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):

	Modern / "Christendom" Church	**Postmodern / Post-Christendom / "Missional" Church**	**Post-Missional Church?**
Placement in Society	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.
Structure	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.
Resources	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).
Goal	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.

Source of spiritual authority.	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."
Modes of discipleship.	Standardised, formal, and curriculum based.	Formalised action-reflection, mentoring, coaching.	Rhythm of life, monastic, familial.
Aspiration in worship.*	Service	Growth	Adoration
?			

* = Subsequently added in edit.

Photo credit: SimonAr

Is the Gospel a Power Play? The perceived incoherence of

belief and humility.

The heart of the gospel includes a *mode* as well as a *message*. Jesus is the substance of both of them.

The mode of the gospel is one of humility. "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit," Paul exhorts us in Philippians 2:3-11. "Rather, in humility, value others above yourselves… have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:… he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant."

Here is what theologians call *kenosis,* the self-emptying character of the gospel. Jesus, who had the power to command twelve legions of angels, doesn't use the sword (Matthew 5:52-53) but lays down his life. This is the Teacher who sets the example of washing feet (John 13:1-17). "Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant," he says to his disciples when they jostle for position, "whoever wants to be first must be your slave – just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Matthew 20:26-27).

We, who follow Jesus, are meant to reflect this mode. It's why we wince when there is hypocrisy in our midst, when we see the drippingly wealthy lifestyle of teleevangelists, or the coercive and oppressive legacy of Western colonialism. We align more clearly with the likes of Mother Teresa or William & Catherine Booth, and above all recognise that the greatest gospel heroes are usually unknown and unsung.

It isn't always simple. Jesus' humility, particularly during his passion and crucifixion, was one of complete surrender to the will of God; he was acquiescent, and was "led to the slaughter… like a sheep silent before her shearers" (Isaiah

53:7). At other times, he is forceful in his actions and language, particularly towards those who exercise and abuse their power. He turns over the tables of the exploitative money changers (Matthew 21:12-13). The pharisees and teachers of the law are “snakes”, a “brood of vipers” and worthy of judgement (Matthew 23:33-36).

When we consider these oppressive people, we agree with Jesus’ actions. Whatever humility means, it doesn’t mean being a doormat, or agreeing with oppression. In fact, **our postmodern world might give us an insight that Jesus appears to be addressing: truth claims are power plays.** By asserting what they declare to be *true* (in how the temple operates, or in the application of God’s law), Jesus’ opponents are constructing a social framework in which they get to have power and influence. Jesus is right to undermine it!

But here, if we are not careful, we run into an incoherence. Because the gospel is not just the *mode* of humility, it is a *message* of truth. Its shortest declaration is three words long: **Jesus is Lord. We are making a truth claim.**

We don’t want to lose humility. Should we therefore refrain from laying out this truth? Let us not fall into the trap of the Pharisees and assert our truth, especially when we inhabit a dominant or privileged Christian position in the Western World. Would it not be more Christ-like to withhold our voice, and be silent like lambs?

Perhaps we should not only lay aside our voice, but be aware of our own heart and attitude. Jesus was humble, so why should we be so arrogant as to hold that we have any particularly correct insight into the ways of the world, the way of God, and the wisdom of what is and what might be? Jesus was self-effacing, so if we speak his name, we must be doing it for our sake, not his. Evangelism itself, therefore, is a form of oppression. We should lay down our power-claiming truths even within the confines of our heart; we should let go of our

beliefs.

Thus, we arrive at our incoherence: For the sake of the gospel, we should stop sharing the gospel. Indeed, for the sake of the gospel, we should stop holding to the truth of the gospel.

If there is a defining dynamic of Western church life, this is it. We want Jesus, but we're embarrassed to believe much about him, let alone speak of him. What if we're wrong? We could so much damage!

I understand the dilemma. After all, other ways of resolving the incoherence may not be particularly attractive to us:

We could modify our sense of Jesus' example of humility and so be less humble ourselves: If he was humble at all, it was an acquiescence tightly attached to his self-sacrificial death on the cross – something he *chose* to do, and therefore a demonstration of his power and strength. The kingdom of Jesus is muscular and assertive: it lays a claim on truth, and on our lives, and dictates some specific ways of living. This world is caught up in a war between good and evil, and we must fight for righteousness in every area of influence: politically, financially, sociologically. This isn't dominance for its own sake, it's justice. We must protect the innocent, particularly the unborn, and hold back the warped worldviews that will pollute the world of our children.

I'm sure you've heard this rhetoric.

We could modify our sense of Jesus' claim to truth and so have less to believe and say: If he made any truth claims about himself at all, they were probably misinterpreted by his biographers, and later given the authority of holy writings by power-hungry men. Jesus is not *the* way, *the* truth, and *the* life (John 14:6), and if he said it, it only applies within the Jewish world that he inhabited, and he never meant it absolutely. Jesus may have claimed authority in the Kingdom

of God (Matthew 28:18) but he meant it subversively, that we might further his Kingdom the way he intended: through dialogue with the oppressed, and inclusion of those discarded by society. The Kingdom of God is made present wherever the compassion that Jesus exemplifies is exercised by any of God's creatures.

I'm sure you've heard this rhetoric also.

Both extremes in this dialectic have a degree of appeal. But it's not a coherent resolution. Within the church, we find ourselves lurching between nihilism ("We can't really know or be anything, let us just be, resting in the empty and meaningless") and more explicit forms of control ("This is how it is, now get on and make the church bigger, don't fail or we will lose influence"). In over-simplification, it's so-called liberalism on one end, and traditionalism (even modern market-driven traditions) on the other.

The synthesis is where we need to be. Neither Jesus' humility, or his claim to truth, can be modified without losing the essence of who he is, and the gospel we believe.

This comes when mode and message combine. As we saw above, Jesus operates in humility. At the same time, Jesus surely does make truth claims about himself. His declaration to the Jews in John 8:58 – "Before Abraham was, I am" – is undoubtedly a claim to divinity. John 14:6 is unequivocal, "No one comes to the Father, except by me." Even the example of humility in Philippians 2 is not a denial that Jesus is "in very nature God", but an exposition of how Jesus didn't *cling* to it for self-grandeur. **We are not nihilistic. Jesus *is* Lord.**

Jesus is the only one who can lay claim to holding "all authority in heaven and earth" (Matthew 28:18) and do so with humility. Why? Because he is the only person for whom that is true, and who holds it rightly and justly and appropriately,

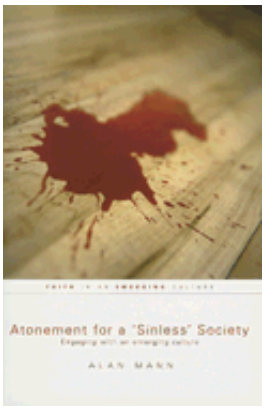
and not by some pretense.

To hold that Jesus is Lord, therefore, not only speaks truth, it also embraces humility. If Jesus is Lord, then I am not. If Jesus mediates the way, the truth, and the life, then I can not. It sets the mode of the gospel: I can not speak the truth in and of myself, I can only seek to echo his words. I can not heal and transform, I can only seek to reflect his heart, and point others towards his safe life-giving arms. I can not untangle the warp and wefts of injustice and human brokenness, I can only, daily, seek to follow the lead of the Spirit of Jesus. **We are not authoritarian. *Jesus* is *Lord*.**

If we really hold to the truth of Jesus, we will be committed to humility. We will entrust others to his care, not try to control them. We will speak truth to power, without fear or favour. “We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; when we are slandered, we answer kindly” (1 Corinthians 4:12-13). How? Because it’s not about us, it’s about Jesus. We live for Him.

The mode of humility involves a self-surrender. The message is that Jesus is the Lord. The two together is the heart of the gospel.

Review: Atonement for a Sinless Society



It took me a while to read *Atonement for a Sinless Society* by Alan Mann. It's style is full of ultramergent pomo-babble which normally turns me away and made it tough going for this particular storied-self. But the title intrigued me and piqued my curiosity. Finding effective ways of communicating the gospel of atonement in away that is faithful to Scripture, inherently Christ-centred, and readily grasped by those who are hearing it is something I have grappled with (as all church leaders and teachers do I guess). For this reason I persisted.

Mann's main premise is that the word "sin" has become meaningless, semantically diluted, in our Western culture. Consequently a gospel that speaks of atonement in terms of the alleviation of guilt, or the forgiveness of sin, fails to impact those who nevertheless are in need of atonement. Mann's suggestion is to consider the human predicament in terms of "shame" and the "incoherence" in their "story", a difference between the story they tell of themselves to others, and their real self:

> *"The chronically shamed fear exposing the reality that the way they narrate themselves to others is not their real self. They are insecure in their relating, constantly aware of the need to cover the self from the 'Other' for fear of being found socially unacceptable. The shamed person lives lives in permanent state of hiding, even when interacting with others. Only ever seeking to story their ideal-self, he or she never wants their real-self to be found." (Page 41)*

There are some strengths to looking at things this way. For instance, shame is certainly part of the fallen human predicament (e.g. Adam & Eve hiding from God and each other). So is relational dishonesty and that sense of incoherence between the who we aspire to be and who we actually are (e.g. Peter's denial of Christ).

It also provides some useful handles on how we might consider the redeemed person. Such a person has allowed themselves to be exposed before the 'Other' (expressing faith, contrition, perhaps repentance?) and has found themselves caught up in the story of One who has never been ontologically incoherent, namely Jesus. Lives are "re-narrated" and therefore made coherent in Christ.

Analysis like this is not necessarily antagonistic to the truth of the gospel. Mann explores this sense of shame, self-narration and coherence in great detail – including an explanation of narrative therapy. Much of this is useful.

My difficulty with this book, therefore, is not so much the "What?" question but the "So what?" question. Setting up a semantical framework which is broad enough to express the gospel is one thing, actually bringing it to bear in a useful way for the Kingdom is another.

One of Mann's problem is that he ends up preaching his framework rather than simply doing what he suggests. For instance, in proclaiming "We come to reflect on his story. But we also come to reflect on our own story." (From a proposed Communion liturgy on page 169) he misses his own point. Just tell the story of Jesus so it impacts our own!

He does do this somewhat in an intriguing comparison of the deaths of Judas and Jesus – both hanging on a tree, both under a curse. Judas' is the result of his incoherence – a shame-filled suicide. Jesus' is the result of his coherence – the being true to himself as obedient Son to the point of death. The juxtaposition of how one is redemptive and the other is not is a useful exercise. And the application whereby we all see ourselves in Judas is also helpful.

But even in this he never quites get there. He may get us to look to Jesus' coherence on the cross… but then what? Are we simply to be inspired? Follow his example? If we are made

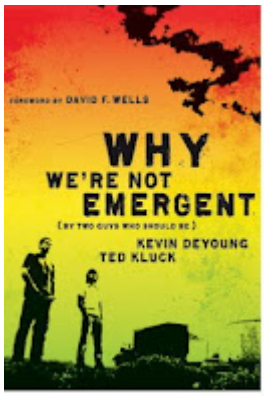
coherent because of Jesus – what actually causes that coherence, upon what does it rest? Mann talks about the "restory-ing of the self" (Page 151) through ritual (particularly Communion) but in this Jesus is simply an inspiring character, not a sovereign Saviour.

I think it's indicative of a nervousness about being objective in any way, or to talk about sin-in-terms-of-guilt in any form. For instance, Mann wants absolution in liturgy to be deliberately ambiguous so that all people can bring their own story to it and notes that "this is perhaps a story that only those who already dwell in the fuller picture of the story of salvation can understand." (Page 157) For me this speaks of telling one story to the uninitiated and another to the more fully initiated – isn't this the same incoherence we are trying to find an answer for? No, narrative needs to meet truth at the beginning, and delve deeper as the spirit leads – but that will never be askance to what is first heard.

I think this book is well motivated and it is one of the better engagements of the gospel with postmodernity that I have read. His framework is not inherently flawed and would be contextually appropriate in many places (including Mann's own circle I suspect). But it needs some theological precision so as to make Christ, not story, central – and an actual telling of the story, more than telling the story of the story.

The book concludes with a conversation between Mann and fellow author Robin Parry who interacts with Mann at his weakest points. It's by far the most productive part of the book to read and makes the task of reading the book somewhat satisfying rather than annoyingly circuitous.

Review: Why We're Not Emergent



With regards to the church of God on this planet we are in an era, like many others beforehand, where the up-and-coming generations of leaders are wrestling with age-old questions of "What is church?" It is not a self-serving question – in the end it bottles down to, "What's the point?" – which brings us to Jesus, and that is good.

This wrestle is often marked by debate about the essential nature of the church, how spirituality is to be expressed, and what mission is to be achieved by whom in what way. As a supposedly mildly-postmodern Gen-Xer I have been caught up in this debate. I have felt and articulated angst against the mainstream, I have been left confused and nauseatingly abandoned by the vacuous left and the experientially pentecostal and hammered by the hardcore conservative rightwing. New Calvinism excites me but I am wary, Rob Bell annoys me but I like to be generous.

You can see from the title of this book, DeYoung and Kluck's *Why We're Not Emergent* subtitled with "by two guys who should be", how it is a part of this ongoing churn. It's a valuable part.

The book is a critique of the "emergent church" movement – a movement which resists the term, is wrapped around the personalities and writings of the likes of Rob Bell (of *nooma* fame) and Brian McLaren, and is characterised by a postmodern spirituality of journey, narrative and discovery. And like it's subject, the critique is messy and somewhat nebulous. Kevin DeYoung brings a theological mind, handling concepts and issues academically, pastorally. Ted Kluck shares anecdotes

and reflections like an opinion page in a newspaper (he's a journalist). It sort of works. Enough.

They are certainly not playing with straw men. They *understand* the emergent church culture, the personalities, the catchcries ("EPIC: experiential, participatory, image driven, and connected" (page 18) is one I have used myself), and the inconsistencies. The rhetorical section entitled "Are You Emergent?" was immensely enjoyable:

> *"After reading nearly five thousand pages of emerging-church literature, I have no doubt that the emerging church, while loosely defined and far from uniform, can be described and critiqued as a diverse but recognizable, movement. You might be an emergent Christian: if you listen to U2, Moby, and Johnny Cash's Hurt (sometimes in church), use sermon illustrations from The Sopranos, drink lattes in the afternoon and Guinness in the evenings, and always use a Mac… [a page later]… if you've ever been to a church with prayer labyrinths, candles, Play-Doh, chalk-drawings, couches or beanbags (your youth group doesn't count); if you loathe words like linear, propositional, rational, machine, and hierarchy and use words like ancient-future, jazz, mosaic, matrix, missional, vintrage, and dance;… [etc.]" (page 20ff)*

Despite the necessary lack of precision they handle the critique well, bottling it down to some useful key issues. DeYoung's theological training is obvious and I found his chapters more useful. A precis would not be valuable, but two key concepts they tackle are worth a mention.

The first is the concept of whether or not we can grasp God. In the face of a movement in which "It's really cool to search for God. It's not very cool to find him." (page 32) they wish to assert that God, in revealing himself, *has* made himself knowable (page 35ff). The doctrine of revelation and epistemological angst is at the heart of engagement with

postmodernity. They do it well.

Of even greater value, however, is their engagement towards the end of the book with the uniqueness of Christ. Here they tackle the well-worn yet bleedingly-arrogant accusations of the liberal left that would relegate atonement to "cosmic child abuse" (page 194) and cry for self-actualised social justice while scorning any concept that God might actually love humanity so much that injustice suffers his wrath.

> *"The emergent emphasis of justice and compassion would be more of a helpful corrective if it went hand in hand with a firm, unashamed belief, made central and upfront, in the reality of everlasting punishment and everlasting reward, the resurrection of all men either to life or judgement, and the necessity of faith in Jesus Christ." (page 187)*

Their demonstration of the ultimate gracelessness of the social gospel is helpful and the strongest critique in the book. Their related consideration of overrealised eschatology (page 184ff) highlights the danger of overstepping "incarnational" or "contextualised" mission and moving to the place where we make the church itself, or some social cause, or some self-actualising journey inherently *messianic* in which Jesus is nothing but a visual aide.

And so it's a good pushback into this generational, ecclesiastical wrestle. It's good that it's written by a couple of young guns which means it never comes near to reading like some pietistic elder-guru intoning dogma.

It has some flaws. I think they should stick with "emerging" or "emergent" rather than interchange these labels which are becoming more concretely used to demarcate between those that want to share a journey (emerg*ent*) and those that want to share a gospel (emerg*ing*).

And I am surprised that there is only one mention of Mark

Driscoll (page 165). That's a nice surprise for me actually as it shows that you *can* talk about this stuff without talking about Mars Hill Seattle. But it's interesting that for a very recent book (2008) they haven't considered reflecting on things in the light of New Calvinism and the Driscoll brand of emerging (not emergent) church.

In the end, and from the broad vibe of the book, my greatest appreciation comes from a resonance with my own feelings of the moment. I'm really quite sick of all the "missional" gumph. I'm tired of jumping through cultural hoops that never seem to work and are usually just shots in the dark by a few know-it-alls. I'm not smart enough to figure out which way the Holy Spirit is blowing and my heart is not big enough to contain the burden of those around me who need Jesus so much. Right now I just want to keep it simple, preach the gospel, defend the poor, and rest in God. I see that here:

> *"…my hope is that we could be marked by grace and truth, logical precision and warmhearted passion, careful thinking and compassionate feeling, strong theology and tender love, Christian liberty and spiritual discipline, congregational care and committed outreach, diversity without doctrinal infidelity, ambition without arrogance, and contentment without complacency." (page 251)*

Pastor DeYoung, Amen.

Review: Metavista

Metavista, written by Colin Greene & Martin Robinson is a socio-philosophical, cultural, ecclesiological and missiological commentary. "Our context in the twenty-first century… is radically different," they say in the introduction (page xiv), and continue:

> *We shall argue that it is post-Christendom, post-secular, post-colonial and post-individualistic, in no particular order of priority, and therefore post-postmodern. And that "postist" reality requires an entirely new mission agenda that will not be adequately understood through adherence solely to church-planting strategies.*

Those who know me will understand my engagement with this book. I share a frustration with typical church-plant/growth/renewal strategies. I resonate with the authors' premise which is later on expressed thusly: "the technology of mission… we are dealing here [is] art, not science" (page 187)… "an organic process rather than a ready-to-go formula" (page 197) and of "tension" between "a more sophisticated recalibration of the church" to "a deeply postmodern context" and those who look, rather, for a "**fundamental reimagining**." (page 180)

I'm one of those seeking a reimagining. But what are the whys and wherefores, where is the framework, what gives it life, how is it found? The value of this book is that it helps to remove the blinkers to the Holy Spirit at work.

Greene spends the first part of the book considering the cultural and sociological landscape. He unpacks the powerful narrative of modernity and secularisation from the 19th century – looking at it not just in philosophical academic terms but with regard to how it all engaged with the people's

imagination.

> *At this moment in history… these creative ideas came together to form a stirring emancipation narrative that caught the public imagination and led irrevocably to fundamental changes in the way people experienced the world. To "indwell the world" no longer meant to be bound inevitably to the accepted social order instituted by God and maintained by the authority of the aristocracy. Neither did it mean to accept one's appointed lot in life which, for most, was one of grueling poverty, hardship and suffering. Nor did it mean to view religion and the church as the only safe refuge from a harsh and mercurial world that did not appear to operate according to any particular inbuilt order… The sociological achievement of the Enlightenment was the rise of the new bourgeoisie, and it was among this new class of rich merchants, bankers and industrialists that the narrative of emancipation was most venerated. (page 14)*

He then unpacks postmodernity in the normal terms – touching on the "incredulity towards metanarratives," the rejection of absolutes and "fiduciary frameworks", and the "preference for individualized spirituality over and against organized religion" (page 42).

Greene wants "a way out of the postmodern impasse of no legitimating foundations to knowledge, ethical and political practice and, indeed, religious belief." (page 42). Indeed:

> *To date postmodernity has been unable to provide us with a satisfying or legitimating account of why local stories are any more credible and authentic than the universal theories and archetypal myths we once found determinative of human existence and therefore believable. (page 50)*

And so the "cultural transition we are presently experiencing, that which we have called 'metavista,' the age of imagination"

is introduced. And at it's heart lies not just subjective postmodern mininarrative, or imposed modernistic metanarrative, but the **"power of retold stories."** (page 51)

This framework imperative to "retell the story" resonates with current experience. The ills of the First World can be seen in the loss of a defining story. What does it mean to be Australian, or British, for instance? Modernity reduces us to economic units, postmodernity reduces us to individual characters in our own self-centred fantasy. How do I fit in the larger whole, what gives me purpose and reason-for-being?

I watched the inauguration of President Obama last night and recognised within his speech the ability to retell the American Story – spinning phrases such as "Yes, we can" that are not mere words but reimaginings, calls, echoes of longing that seems to be speaking to Americans and giving them a metanarrative that is not imposed but to which they run. **Similarly, the church story, the Jesus story needs retelling.**

And so Greene tackles the main locus of that story – the Bible. He critiques the historical-critical hermeneutical and exegetical approach that modernistically asserts that the Word of God is reserved to the domain of the educated and academic. He suggests a return towards allegorical or typological reading – certainly not to the level of medieval excess but, dare I say it, with the same heart as biblical theologians such as Goldsworthy, and in the same vein as "many of the biblical writers [who] linked the two testaments into one unified story" (page 106):

> *Now it is very interesting that while the typological and the allegorical meaning was what the Reformers must distrusted… it is precisely this convention… figuration, that allows the Bible to be perceived as a unified narrative. (page 105)*

And so **Greene and Robinson place the Bible at the heart of the story that needs retelling in a metavista age.** They identify,

in particular, the “four subplots” of the Bible – The creation story, The Israel story, The Jesus story, and The church’s story. The gospel as theological assertion – you sinned, Jesus died – is replaced by gospel with flesh and bones – no less centred on the death and resurrection of the Messiah – but well-rooted, flourishing, bearing fruit in the reality of history and the imagination of today – a perichoresis of narratives that reveals Christ to us.

A crucial aspect of this perichoresis is the story of God at work in the church. **The Church is no longer relegated to the epilogue** of Christ’s passion but is caught up in the gospel dance itself. This is no heresy, and no surprise. After all, even Bill Hybels holds to the vision of “The local church is the hope of the world”!

Greene finishes his contribution by considering the church in this respect, retelling the church story particularly in terms of political engagement against the modernistic relegation of the church to the merely private.

> *Here, at times amidst the fleshpots of Babylon, at others under the oppressive strictures and tyranny of empires, where the mission of the church is curtailed or controlled, the church must, nevertheless, fulfill her task to image the kingdom of God, proclaim judgment, and actively resist the idolatry of the oppressors. (page 149)*

Robinson then completes the book delivering one of the best overviews of nineteenth and twentieth century church history I have ever read.

In recent year
s, observing my own church – Anglican in Tasmania – I have noted how the vigour (and orthodoxy) of nineteenth century Anglo-Catholicism seemed to have collapsed across the world wars to a generation who ended up retaining the tradition but not its content. Having ministered in congregations defined by

this generation I can testify to the contemporary echoes of the death-throes of Christendom which crescended, as Robinson states, in the 1960's.

Robinson continues the story through the 70's, considering the Lausanne evangelical resurgence of mission. He helpfully notes what many often ignore – the transition in Pentecostal churches from sect to mainstream, and, in the 80's from what I call "classical pentecostalism" focussing on the work of the Holy Spirit to "new-style pentecostalism" focussing on entertainment techniques and management programs.

> *It had become apparent by the 1980s that the revivalist hopes of the charismatic movement were misplaced. However much some individual charismatic and Pentecostal congregations had grown, the hoped for scenario in which a renewed church would see hundreds of thousands clamoring to become Christians in the context of signs and wonders came to be seen as a false hope… New solutions would need to be found. The 1980s and 1990s saw a succession of solutions presented… programs of one kind or another. (pages 176-177)*

All of this provides the background for the necessity of a "fundamental reimagining" of the church. Robinson picks up on contemporary concepts of Emerging Church and offers some critique and balance while working towards a presentation of a "Missional Community" at the heart of his reimagining. **He tells a counter-cultural story of church** "constituted not for itself, nor even for the world in an abstract sense, but towards the remaking of human communities as deeply incarnational expressions of the church in mission." (pages 188-189).

His comments provide a helpful balance that has been missing in contemporary urgings to be more missional. We don't always realise that the dying Christendom story can express itself outwardly ad well as inwardly in activities that look like

mission but are no longer missional. In my own experience I have heard a call to mission answered by yet another round of people volunteering for charitable programs or "doing their bit" for the "work of the church." Why did I find such goodness frustrating? Because such "mission" would not retell the story or reimagine the church and live out the gospel. Robinson provides an excellent quote from Robert Jenson:

> *All that talk a few years ago about the world setting the agenda, about seeing where God was at work in the world and jumping in to help, etc., was just* ***a last gasp of the church's establishment in the West, of its erstwhile ability to suppose that what the culture nurtured as good had to be congruent with the good the church had to bring.*** *(page 189)*

Even the best intentions can fail to resonate when they either merge with culture, or find no point of connection. Robinson, rather, calls for a reimagination of a counter-cultural life. "To live counter-culturally will mean to confront rival ideologies and not to be subverted by them." (page 189).

Again, I find this resonates with my own kerygma in recent times to bring to the church the eschatological impetus to actively, passionately, "do life well" all the more as the Day approaches – for each to know their place in the story so that they can retell it in their living.

This lies at the heart of the difference between "attractional" models of church and missional models of church that happen to be "attractive." Such attractive communities "are that way partly because they have a high threshold of expectation in terms of what members will do" (page 195). **Participation is expected – but not a simple volunteerism for programs, rather a participation in counter-cultural life itself.**

There are many other gems in Robinson's thoughts – comments on leadership for instance and citations of a book by Alan

Roxburgh that I have bought and will review at some point.

I will finish with one final quotation. Like most of the book it gives voice to my heart that I hear echoing in others. In this case let me note a congruence with Mark Driscoll's theory of "reformission" in the collision of the three "narratives" of Gospel, Church and Culture where the church has to "live adventurously":

> *To live this kind of counter-cultural life the church has to "risk" living at the interface of the collision of all three narratives… It has never been a safe option to live a genuinely counter-cultural Christian life, because such a life deconstructs old cultural verities and ignites new habits of the heart. It invites old men to dream dreams and young men to have visions. (pages 226-227)*

Amen.