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a forum for people struggling with faith and church issues

values being real
supports faith stage transition
respects and validates the journeys of others
allows questions and doubts
lets God defend God

A Former Baptist Pastor's Journey to a Churchless Faith

Right at the outset I want to say I strongly believe that the 'gathered Church' has a huge part to play in God's strategy in his world. Indeed, this was my world for most of the first fifty years of my life. In recent years, however, I have come to realise that Christ's Church is vastly broader than the Christian gathered Church, and that there are those of us who are specifically 'called by God' NOT to be part of the gathered Church but to serve God outside its parameters.

The background to my Churchless faith

The son of a Baptist minister, I was myself theologically trained and in the Baptist ministry from 1976 to 1988. I was strongly evangelical and charismatic and, by gifting, had a developed pulpit teaching and pastoral counselling ministry.

But in 1988, following a powerful divine visitation during which I was 'told' that my time as a pastor was over and that I was to go into secular work, I resigned from pastoral ministry. At that stage I believed the major reason for my radical relocation to be my unacknowledged profound 'burn-

out'. Looking back sixteen years later I can now see it was also to do with a new calling God was preparing for me.

The years between 1988 and 1998 were truly 'wilderness years'. While my new work as a life insurance broker was going well, in most other areas I was struggling. Our twenty nine year marriage was increasingly dysfunctional and, though I attended church, I could not face the thought of ongoing active involvement in church life. In 1998 I finally made the huge decision to leave the marriage. And, rather than cause awkwardness in any local church where everyone knew that I, a former Baptist minister, had apparently just 'walked out of my marriage'; I also chose to curtail church attendance, at least for a while. Never at any point was I treated badly by any church or by individual Christians over this matter. Those Christian friends who did make the effort to contact me were caring and non-judgmental.

Some years later I remarried. My new wife Jan, the daughter of a Seventh Day Adventist minister, had been a deeply committed and spiritual child and teenager.

Her subsequent spiritual journey had led to her combining the best of Christian and eastern spirituality. She had grown to be a person totally and utterly dedicated to doing God's will in her life. Our marriage is based on our profound conviction that it was God who brought us together for the express purpose of doing his will and calling in our lives.

What then was it that caused me to see that God's will and purpose for Jan and myself lay outside of the gathered Church?

1) My growing disagreement over the traditional Evangelical understanding of 'Salvation'

Hours of intense discussion and debate with Jan over this key issue meant that, with my previously cast-iron evangelical blinkers somewhat prised open, I began to carefully re-examine the biblical evidence, especially Jesus' teaching on this subject. What I found came as a huge shock.

Rereading the gospels, especially Matthew, Mark and Luke, the earliest gospels, I discovered a Jesus who frequently and explicitly affirmed salvation for

individuals *solely* on the basis of their loving God and living their lives on the solid rock of 'Golden Rule goodness' - *without* any iron-clad requirement for them to first 'believe in him', as demanded by our traditional evangelical salvation formula.

I saw that we evangelicals had built up our salvation theology from very carefully selected verses in John's gospel and the writings of the Apostles, while totally ignoring a considerable body of Jesus' own explicit teachings with their infinitely broader and more generous understanding of salvation - an understanding that does not cast ninety percent of humanity into eternal hell. One outcome of my re-examination was our website, www.vanguardspirituality.org, which contains a number of provocative articles exploring in depth the biblical evidence for an 'Inclusive Christianity' founded on the explicit teachings of Jesus Christ.

I began to realise that if I were to attend an EPC church I would, because of these views, very soon find myself in conflict with the pastor and elders. Not wanting to become a focal point of division, I felt it best to limit church attendance to occasional visits. *Thus it was apparent that there was no way I could attend on the basis of what I could GIVE to a church, as an important aspect of that giving would not be accepted.*

2) Now I know this will sound arrogant, but -

I began to own up the fact that I had outgrown the general spiritual ethos of most EPC churches and that there was little, if anything, they could offer that would grow me in my relationship with God.

On the occasions we did attend church (at a number of different middle-of-the-road EPC

churches) we more often than not came away deeply disappointed at the frightening shallowness of both the worship and the sermons we heard. We knew that if we again became part of this type of church and were sucked back into typical evangelical mindsets and *control assumptions* we would find our walk with God actually being drained and diminished.

While the Evangelical Church had done a marvellous job of growing me to a certain point I had, through God's dealings with me over recent years, now outgrown it. I was no longer in need of a weekly emotional rev up to maintain my walk with God. (I say *emotional*, for much of what is called 'spiritual' in EPC church life is, in fact, at a rather superficial emotional level and has very little true spiritual content.)



3) **For me the worship music choice and style of worship leading that characterises many EPC churches had lost much of its power.**

(Note: I do, however, acknowledge that this EPC worship style *does* minister

powerfully to most of those who attend these churches. I also know that there are a few EPC Churches which are not guilty of what I say below.)

At 56 I am old enough to have a deep love for some of the profound and powerful hymns. Tragically, most of these hymns are unknown to the generation of younger people who lead worship in many EPC churches. Likewise, most of the equally powerful worship songs birthed out of the 1970s and 1980s Charismatic movement have fallen victim to a large overdose of Hillsong triumphalism and are all but lost.

Added to that was the fact that about five years ago I discovered the amazing spiritual powerhouse of 'sacred voice' music, tragically virtually unknown in our EPC tradition. Once I had been baptised into the unspeakable spiritual power and wonder of Mozart's *Great Mass in C* and *Ave Verum Corpus*, Handel's *Messiah*, Allegri's *Miserere* and many other pieces like them, trying to worship God via much of what passes as 'worship music' today became a most difficult exercise.

4) My deep unease over the way many evangelicals completely misunderstand the true nature of sin, and the way group dynamics in churches nurture and sustain this misunderstanding.

I remember one of my church elders saying to me that he didn't believe that *unmarried* couples who lived in a long term committed relationship were 'living in *sin*'. I found myself agreeing with him, but we both concluded that we dare not say this publicly as it could be worth our jobs!

Then there was the issue of so called 'dirty jokes'. I knew that on a *private level* we could and did at times laugh over genuinely

funny jokes about sex, which is of course often a truly hilarious subject. Yet in public we all felt obliged to toe the party line and piously declare these jokes to be sinful.

Another was the issue of swearing. I knew for a fact there were men in our leadership who in their everyday jobs occasionally came out with the odd well placed 'bloody', 'shit' or 'bugger'. I found it hard to believe that God was in any way upset over this. But none of us could ever afford to be honest and acknowledge publicly that this use of expletives was not sinful.

Despite what evangelicals will claim, in actual practice many still display vastly more concern over what they declare to be 'sins

of the flesh' than they do over the far more serious core 'sins of the spirit'; slander, criticism, pride, judgmentalism and the misuse and abuse of power in regards to both people and the environment. In doing this they demonstrate an alarming misunderstanding of the true nature of sin. In fact, I suggest that our popular evangelical understanding of sin owes infinitely more to the Pharisaical view than it does to the teaching of Jesus Christ.

In Conclusion

In spite of the above criticisms, the gathered Church is full of sincere wonderful people who successfully and faithfully serve God in the place where they are called. Indeed, their power lies in their obedience to God's call to

be an active part of the gathered Church despite its shortcomings.

Likewise, Jan's and my power can come only from our obedience in serving God from the place he has called us to be – outside the gathered Church, as part of Christ's vast and varied wider community seeking to bring God's will on earth as it is in heaven.

Bruce Puddle - Tauranga

To find out more about Bruce (and Jan), their work, book publications, articles of interest, check out their website – www.vanguardspirituality.org

Have we failed again?
Oppressed under the weight of our own "correctness"
Where there is this life in all its fullness
We hear about so much?
We remind ourselves –
We write and speak about this life and freedom
Perhaps like a mirage in the desert:
Tantalizingly close yet never realized
Looking so real yet without substance

Jesus calls us to remove our uniforms of rules and conformity
And to dive naked into the pool of liberty
Bask and splash, soak and drink
There's plenty there for all!

Andrew Wheatley

Parachute and a Spirited Exchanges website

Spirited Exchanges was a solid presence at Parachute again this year. Being there for the second time built on the previous year and being alongside Spiritual Growth Ministries (SGM) a complementary organisation, meant we could reinforce each other. If you would like to know more about SGM and what spiritual direction offers click onto www.sgm.org.nz A spiritual director (companion is a better word) can help you to clarify, discern, further understand your own spiritual journey.

Spirited Exchanges has also launched its own website! This was up and running, although still in its forming phases, in time for Parachute. Bit by bit this is being added to so please bear with us. You can find us on www.spiritedexchanges.org.nz Any feedback is welcomed.

The Complex Christ: Signs of emergence in the urban church

by Kester Brewin

Published by SPCK 2004

First, a disclaimer. This is not a review or an evaluation, still less a critique, but an introduction. I found this book stimulating, disturbing, poetic, sad and hopeful.

I came to this book with no preconceptions or expectations of what I might find in it.

I'd never heard of Kester Brewin, nor of the Vaux Community to which he refers. He is British – I know nothing about the church scene in Britain and less about the Church of England.

So I began reading simply because I liked the title. Two words intrigued me: complex and urban. On opening the book the chapter headings further intrigued me: Advent; Incarnation; Emergence; the City; Gift; Dirt.

'This is a book about change'. So begins the introduction. Brewin looks at the church of today and is scathing. He quotes thinkers who conclude the church is dying and doesn't refute them. At the same time he is hopeful. If the church is willing to change, to learn, to adapt, to be re-born it may emerge 'as a totally new organism, one that is adapted to the complex and evolving environment of the city; one operating with a spirituality that rejects simplistic, monochrome, flat answers and embraces the multi-dimensional full-colour complexity of our situation...' (p. 64)

Change begins with waiting. There must be a pause before the new can be born, and when it does it will be incomplete and immature. It will also be very specific to the culture and place where it is born. Brewin argues, that as God became incarnate in Christ, dependent on Mary, learning from his elders, taking his place in society, so the church must be the body of Christ incarnate in its own time and culture.

In the chapter concerning gift I was fascinated to read an extended description of Maori hunting rituals. This leads into a thoughtful exploration of the economy of gift and the

economy of the market. How can the church become a space for people to offer their gifts?

The chapter on dirt is equally intriguing. Brewin points out that over the centuries in most societies, religion has set the boundaries for what is 'clean' and what is 'dirty'. Having lived in a Muslim society where 'pollution' was a pre-eminent concern, the factor which most impacted health and well-being I've long been aware of how Jesus stepped over, disregarded, or eliminated so many of the dirt boundaries – touching the leper, taking the hand of a corpse, allowing a bleeding woman to touch him. Brewin goes further and shows how in doing this Jesus subverts all the power and authority of organised religion. The priests no longer control cleansing. Anyone can come to God. Sadly, the church has continued to label things as dirty and become a place where the dirt is excluded rather than the place where the dirty can find cleansing.

The repeated theme of the book is the city. If the city is to be the place where God will finally dwell with people, we must look now for signs of God in the city. We learn from and in cities. 'Christ's attitude to the emerging city was not one of antagonism or annihilation. Quite the opposite. Christ approached the city in order to become part of it, to infect it, to plant some seed within it that he hoped would take root and grow, drawing the city toward its fulfilled state: that of the place of divine and human cohabitation.(p114.)

To try to summarise the book further would be to do it an injustice. Enough to say that it's rich in ideas, inviting reflection and action. This is a book that draws on the Bible, church history, philosophy, theology, fiction, poetry, art, and disciplines of science and the social sciences. If for nothing else I'd be grateful to Brewin for quoting authors and ideas new to me. I will certainly be exploring his list of books for further reading.

For reviews of this book, more information about the author, articles by him and feedback from others, visit his website www.thecomplexchrist.com

Introduced by Adrienne Thompson

For any contributions to, or comments you would like to make about the newsletter or if you would like to come off the mailing list please write to the Editor: **Jenny McIntosh at P.O. Box 11551, Wellington** or on email: spiritex@central.org.nz or jenny@central.org.nz For Alan Jamieson: alan@central.org.nz or aj@paradise.net.nz