorter

Catechism states in its very first question is to “glorify God and enjoy him forever.” What an excellent definition of worship! The “chief end” is not the making of Christians and the bringing of justice (although they are necessary corollaries) it is to the glory of God.

The Catechism is not going out on a limb here. Jesus, himself, would have us pray “hallowed be your name” even before we pray “your kingdom come, your will be done.” The hallowing of God’s name is not just prior, it is *integral* to our seeking the kingdom and the will of God.

Similarly, the mission of Jesus is not essentially *pragmatic* but is rooted and immersed in the adoring, loving relationship between Messiah and God, Son and Heavenly Father.

Very truly I tell you, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does.

John 5:19-20

In the big-picture eschatological scope, the glory of God is also the chief point of mission. When Paul speaks to the Corinthians about the end of time, he speaks of Christ’s mission as “putting all his enemies under his feet,” and then submitting himself, and all that is under him (that is, everything!), to God his Father. Christ’s mission is to ensnare all of creation into his own worship of his eternal Father.

But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father

after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For he “has put everything under his feet.” Now when it says that “everything” has been put under him, it is clear that this does not include God himself, who put everything under Christ. When he has done this, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all.

1 Corinthians 15:20-28

When I was young, I was moved towards activism. I was moved towards *doing* mission. In my zeal I misunderstood or even disparaged more “worshipful” aspects of our spirituality such as contemplation, adoration, and prophetic acts. At best, I used “quiet times” and “retreat days” as ways of stoking the fire for the “real work” of reaching people with the gospel or “building the church.” If I used the “up-in-out” triangle, my emphasis was on the “out.”

I was wrong. And I am not alone. The “up” must come first, because it is the heart of both the “in” and the “out.” Even now I run into situations where there is a false dichotomy between “worship” and “mission.” If there is a separation between doing the “work of God”, “drawing people to God”, and “adoring and worshipping God” then, frankly, we’re doing it wrong!

One of my greatest concerns for the contemporary Western church is our *entrepreneurialism*. When that speaks of innovation and focused pursuit of the gospel, I cheer it on. But sometimes it lapses into pragmatism, or even task-oriented rationalism, and, more often than we might care to realise, self-glorification. When we are at risk of asserting control for the sake of our own existence or empowerment, *even as we pursue the five marks of mission*, we risk losing the way of faith. **We must return to worship, attuned to a King who will**

bring all things under the father at the end, by being a living sacrifice now, hallowing his name. *That* is the chief mark of mission – to glorify God.

We are encountering, more than we ever have, a growing number of people who are moved to worship. Sometimes it is through prayer and intercession; they travail, literally groaning as they filled with the Spirit. Sometimes they adore, and rest, and exhibit the peace, sometimes ecstasy, of that very same Spirit. Sometimes they offer words of knowledge and wisdom, speaking prophetic truths that do what all prophetic truths do; they call us back to hallowed ground where Father's name is all in all.

Many (but not all) of these feel homeless in today's church. They feel tangential to the missional machine, un-embraced and unreleased, because the missional return on investing in them is not clear to a "missional church." Yet, I am fully convinced, without their leadership, we have lost our way. Without their heart, we can do "our" mission, and find on the last day that we already had our reward.

This is not a new thing. And I'm not trying to paint a black picture. Different traditions have the tools to do the recalibration of mission around the heart of worship. The Catholic propensity to interweave mission and the eucharist encapsulates, at the very least, the missional value of simply bringing the presence of God to where it is needed and administering his grace. The Charismatic and Pentecostal world values times of "worship and ministry" as a place where the Holy Spirit administers healing, revelation, acceptance, and conviction; a space into which Christian and non-Christian like can be invited. The Liberal claim to self-effacement, to be followers of the Word rather than asserting ourselves, can line up with this. And the Evangelical posture of submission to the Word of God in all things, for its own sake, takes us to where we need to be.

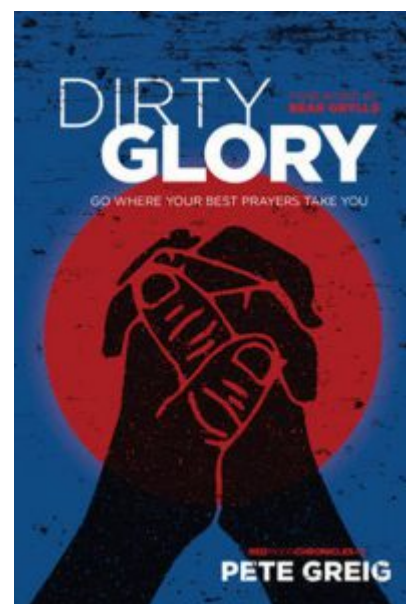
For myself, as I think about mission in my own context, and have found myself being led by worshippers: Let us first turn our face to our Heavenly Father. Let our hearts and our very beings resonate in adoration. Let us cry “Holy Holy Holy” with the choir of heaven. The chief mark of mission is to glorify God, who made heaven and earth.

Review: Dirty Glory

Hey @PeteGreig. You don't know me, but I just blubbed my way through Dirty Glory. Fanned fire from both living flames and dormant embers. Holy mess. Not sure whether to say “thank you” nicely or wryly :-/. “For the sake of the world burn like a fire in me...” Groan. Now what? ☐

– Will Briggs (@WillBriggs) April 7, 2018

I remember a Bible college lecturer asking the class once, “What aspect of the gospel first impacted you?” For some it was about *truth*. For some it was about *forgiveness* and *renewal*. For others it was about *belonging* and *reconciliation*. The aim of the question was to get us to think about how the gospel is a *passionate* thing. How are we *moved*, *enlivened*, *stimulated* by the good news that Jesus, who calls us to himself, is King of this world?



There's a similar question about our sense of *vocation*, the part we play in God's mission. How does the command to “Go and make disciples of all nations” move us? For some it is a

passion to *teach* and *preach*. For others, it's about *embracing* the broken with care and comfort. Some simply want to introduce people to Jesus. [Aside: there's a strangely fivefold shape to these missional passions].

It's a question worth pondering, because vocational fires dwindle. We come to plod from day to day, being as faithful as we can. Even church life can become a lurch from Sunday to Sunday; it can revolve around the management of buildings, and the placating of opinions. Individually, and together, we Christians are adept at curling up into ourselves and maintaining a static equilibrium of spiritual excuses.

Sometimes we even forget what those old fires felt like. But then annoying books like Pete Greig's *Dirty Glory* come along and douse us in rocket-powering oxidiser.

I wasn't really expecting to begin to burn again when I read Greig's book. It was "just" another book; the standalone autobiographical sequel of "just" another hipster church leader and his well-marketed 24-7 prayer movement, (I mean, Bear Grylls wrote the foreword and everything!). I hadn't really looked into 24-7 much (it's mostly a UK-US thing and not as big in Australia). I'd heard enough to be both interested and slightly sceptical. And the thing is, I've read the book, and we've even visited Greig's Emmaus Road church in Guildford, and I *still* don't know much about the practicalities of the movement and the exact details of what they do. But there's something at the heart of this book, something in the intermingled testimonies and teachings, that has caused my heart to be strangely warmed.

Here are the principles that I can glean from what Greig has written:

Dissatisfaction. I get this. Without a sense of discontent, mission is reduced to "more of what we already have." Church health is reduced the *static health* of numbers and money, and

not the *dynamic growth* of vision and depth.

I began to realise that it would now be possible to live the rest of my life as a minor entity on a Christian production line, busy and occasionally even applauded, peddling religious experiences without ever really nurturing the kind of inner garden that I admired in others, and which could make it all mean something in the end... It dawned on me, but only very slowly, that my inner turmoil could not be dismissed as a quarter-life crisis, it wasn't boredom, nor could it be attributed to a besetting sin from the predictable checklist. Worryingly, nothing was wrong. Everything was right and yet I felt hollow. 'Within me', confessed St Augustine, 'was a famine of that inward food: Thyself, my God.' This hunger in my soul, I began to realise was not bad. In fact it was good: a gift of dissatisfaction directly from the Holy Spirit. (Pages 29-30)

For Greig, the touchstone of holy dissatisfaction is prayer. To express this he turns to the story of Jesus cleansing the temple, a house of prayer that had become filled with corrupt traders. He wants us to hear the rebuke of Jesus: "...[T]here could be large, impressive, popular churches... attracting large crowds... impressive buildings, strong brands, great wealth and a remarkable history..." but they might "evoke a similar rebuke" if "they have lost the fundamental heart of prayer", (page 44). From this, he develops his "blueprint" of *Presence, Prayer, Mission, Justice, and Joy* (page 45) which becomes the essence and structure of the book.

Presence speaks of the fundamental imperative in prayer to "seek his face always" (page 51). I have been exploring these thoughts in different ways recently, and I was able to rest in Greig's words here. What is fanned into flame is a posture of intimacy (page 71) and of surrender:

Urgent voices are calling us to abandon the familiar comforts

of Christendom, to strike out into the unknown and rediscover the Nazarene. Let him hack our systems and take us back to the place of willing surrender in which we will simply do anything, go anywhere, say anything he tells us, whenever, wherever, whatever it takes... We need a theophany, a rediscovery of the terror of his proximity. (Page 57)

Learning to dwell (and even to sleep) in the love of the Father is offensive to the strategic part of our brains: a violation of the ego; a sort of dying. It can seem irresponsible... It can appear profligate... It can seem naive and scandalous... It can appear selfish... It can seem rude... It can seem unstrategic... [but] 'To be a witness', says the writer Madeleine L'Engle, 'is to be a living mystery. It means to live in such a way that one's life would not make sense if God did not exist.' (Page 77)

Prayer speaks of power. Greig recounts some amazing stories of answered prayer, of course, but this isn't about hype. This is about simple prayers – bold, simple prayers – simply answered. It is also about “predictable valleys of the mundane” in between, in which “we mature; our faith fills up into faithfulness, we learn to push into community and into God's presence, which is, after all, the greatest miracle of all” (page 108).

Luke 18:8 asks, “Will the Son of Man find faith, when he comes?” and Greig ponders “a big, fat, screaming ‘if’ hanging over the people of God in every generation: will we, will we not, pray when trouble comes?” (page 118). It is a real question. I used to think about ministry and church and simply assume that, of course, we would pray. After two decades in church ministry, I am no longer that naive.

Whenever prayer is reduced to a clumsy technique for getting God to mutter a reluctant ‘Amen’ to our selfish desires, it is merely wishful thinking in a religious disguise. But when

prayer is an 'Amen' to God's desires, it is profoundly Christian and powerful beyond measure. (page 126)

What is fanned into flame here is a connection of our worship with the renewal of the land. Greig draws on the promises to Solomon in 2 Chronicles 7:13-14 to do this, and takes us to "God's great project to see creation remade" (page 120). He speaks of prayer as a travailing and wrestling (page 129), as childbirth (page 130), and even of violence (page 131); to not have that in church makes as much sense as a soldier not having a gun, "a boxer his fists, or a theologian great tracts of his Bible" (page 132).

I would pushback a little at Greig at this point, though, because he sometimes slips into a false progression: "Once the church is back to normal, pulsing with life, God's great project is to see creation remade" (page 120). These are not distinct steps, as if once God has finished building the church, he'll move on to the world! A church does not pulse to life unless it is *already* yearning for God's great project. Christ grows his church as he calls us out into his world-changing purposes, not *before* he does. I think Greig gets this though.

Mission reflects how God intends us to be a house of prayer *for the nations*. Greig takes us to stories of God's people being present – in America, Ibiza, and (later in the book) "Boy's Town" on the Mexican border. These are missionary stories of the old kind, like the ones that stirred Gill and I in our YWAM days. They are of ordinary folk stepping out in faith, daring to go where others would not, for the sake of bringing light to a life, to a place, to a generation.

There's some decent missiology in Greig's approach:

"In approaching any new culture our first task is always to remove our shoes, recognising that we are standing on holy ground. We are not bringing the Lord somewhere new, because

he is already here. Our primary task, therefore, is to identify God's fingerprints and to trace his footprints in the new environment." (Page 208).

And he helpfully addresses our propensity to perform mission as some form of service provision by professionals:

"Our own journeys of salvation and spiritual formation will... become intertwined with those to whom Christ is sending us... We go to the lost and make space for them to preach to us, to teach us, to minister to our unbelief. This requires stillness, and humility, a deeply anchored assurance in the gospel, and the ability to ask gently disruptive questions." (Page 213)

Justice is the touchpoint at which mission impacts the real world. "Prayer without action is just religion in hiding", (page 238). Justice is where mission gets real. Greig quotes Bob Pierce as he tells us that "one of the most dangerous prayers you can ever pray: 'Let my heart be broken by the things that break the heart of God'" (page 247).

There's a lengthy exposition of Kelly Teitsort's ministry in Boy's Town Mexico which fans these flames well. And Greig backs it up biblically: He runs a thread through the pre-exilic prophets (page 255), Christ's cleansing of the temple, and his claim to fulfill Luke 4:18-19 (page 250) and then connects it to our own worship and mission. We are not just about reaching souls, we are about "recognising that "something [is] wrong systemically and it [is] only going to be changed by a profound cultural shift" (page 283).

"Compassion for the hungry, the stranger, the naked, the sick and the prisoner is not an optional extra for those with a strong social conscience. It bleeds from the heart of true Christian worship. When we care for the poor, we minister to Jesus himself." (Page 254)

*When God freed the Israelites from captivity in Egypt he did it literally – not just metaphorically. Similarly, when Jesus forgave the sins of the paralysed man... he proceeded to heal him physically too... **Down the ages, it has always been the tendency of the rich to reduce salvation to a purely spiritual experience.** But if you're hungry you need real bread before you will consider the heavenly variety. If you're in chains you take the Bible verses about freedom very literally indeed. (Pages 278-279, emphasis mine)*

Joy is the outcome of faith as it works itself out through dissatisfaction. We are content with nothing else but the presence of God, manifest in power, mission, justice, etc. Jesus is our answer, and his presence is our joy, in with and through all circumstance. Greig spends much of this section talking about the fifteenth anniversary celebrations of his movement. He truly celebrates, but there is a warning away from triumphalism. He points us to the "Jesuit 'Litany of humility'... From the desire of being praised, *Deliver me, O Jesus...*" (Page 315).

So why does all this make me burn up (in a good way)? I'm not entirely sure.

There are certainly some points of personal connection. I know what it is like to share the journey with a chronically-ill wife ("I'm sick of being sick", page 116). I know what it's like to travel internationally as a family, involving our children in the discernment and the cost (page 300). My tears flowed as Greig spoke of his wife's graduation after "illness had robbed her of so many precious moments" (page 299). They flowed even more when I encountered the thought of "the Lord inviting us to pioneer together once again" (page 299).

I found myself repenting at points, or at least, crying out with a *desire* to repent. In our current season I know I have had to turn from the idolatry of comfort. I have had to repent

of the faithlessness by which I have placed my sense of identity and worth, and the source of my family's protection and care, not in God's hands, but in broken ecclesial systems.

There was also times of frustration in my reading of this book. Having had my passions awakened, the engines are revved up and that is accompanied by a familiar sense of wheels spinning. No grip, nowhere to go. It's time to turn this towards intimacy, towards trusting God not just for the fire, but the fireplace in which to burn, and the specific promises for a specific people to cling to.

For me then, the greatest help was Greig's image of "Blue Camp 20." This is drawn from his time in America where he learned the history of his local town: It was once a camp, a place where pioneers, originally intending to go on further, often decided to settle down instead. It speaks of premature comfort with a road not yet travelled.

I was moved by Greig's confession of the temptation to "settle down here and stop pioneering... would it really be wrong to serve the Lord with a bit more cash, a bit more kudos, and a lot less rain?" (Page 141). Indeed, having experienced church planting, and time-limited placements, I am sometimes jealous of the seemingly comfortable run that some of my clerical colleagues get to enjoy! But then there's that annoying, calling, stimulating and painful fire: "I signed up to change the world. I never wanted to be like it." (Page 153).

It's easy to pioneer when you're too young to know what it will cost you, when you feel immortal and invincible and the whole of life is an adventure waiting to begin. But pioneering a second time is hard. Abraham was one of the few who never settled down – even in his old age he lived 'like a stranger in a foreign country... For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and build is God' (Heb. 11:9-10). (Page 143)

We tend to assume that Blue Camp 20 is the frontier from which we can pioneer into new territory geographically, or into new effectiveness professionally, but ultimately it is the place of testing from which we can pioneer into deeper intimacy with Jesus than ever before. We wrestle with God at Blue Camp 20... to come close to him in greater intimacy. We lay down comfort at Blue Camp 20... We pioneer from Blue Camp 20 not to achieve something for God, but to receive something from him – a deeper fellowship with him in his death and resurrection (Phil. 3:10-11). (Pages 147-148)

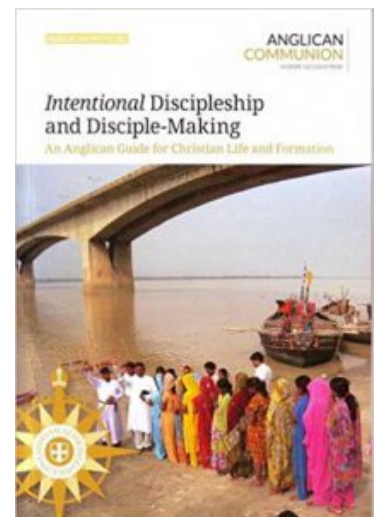
Perhaps all that is happened in me is that Greig's prayer for his book has been answered. It has deepened my thirst, because it has "rubbed salt on my lips" and woken me up, (page 12). It has had me shaking off the protections and pretenses of being a performing parson. It has had me reflecting on the past and the present. It has got me dreaming for the future. It has got me longing for his kingdom to come, real, substantial, local, global.

I no longer have the vigour and brashness of my youth and younger pioneering days. I know what real mission costs. I have regrets, and I have hopes. And all I can do is pray, to the glorious God who meets us in the dirt. Somehow, that's where life happens, and I long for more of it.

*I give you back today the prayers I have prayed that are not answered – yet. The seeds I've sown that haven't borne a harvest – yet. The dreams I've buried that haven't risen – yet. Restore the years, the prayers, the trust that the locusts have eaten. Remember me, Lord, redeem my life, and answer my oldest, truest, prayers. Amen.
(Page 307)*

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

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



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

This small book, published by the Anglican Consultative

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

It is available for download in pdf.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Q&A: Who are the poor? Is our first challenge the spiritually poor?

Anonymous asks:

We are challenged certainly in some Anglican communities to look after the poor. I suppose the biggest question is going

to be who are the poor? May seem a daft question, but in financial terms we have very few poor. However, certainly some of the financially richest people I know are very, very poor; spiritually and otherwise? My personal thought is that we do have poor with us, right now. Our challenge is to reveal those clothes they are wearing are actually rags. Is that our first big challenge?



[This is a Q&A question that has been submitted through this blog. You can submit a question (anonymously if you like) here: <http://briggs.id.au/jour/qanda/>]

Thanks for the question. I have some general thoughts on this in a recent review: *A Church for the Poor?*

My first thoughts on the poor usually arrive with the famous “sheep and goats” passage of *Matthew 25*. In this passage the returning King, acting as judge, declares (for the righteous):

“Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was ill and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.”

‘Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or

needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you ill or in prison and go to visit you?"

'The King will reply, "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me."

And of course, there's an equivalent and negative judgement for those who did not feed, give drink, clothe, or visit etc.

This gets us into your question. **Who are the poor?** They are indeed those who are financially, physically impoverished: hungry, destitute, excluded by their circumstances.

We can't overlook this. There is a clear gospel challenge to look after and to care for the physically poor. This is clear from the Scriptures: the laws on *gleaning* is about providing for those who are literally hungry, as are the many passages that talk about caring for widows and orphans, who lack the stability and security not only of societal standing, but also of the basics of life. James considers the care of these physically vulnerable people to be an aspect of "*genuine religion*".

It also gives some exhortational force. **Who are the poor?** The ones who we *can* see. We are held to account for who is *in front of us*; we have *personal* responsibility for those who God brings across our path. There is also *communal* responsibility for those who are in front of us *as a community*. This is just as serious and calls us to *move* our community towards caring for the poor through advocacy and social justice and personal example.

We cannot ignore the physically poor. As Keith Green would imply, we make too many excuses, individually and together, we ought to care for those who do not have as much we are do. It is good in its own right. It is a gospel imperative. Or shall we insist that what we have is ours alone, and not God's?

But you are right, there is also a **spiritual poverty**. But there are *two ways* in which we need to take this.

Firstly, there is spiritual poverty that speaks to a hardness of heart, a self-righteousness that, as you say, dresses itself in resplendent rags. This is not just preening and pride, but facade, self-reliance, the idolisation of financial security, and other “decent” sins.

Such folk are the “goats” of Matthew 25. They are the *rich man with Lazarus*. They are the *fat cows of Bashan*. Such hardness of heart is rightly and justly judged harshly. And notice how the *spiritual* poverty is often marked by the hardened attitude towards those who are *physically* poor, or a general dismissiveness of those who are weak and dependent in some way.

Is it, then, as you say “our challenge to reveal those clothes... are actually rags”? That is, **is it our task to reveal this hypocrisy, this hardness of heart?** To some extent, yes. We are called to not only advocate for the poor, but also to exhort people to repentance, to soften their hearts, to take a posture of faith and humility, to enter into the insecurity of faith whereby their hearts might break with the massive longings of God’s own heart. Biblical and Christian history is full of characters who have served us in this way, by provoking us towards righteousness.

We must feed them, as we must feed the physically poor. These people need the Word of God (“All they need is Moses,” the rich man is told...), and they are in front of us. If church members and even clergy find themselves uncomprehending of how to apply the *elementary teachings of the faith* then it’s not somebody else’s job. We must dig into the Word, speak the truth, exhort repentance, paint a vision of hope, etc. etc. That is, we are called to “feed the sheep” that are in front of us, even if they think they are princes.

Secondly we might think of *spiritual poverty* in the sense of being **poor in spirit**. This is a more positive sense.

There is a recognition that those who are physically poor, by their circumstances, are dependent, vulnerable, reliant, weak.

The poor in spirit may have enough to eat, but they may be dependent, vulnerable, reliant and weak in other ways – even if they don't know it. In our middle class town I know those who are involved in picking up the pieces from addictive behaviours, neglected children. The book that I reviewed, *A Church for the Poor?*, understands this, for instance, and speaks of things such as *aspirational* poverty and *relational* poverty.

There is a similar imperative to care for these who are in front of us: If we encounter a depressed young man, we cannot turn aside. If there is a lonely widow in front of us, we should not simply “leave her to the professionals.” And when society begins to produce a younger generation with increasing incidences of anxiety we should be amongst those standing up and saying “Come on, we can do better, let's change how we do this!”

But here is the difference between hard-hearted “spiritual poverty” and being “poor in spirit.” It is this: the way of Christ moves away from one and toward the other.

You see, in this context, being “poor in spirit” is an indicator of faith, a positive thing – the opposite of being “poor in spirit” is being “rich in ourselves” that is, self-righteous. The *physically* poor teach this lesson, they weather circumstances in which they are weak, vulnerable, and dependent, and God *honours* them by valuing the related things of *faith, trust, and honesty* and judges the rich-in-themselves for their lack of them.

No wonder Jesus identifies with the physically poor! They look more like Jesus than the self-secure rich!

Just as we are all relatively physically wealthy in the global scheme of things, we must realise that we are all relatively poverty stricken, hardened in the spiritual sense. I know for myself that while I might have “done good” from time to time, I am most likely to be moved by the financial and other physical insecurities that beset my own family. I find myself protecting myself emotionally as I encounter those who are wounded by life. I cling to my wealth, my strength.

The Christian journey begins and continues with the basic understanding of “nothing in my hand I bring, simply to the cross I cling.” Any challenge to “reveal the rags” must begin in us. When we realise that we are spiritually poor, we are also drawn to our weakness, vulnerability, and dependency, and, faith, trust, and honesty is the sweet fruit of it. We cannot turn to ourselves, so we turn to God, and inherit the *kingdom of heaven*.

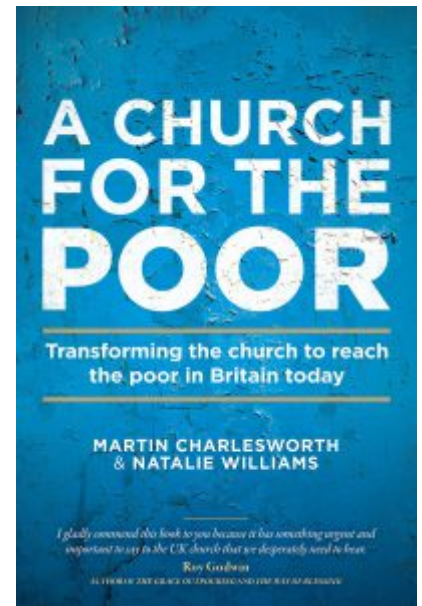
The Christian journey is one of constant relinquishment and surrender in this regard, a long slow walk of obedience. We become poor in spirit, and find ourselves with riches that are not limited by our capacity, but strength in our weakness, life in our death. This is what Jesus looks like.

That is our first big challenge. To look to our own posture before God, a posture of faith that is soft towards God and others, and not self-reliance that just builds fine looking decent protective, hard, walls.

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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 “millennial 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 their 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.