

Roxburgh, Alan J. 2021.

*Joining God in the Great Unraveling: Where We Are & What I've Learned.*

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THE STARTING POINT OF Roxburgh's latest book is "Modernity's Great Wager", namely the "modern project", the Enlightenment and associated philosophical and cultural movements that have "bet the farm" on the proposition that *life can be lived well without God*. A second starting point is Roxburgh's observation that we are living through a time of great unraveling, both in what he calls our Euro-tribal churches and in the West generally.

He argues that Euro-tribal churches have largely been colonized by modernity's technocratic rationality, driven by professionalism, technique, management and control, in order to bend the world to our will, and so has little need for God's agency. These churches have unwittingly swallowed Modernity's Great Wager and functionally operate on the basis of human agency. Today

Euro-tribal churches are church- and clergy-centred and obsessed with fixing the church and their own survival. Their focus on getting people to come to the church is no longer effective.

However, Roxburgh notes that the Holy Spirit is already fermenting change. Many church members understand that “business as usual” is no longer possible. Change comes from the grass-roots in congregations and not from seminaries or wider church leadership. For the Euro-tribal churches to join God in the neighbourhood, they need to embrace new ways of knowing, new metaphors and language worlds, postures and apprenticing, where God is the active subject and is essential to the outcomes.

In writing this book, Roxburgh is documenting his journey since writing *Joining God, Remaking the Church, Changing the World* in 2015. Starting with the logic of Lesslie Newbigin’s understanding of “how we know and its relationship to forms of knowing in late modernity” (6), he proposes a reorientation of missional life. He notes that the word *missional*, rather than describing what God is doing in the world, has become an adjectival modifier of “church”. He says that in working with congregations and church systems over the past five years, he has discovered little sense of God’s agency in the “missional” activities of Euro-tribal churches.

The COVID-19 pandemic has hastened this unraveling as the usual movement from professionals to “laity” based on programs and benchmarks set by national organizations is no longer possible. In this context the Holy Spirit is fermenting change that bubbles up from ordinary people in their congregations, in ways that are not susceptible to human management and control and cannot be captured by vision statements or strategic plans. Roxburgh had already challenged many of the assumptions behind the strategic planning approach to church leadership in his 2010 book, *Missional Map-Making: Skills for Leading in Times of Transition*.

In documenting his journey, Roxburgh notes that he has been influenced by a number of “conversation partners” that have assisted him in grappling with different metaphors of meaning. In particular, he mentions four, beginning with Mary Jo Leddy, the Catholic theologian and activist, who noted in the early 1980s that the religious communities of which she was part were becoming threadbare and needed reweaving with fresh threads. In doing this she draws on the ordinary Christian practices of place, prayer and discernment.

Lauren E. Oakes, a young PhD student at Stanford, researched the die-back of Yellow Cedar in southeast Alaska in 2010–16. In reflecting on place and relationship she discovered how native women, who were weavers in the tradition of their people, used threads made from the bark of the tree, viewing

it not as a resource to be harvested but as part of the life-world they co-inhabited. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, a sociologist and scholar re-entered her indigenous North American context and submitted herself to elders, learning about resurgence in the face of dispossession. Finally, Simone Weil (1909–43) a French intellectual who taught philosophy while working in a Renault factory, reflected on the way technocratic elites controlled the way everyday life was lived in communist, fascist and capitalist societies.

Newbiggin, like these four women in their different ways, is calling for a fundamental transformation of the imaginations of Christians. Roxburgh argues that, “far from being over, the missional conversation that Newbiggin shaped needs to be reimagined from outside the logic of anxiety, survival, or techniques of change” (2). Therefore, to join in the Spirit’s ferment we need to embrace another language with different symbols and metaphors, assume a posture that doesn’t prioritize professionalism and instead adopt a model that involves becoming apprentices to others as we journey onwards.

Leaders therefore need to ask different questions. Roxburgh suggests a number such as, “How do I listen to the Spirit’s presence among my people rather than push my own agendas?”, “How do I lay down my anxious need to fix, tell, and make things happen?”, and “How do I create spaces where I am attending to the stories of my people?”

This is a practical little book (155 pages) that assists us in understanding the world in which we now live in the west. Roxburgh makes practical suggestions for continuing the journey. In doing so, he brings a range of understandings and attitudes one doesn’t need to agree with in order to take seriously his central theses. Overall he speaks of “elites” in a dismissive way, in spite of a sprinkling of statements that he doesn’t dismiss the value of theology, science, research, technology, serious study and western thought forms. He also uses emotive terms like the “clergy industry” and speaks of his role as a leader in the wider church and consultant as not being particularly helpful, even though that is still what he is doing in writing this book. He dismisses technocratic approaches, yet often uses highly technical jargon (God’s agency, ecclesiocentricity, relationality, Christian praxis etc).

Roxburgh goes to great lengths to emphasise that going into the neighbourhood is not a new program for evangelism, providing help or studying a community. In doing so he is in danger of giving the impression that all we bring is a Christian presence and we don’t bring any good news. I don’t think that is what he believes and I agree that we should not approach this as a program and look for a return on our investment.

In this book it seems to me that Roxburgh never really grapples with the question of how God works in the world. God is at work among non-Christians preparing them to receive the good news that is Jesus. We see that both biblically and in our present experience. An example of the former is the story of Cornelius in Acts 10. He sees an angel in a vision who tells him to send for Peter. Peter comes and tells him about Jesus. The Spirit falls and the rest, as they say, is history. Likewise the Ethiopian Eunuch who was reading and questioning in Acts 8. The Spirit sent Phillip to help him to make sense of it. Examples of the latter include many Muslims testifying to having dreamt that Jesus was calling them to come to him, so they sought out some Christians and came to faith. Some clarification around this would have been helpful.

Roxburgh's point about the technocratic controlling approach of the Euro-tribal churches is well made. Therefore, Roxburgh's central emphasis that God is at work, or as he puts it God has agency, is very important. Roxburgh's emphasis on the need for the disruptive ferment of the Spirit is vital. We need to embrace vulnerability, and not structure things in such a way that, if God were to depart from our presence, everything would still continue as normal. We would also do well to reflect on Roxburgh's comments about the "clergy industry".

Discernment is a gift of the Spirit and therefore a spiritual discipline. It, together with other practices are deeply rooted in our scriptural and traditional Christian practices, yet many of them have fallen into disuse. There are healthy reminders here that in a time of crisis we need to dig deeper into our roots rather than rely on techniques for fixing the church's problems. This is an important little book in our time of ferment and disruption.