



BOOK REVIEW: 'JOINING GOD, REMAKING CHURCH, CHANGING THE WORLD', BY ALAN ROXBURGH

Review of *Joining God, Remaking Church and Changing the World: the New Shape of the Church in Our Time* by Alan J. Roxburgh (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2015).

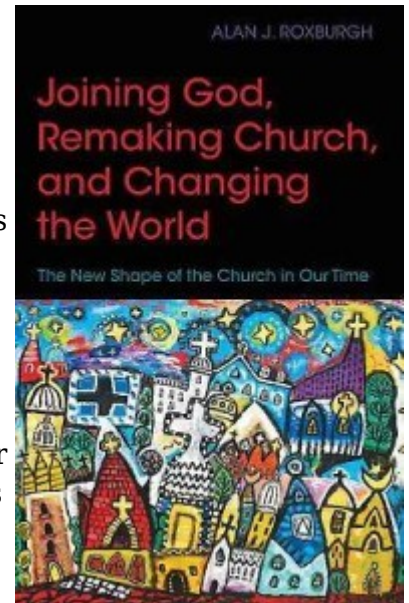
For thirty years (or more), missional thinker Alan Roxburgh has been challenging the N American church to move into the neighborhood. He has an extraordinary grasp of social systems, cultural dynamics, intellectual history and what is happening to us in the West. His newest book, *Joining God, ReMaking Church, Changing the World*, sums up some of his best insights in a small accessible user-friendly book for local church pastors.

Alan gets at the heart of what drives his thought in short chapters. Like for instance, in the introductory chapter, Alan talks about Lesslie Newbigin as the founding father of missional thought. Newbigin, he says, started with God as the primary agent of mission. His great insight was that all discussion of church and mission begins with who God is and what He is doing in the world. But Roxburgh protests that current missional conversation has “turned Newbigin’s God questions back into “church questions.” Church leaders and missional thinkers want to know how to fix the church instead of placing who we are as a people in the midst of who God is and what He is doing in the world. That doesn’t fix the church; it changes what the church is. Instead, we put all our attention on the church and what the church should be doing and never get to who God is and what He is doing.

I have always enjoyed being in the room when Alan drops a grenade like this in the room. And Alan has a point. North American church leaders have become pragmatic. In the process, we have failed to see how our church systems are deeply intertwined in the cultural frameworks that are “unraveling” in our midst. We must start with uncovering our assumptions. Understanding this is a big part of Al’s work. It is so important.

For Alan, this time of ‘unraveling’ is an invitation to shift our focus, to listen, discern and join God’s presence in our neighborhoods? In Alan’s words, the Spirit is going ahead of us into our neighborhoods. So often churches seek to either defend or accommodate as quickly as possible when faced with massive cultural shifts. Think about how different things could be if pastors and church leaders learned to see the cultural shifts as God at work opening spaces to listen and discern a new engagement for the gospel. This is the gift of Roxburgh. The answer to the church’s struggles is not more flashy promotions but a new and deeper discipleship and a community present to what God is doing in the places we live.

But we all know how difficult it is to lead a church into a new space that has been built on the edifice of Christendom for many years. How do we re-imagine a new discipleship, fund a capacity for community amidst the disrupting changes around us? Here in this book, Alan does his best job ever of outlining the practices he has toured the globe expounding as the means by which congregations can follow the Spirit into the neighborhood: Listening, Discerning, Testing and Experimenting, Reflecting, Deciding.



And then doing them all over again. In short wonderful chapters, Alan tells stories and outlines a program for small groups of Christians to “move into the neighborhood.”

Dwelling in the Word is a staple for Alan’s work with churches. It is a part of what it means to listen. Alan teaches us in chapter 6 how we as a churches can be led to enter the stories of the Bible as our own stories and the lives of our neighbors. In learning to discern this way we are able to join God’s life in the world.

Many have asked me what I have learned and where I differ from Alan. Alan’s focus on the Spirit in the world is so good and helps me understand what is at stake in living our lives in the neighborhood. Alan is expert at pushing the church out of its enclosed location into being present to the Spirit in the context. Thanks to Alan for spearheading this insight and making it practical as a way of life called mission.

I think the difference between Alan and me is: he starts with the Spirit in the world (or the neighborhood), I start with Christ’s presence around the Eucharist. Alan has confidence that dwelling in the Word together in the context will lead us to God’s presence by framing the world we live in with the stories of what God is doing in the world. We can discern and engage from here. I have confidence that we learn to discern Christ’s presence around the Table and then extend that discernment into all the tables in the neighbourhood. Alan starts in the neighborhood and shapes church from there. I start with Christians gathered around the table (as the church) in and among the neighbourhood and then extending out from there to discern His presence. Alan’s emphasis is on the Spirit’s presence in the context before we get there. I agree that He is present there before we get there. I nonetheless suggest that the actual presence of Christ becomes visible as we engage in simple practices. Alan’s practices focus on Listening, Discerning, Testing and Experimenting, Reflecting, Deciding. I focus on the historic practices of Eucharist presence, proclaiming gospel, reconciliation, being with the poor, being with children, five fold ministry and Kingdom prayer. Whereas Alan focuses on God questions first, and only then comes church questions, for me the two are inseparable. The church is part of how God enters the world. Because of this, many people (including Alan) might see me as ecclesiocentric versus Alan being Spirit-centric in the world?

To me the difference between Alan and me is the difference between classic protestant and Anabaptist. I’m not sure he would buy into that. And that is totally cool with me. I have been so enriched by the conversations between Alan and I over the years. I would count Alan a great friend because of the generous ways he puts up with me. It’s part of what makes Northern Seminary’s D Min in Contextual Theology so rich (since we both teach in it). I have always been a fan of Alan’s work. This new book is a splendid quick guide to many of his most significant contributions. Congratulations to Alan on a fine fine book! I recommend it to all pastors and leaders seeking a way into engaging the mission of N America!