

Is the church captive to white picket fences?

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CULTURE | Tess Holgate

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When Tim Foster made the 15km move from a suburban parish to an urban one, he didn't anticipate just how much his understanding of the gospel would be challenged. Now the Director of Theological Education and Formation at Ridley College in Melbourne, he has penned his reflections in his new book, *The Suburban Captivity of the Church*.

Aside from all the cultural differences, Tim says he was struck "by how hostile people were to evangelical Christianity and yet how many of their values were familiar to me from the Bible. There was a real concern for the marginalised, for social justice, for the environment, a real desire for community".

Observing this forced Tim to reflect on the way he had understood the gospel: "The gospel as I had come to understand it, aligned itself very strongly with suburban values".

Tim says that the gospel has been so contextualised to the suburban context that the two are inextricably linked. "Suburban people are fundamentally aspirational; what drives them is moving towards a settled, secure and safe existence. The suburban gospel suits this because it gives you eternal security," Tim says.

According to Tim, this vision is missing a critical element of the gospel: the critique of strongly held values. "It seemed to me that our gospel and church was being held captive to suburban context and values.

"In reducing the gospel to becoming a ticket to heaven, evangelicals have developed a very under-realised view of the Christian life – so it's all about what happens after I die, it doesn't shape how I live. In Jesus' life, death and resurrection a new order has come. There's a new way to be human, a new way to be community, and this new order turns the world upside down. It challenges all of our values", says Tim.

Foster's critique of a "punitive" gospel might be challenging for some Christians, who might be focused on keeping the gospel "clear". In an early chapter of *Suburban Captivity* he gives case studies of people ranging from "Kate" a heritage architect in the inner city to "Suzie" who lives on a housing estate and encourages us to think how we can engage in their "cultural narratives". Or to put it in Christian-speak, "how the gospel can enter their lives". He is saying that we need to understand them so that they can understand us.

The gospel is much more holistic than a simple salvation equation. Tim says, "the gospel is about God realising his purposes for the creation. I am no longer at the centre, but God is, because it's the recovery of his purposes.

"The gospel is still about salvation, but it's no longer primarily driven by the question of my personal salvation from judgement. Conversion becomes about getting on board with God's purposes. It's no longer an abstract conversation about me being under God's wrath and facing judgement at the end time. Rather when we look at recovering God's purposes for the world, we actually need to look at how those purposes are being realised, how they are being undermined and how they can be redeemed in a given culture".

This is contextualisation, and as Foster says in his book,

The power of the gospel is felt when it is brought into meaningful engagement with the narrative of a culture. God has given us a job to do, and it is more than simply repeating the supposedly timeless words of well-worn tracts. We must better understand both the gospel and the culture we are seeking to reach, using our creativity and imagination to bring them into dynamic conversation (p. 137).

Keep your eye out for a review of Tim's new book, *The Suburban Captivity of the Church*, coming soon to an *Eternity* near you.



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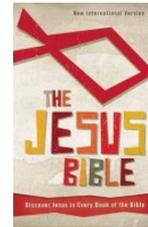
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