

The Suburban Captivity of The Church

Contextualising the Gospel for Post-Christian Australia

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*Dedicated to the memory of my friend
Andy Stirrup
who died suddenly in January 2014
and whose wisdom, godliness and gospel passion
are greatly missed.*

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FOREWORD

It is a delight to write this foreword. I came to know Tim many years ago while he was still a part of Youthworks in Sydney, and then as he moved into his urban parish of Leichhardt. This little book is a powerful expression of hope and love for a location that many have chosen to dismiss and diminish – the city and its suburbs.

In the late sixties, Gibson Winter, the American sociologist, wrote a book of the same title. It described the massive demographic shifts in North American culture and the flight to the new suburbs by white Protestants and their leaders. Practically all church planting in that period was in these expanding and multiplying suburbs. With patterns of deep homogeneity and conformity, newly minted pastors went out to start new congregations in newly built suburbs. It was all a matter of ‘add water and stir’, as clergy-managers trained by seminaries for branch-brand church planting bravely went where everyone else had already gone. So much of the story of the Protestant churches in North America, so keenly parsed by Winter, sprang from this development.

That was more than seventy years ago, and much of the malaise of Christian identity sprang from these roots. But Tim comes at this question of the suburbs with fresh eyes and a gospel-filled imagination. He recognises the challenges and ‘captivities’ of suburban contexts, but he also sees something much more significant – the power of God present in the transforming gospel. While many want to curse the suburbs and

“This little book is a powerful expression of hope and love for a location that many have chosen to dismiss and diminish – the city and its suburbs.”

the deformed 'gospel' that sprang from its self-absorbed individualistic and consumerist base, Tim grasps that the gospel has good, great news for the modern suburbs. God's hope-filled good news turns up in the most godforsaken places. The Spirit's transforming power shows up among the very people we write off as not able to 'get' what God is doing. In this book, Tim frames that radically hope-filled gospel as good news within the suburban captivity of the churches.

This book offers positive ways in which churches can reimagine and rebirth their lives as gospel communities. We live in crazy, confusing times that are amassing huge levels of anxiety in us all. Churches see

“This book offers positive ways in which churches can reimagine and rebirth their lives as gospel communities.”

themselves struggling. Established narratives about Christian life and identity are unravelling all about us. In this context, too many leaders keep trying to fix their churches by aping programs and trying to reenergise existing forms one more time. Tim has learned that the way the church

is remade as a gospel people is through contextualisation: re-entering these strange places called suburbs in order to listen to the quiet but real ways in which the Spirit is already ahead of us in the city.

Too often we have uncritically aligned the gospel with the white middle-class cultures of the suburbs. But, if we are ready to hear again the gospel for these contexts, we can become agents for the transformation of the suburbs; helping them to move from places that destroy human thriving to places that celebrate the radical otherness of God. This is no easy task! It is a massive undertaking, but one the Spirit has always been about – redeeming rather than cursing; transforming contexts again into vehicles of gospel life.

Hear the invitation of the Spirit in this book.

Alan Roxburgh

INTRODUCTION

I still recall the day when we arrived in the inner-city parish of Leichhardt fresh from the suburbs. We climbed out of our four-wheel drive and my eight-year-old son Harry stood and stared. His attention was first captured by the beggar across the street accosting passers-by with her trademark ‘You got a dollar mister?’ He had never seen someone homeless, begging. As a low-flying plane roared overhead, the two women walking past hand-in-hand added to his confusion. Who are these people? What had he come to? His father was asking the very same questions!

We had driven a mere fifteen kilometres – we were in the same city in which we had lived our whole lives – and yet it felt like we were in another country.

Over the following seven years we slowly came to know these people. We discovered that we were living in the midst of two distinct subcultures. One was the ‘yuppie’ subculture, whose members occupied renovated terraces and factories. These people were attracted by the vibe of the streets, cafes, bookshops and fringe films. They embraced numerous causes, most notably the plight of refugees, environmental sustainability and gay marriage. Then there was the ‘battler’ subculture, consisting of the remnant working class and those living in government housing or boarding houses. For them, life was all about survival.

We discovered that these two very different groups had one thing in common. They were deeply alienated from the evangelical church.

**“We were in
the same city
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While each group perceived us differently, both were shaped by value systems that, in their own way, were diametrically opposed to the values of evangelical Christianity.

So we exchanged our four-wheel drive for a Prius, and spent the next seven years trying to understand how to become a church that would bring the gospel to these divergent groups of people.

“The gospel that we evangelicals proclaimed was loaded with the cultural baggage of suburbia.”

It was from this vantage point that I began to reflect on the values and aspirations of my friends back in the suburbs. While immersed in suburban life myself, I was unable to recognise the distinctive values of suburban people. I regarded suburban ideals as normal: values that centred on the domestic sphere, that privileged family and which were fuelled by the desire for upward mobility. I hardly even recognised them as ‘values’. But now that I was no longer a part of that culture, I was able to see its distinctive set of values for the first time.

One of the more important things I noticed was that the evangelical Christianity I had long been a part of had been profoundly influenced by suburban values. That is, the way we had come to understand the gospel, church and the Christian life, as well as our values and aspirations as Christians, was not simply a product of the Bible, but of a spirituality that was shaped, more than anything, by life in the suburbs. Far from being culturally neutral, the gospel that we evangelicals proclaimed was loaded with the cultural baggage of suburbia.

This created a huge challenge. If these urbanites had explicitly rejected suburban values, and if suburban values were deeply embedded in my evangelical gospel, then my gospel would be automatically rejected. Of course, this would be alright if it were the *gospel* they were rejecting (see 1 Cor 1:18–25), however if it was a gospel distorted by my own suburban middle-class ideals, then the problem lay with me.

In my mind, this went a long way to explaining why evangelical Christianity is so strong in the suburbs and yet has had so little impact in the gentrified urban areas and among the working class. It also posed a significant challenge to this evangelical pastor and his embattled church as we sought, not only to understand this new culture, but also to extract the gospel from our suburban cultural baggage and reimagine the message as good news for urban people.

I came to realise that I had to think about my parish of Leichhardt in the same way that a missionary would think about their new context. A missionary would learn the skill of *contextualisation*: how to take the gospel as it is understood in one culture and to translate it for the recipient culture. I needed to learn how to read Leichhardt's subcultures, and bring the gospel to them free from the baggage of my own cultural background.

Not every reader will share the middle-class version of evangelicalism that I have described, and which, for many years, was invisible to me. Nor will you necessarily share my middle-class suburban background, or have made the same assumptions that I made. What we do share, however, is this: we all have unexamined cultural baggage that has the potential to distort the gospel message. Whether we are reaching a new culture, or trying to bring the gospel to our own in a more biblically faithful way, we need to understand the nature of the gospel, learn how to interpret culture and discover how gospel and culture interact to produce a contextualised message.

This book represents my attempt to wrestle with these issues while remaining faithful to the gospel. In fact, I wanted to be more faithful to the gospel, stripping it of my own cultural baggage in order to address the values of my new 'host culture'. The exciting prospect for the evangelist is that this process of contextualisation can lead to a message that has a powerful transforming effect. A gospel message that takes a person's culture seriously will challenge the very foundation on which a person's

life is built, offering an alternative way of understanding the world and a new way to live. This is not just about good theology, but about good evangelism as well.

Overview

The purpose of this book is to help you understand the nature of the gospel, to recognise the extent to which your understanding is itself a product of culture, and to frame the gospel in a way that brings its promise and challenge faithfully to a given culture.

While missionaries have been engaged in this enterprise for decades, it can no longer be considered a task for those serving overseas. Not only are Western nations more ethnically diverse, but ‘white’ culture has become increasingly fragmented. The emergence of a hip inner-city culture has created a substantial new group that rejects suburban values, many of which are embedded in our understanding of the gospel. At the same time the working class culture remains largely unreached and disinterested in the aspirational gospel of the middle class.

“The emergence of a hip inner-city culture has created a substantial new group that rejects suburban values.”

Part 1 of this book is concerned with each of these elements, and we focus on developing a theory of contextualisation.

Chapter 1 explores the dimensions of the gospel, challenging the popular contemporary presentations in which the gospel is presented as a ticket to heaven.

Instead we seek to do justice to the biblical emphasis on the kingdom of God and consider how it might be understood outside its first-century Jewish context. This provides an alternative way to ‘frame’ the gospel, one that better represents the biblical material and provides a foundation for the enterprise of contextualisation.

In Chapter 2 we discuss culture, using the idea of ‘cultural narrative’ to understand how culture shapes the values and aspirations of its

members. Since we want the gospel to intersect people's lives at this deep level where behaviour is shaped, we need to learn how to discover the elements that make up their worldview. We must 'crack the culture code' by deconstructing the identity, symbols, myths and rituals that promote the cultural narrative.

Chapter 3 brings gospel and culture together and explores how the gospel operates as an alternative cultural narrative that stands in tension with its host culture. We consider how the gospel narrative both affirms and critiques culture, providing a new vision for life shaped by God's new order.

In Part 2, we apply this theory of contextualisation.

Chapter 4 begins in the suburbs, exploring how the evangelical gospel and the suburbs became so entangled. By understanding this relationship we are better able to bring the gospel into critical engagement with suburban culture and also reshape the gospel for other cultures.

In Chapter 5 we focus on the urban culture of the inner city, which represents a strong challenge to the suburban ethos and to churches who maintain it.

Our third case study, in Chapter 6, takes a close look at the 'battlers', a group significantly under-represented in evangelical churches, and identifies some strong alignment between the gospel and the battler ethos.

There are numerous other cultures and subcultures. I am not attempting to offer a contextualised gospel for every one. Rather, I want to develop a theology of gospel and culture, and then illustrate how contextualisation works. By illustrating this with respect to the suburban, urban and working-class cultures, I aim to provide the tools that can be applied to any context.

“The working class culture remains largely unreached and disinterested in the aspirational gospel of the middle class.”

Why contextualise?

At this point you may be wondering why all this is necessary. Why not just proclaim ‘the gospel’ that Jesus has died for our sins and that we need to repent and trust in him to be saved? After all, many people have been saved by this gospel in the past, perhaps including us!

While some will fear that contextualisation means changing – and therefore distorting – the gospel, failing to contextualise represents a far greater risk. This is because what we assume to be ‘the gospel’ is itself highly contextualised for our own culture. The gospel can never be free from the language, thought forms and values of a particular society. In contextualising the gospel for our culture, we have shaped it around our own agendas and accommodated it to our own values. One

“Contextualisation is about bringing the gospel into critical engagement with the cultural narratives that shape us, and framing the gospel as an alternative story to live by.”

example is the Western perspective on the centrality of humanity, and in particular the individual. As such, it marginalises the church and the environment and has little to offer for transforming the world in the present. To the extent that other cultures do not share these agendas and values, our version of the gospel may have little traction, and make little sense. If we are going to reach people who are not middle-class suburbanites, then we will need to translate the gospel so that it engages their agendas and is expressed within their thought forms.

Contextualisation is about bringing the gospel into critical engagement with the cultural narratives that shape us, and framing the gospel as an alternative story to live by. Too often the gospel is so truncated that it fails to engage a person’s worldview, instead simply

tinkering at the fringes. Unless people are converted to a new story, abandoning the narrative that has shaped them and embracing the gospel story, then they will continue to be shaped by their host culture and make poor disciples.

By contextualising the gospel we will not only see more people come to faith, but see their lives deeply transformed as they enter God's new order and embrace the new life he has for them.