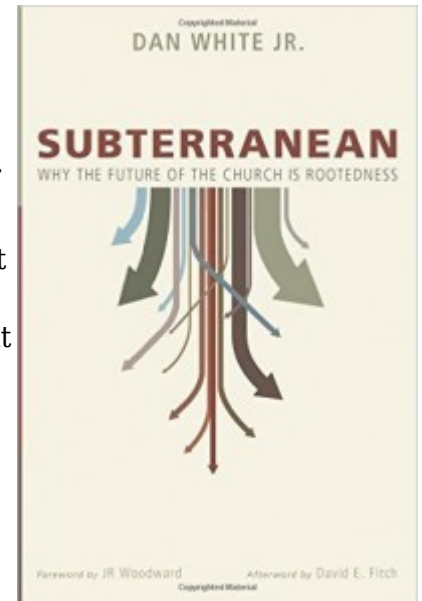




## BOOK REVIEW: 'SUBTERRANEAN' BY DAN WHITE JR.

Review of *Subterranean: Why the Future of the Church is Rootedness* by Dan White Jr. (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015).

There is something in the air these days. It's the return to the local; the desire to rediscover neighborhood, to experience the ordinary rhythms of everyday life. In 2009 when I was writing *Joining God in the Neighborhood* (Baker, 2011) it felt that I might just have it all wrong, that I was being unfair to the church in all its efforts to attract and look fresh. Today we're in a different place. Other books have come on the scene that take seriously the Spirit's call to join God in the local. *The New Parish* (IVP 2014) and *Slow Church* (IVP 2014) are excellent examples. Even in the broader media there is a sense that recovering the local and re-engaging the neighborhood is critical for people's welfare- the common good of citizens. *Atlantic* magazine's article about neighborhoods is an excellent illustration of this.<sup>[1]</sup> Marc Dunkelman's *Vanishing Neighborhoods* (Norton, 2014) offers a brilliant analysis of the need to go-local and recover some semblance of the common good. Wilfred McClay and Ted McAllister's *Why Place Matters* (Encounter Books, 2014) provides the insight of thinkers and practitioners on the ways place is essential for addressing a rootlessness and anomie so pervasive across Euro-tribal North American society. Bruce Fuller's recent *Organizing: How the New Decentrists Improve Education, Health Care and Trade* (University of Chicago Press, 2015) points out the power of organizing locally for the common good. Peter Block and John McKnight address the place and power of neighborhood and the local in their book, *The Abundant Community* (Berrett-Koehler, 2012). Home, neighborhood, and the local are back on the front page of our imagination.



A lot of people are sensing there is something basic and misguided about our current ways of life together; they are seeking for adequate, hopeful responses and the return to the local is offering hope even if most of us don't know how to do this. You know an atmospheric change is under way culturally when the language of the local starts turning up in marketing and advertising. I recently watched a TV commercial for insurance framed around two things - the company and the fact that they care about neighborhood. I now keep seeing this pattern popping up in newspapers and magazines. Business and corporations want you to know that they are in and committed to the *neighborhood*. What does this tell you?

Into this mix is also emerging some excellent, much needed, theological reflection. In the UK, Nicholas Sagovsky and Peter McGrail's edited volume of essays *Together for the Common Good: Towards a National Conversation* (SCM 2015) brings together Catholic social teaching with a variety of protestant thinkers. Luke Bretherton's earlier, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics* ((Wiley-Blackwell, 2010) provides some excellent theologically and biblically framed proposals for understanding the nature of Christian imagination and the local. Walter Brueggemann's *Journey to the Common Good* (John Knox Press, 2010) gives a wonderful framing for anyone seeking a biblically measured understanding of why this journey is so critical for us.

The same insight has been directed towards the church in a spate of books about how churches can ‘go local’. If past trends are an indication, most of these books will miss the point, going directly to yet another set of techniques for how churches can use the notions of neighborhood and stay ecclesiocentric. Such is the time in which we live. Many of them are not very reflective of the issues at stake for Christian life in North America, but a small number are quite helpful. Diana Butler Bass’s recent book *Grounded* (Harper, 2015) touches on this, as does my own *Joining God, Remaking the Church, Changing the World* (CPI-Morehouse, 2015).

I recently came across a book that is working at this question of being the church today: *Subterranean: Why the Future of the Church is Rootedness* (Cascade Books, 2015). It’s written by a church planter in Syracuse NY, named Dan White. Dan has an appreciation for the ways in which Euro-tribal, evangelical churches and their leaders remain deeply enmeshed in rationalisms, techniques, notions of success and power that so deeply infect Christian life on this continent. In the early chapters he dives into these issues. He travels a road many of us have taken by pointing out these captivities in order to show their inadequacy. The hope is that readers will see this and, in so doing, want to travel with him into the space of the local and the ordinary. I understand the desire but my experience is that these kinds of arguments, while true, do not have these effects. The method itself is a version of the rationalist mind approach that assumes if one can help people to think about the problem they will change. It’s a version of *we think our way into new ways of acting* which isn’t the case. Change does not, primarily, arise from reflective deliberation or analysis.

The issues at stake here are about imagination, what the French philosopher, Pierre Bourdieu, describes as the embodied, encoded *habitus*. It is this controlling reality that resides, unchanged, beneath the models of leadership and practices of church that Dan so ably understands are the problem. The deeper challenge is culture change and that raises questions about the tendency to communicate as if concepts and principles are sufficient to mobilize different behaviors. Leaders don’t function in neutral social space. They are caught up in larger imaginaries and inherited frameworks, presets, cultural jigs, for the identity, purposes and roles of the institution and its leadership. There are already scripts in place from within the church and the external socio-cultural influences continually reinforce a leader’s and congregation’s habits. The conceptual frameworks behind the words and symbols used by leaders and congregations are laden with assumptions. The challenge of engaging these scripts and roles is huge, as witnessed by the fact that multiple books with brilliant ideas have failed to engender the transformations they so ably describe.

White’s use of the metaphor *subterranean* is helpful. It is one more metaphor (dwelling, going local, new parish, grounded, joining God and so forth) that contributes to the broader conversation. The more we have, the better the chance we will engage people’s imagination. His metaphor takes him into Biblical resources that, importantly, root his book in the God of Scripture and ways the kingdom is lived in the saeculum. His notions of fidelity (a reminder of the *hesed* of God in the book of Hosea) in the local and, particularly, his use of the language of availability and vulnerability (the rule of life for the *Northumbria Community* in the UK) are hopeful and important.

Toward the end of the book White turns to a series of practical proposals. It's here that I grow in my appreciation of what he is practicing and seeking to communicate but also get a bit lost in the piling up of sub-titles and labels. It is not meant to but it now starts to sound complex. What I mean is that White, himself, is already inside this world - he's practicing his *subterranean* so all this language makes good sense to him. In that sense it's clear. But most people in most congregations don't work that way. Again, what White is asking for is culture change. As suggested above, it's a huge ask! Culture change doesn't come from the ideational notions of pastors or even the proposals of books (including my own). It emerges from ordinary people in local contexts and congregations. A critical leadership question for this journey is not primarily about the right ideas (kingdom or otherwise) but how one invites the people of a local congregation onto this journey of culture change. This is the subterranean work. In my experience it's the hard, difficult work of leadership that's done on the way and on the ground but *is* difficult, and so often, not done.

I appreciate what White has given us in his book. It's really worth the read. It's a wonderful imagination that is right on, in terms of its instincts. The question we're still wrestling with however, is about subterranean culture change in all the Euro-tribal churches across North America. Without that, so much of this good work will be turned back into another tactic for an ecclesiocentric church.

[1] Diana Butler Bass, 'Finding God in the Neighborhood', *The Atlantic*, 6<sup>th</sup> October 2015. <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/10/evolving-american-neighborhood/408484/>. (Last accessed 1/3/2016)



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