

Aaron Klinefelter
1757 Mills Ave.
Norwood, OH 45212
aaronk@fuller.edu

Roxburgh, Alan J.
1997 The Missionary Congregation, Leadership, and Liminality. Harrisburg,
PA: Trinity Press International.

Alan J. Roxburgh is the “Senior Pastor of West Vancouver Baptist Church in British Columbia, an adjunct faculty member of Regent College in Vancouver, and author of *Reaching a New Generation*” (1997: back cover). I had the privilege of hearing him speak at Fuller Theological Seminary’s Missiology Lectures in 2002. I thoroughly appreciated his insights and challenges for the contemporary church in the west. I was further exposed to his work in *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Eerdmans, 1998). Roxburgh is a lucid and intelligent observer of our cultural situation and the church’s mission in this context.

Roxburgh’s thesis is presented in the form of a question. “How does the church in North America most appropriately understand its current situation” (ibid: 2)? The current situation to which Roxburgh refers is the marginal position in which the church now finds itself. “The churches have lost their social location at the center of the culture” (ibid: 2). He recommends a missionary engagement in this context. The approach he takes in the development of this position is to first develop an understanding of the situation, recognizing that marginalization may not be the best way to frame the setting.

The marginalization question and the church’s response is pursued and developed in three chapters. The first chapter explores the marginal state of the church in North America. The second chapter appropriates Victor Turner’s study of liminality and what this concept can teach the church. The third, and final, chapter looks at leadership for a missional ecclesiology.

In the first chapter, Roxburgh notes the increased awareness of the church's marginal status in society. In the first case, there is a recognition that Christianity was once at the cultural center of Western society. For second case, the assumption that the church is now at the margins of our culture, Roxburgh calls for further study. To be on the margins assumes that there still exists a center. This is arguably not the case. In early modernity, Christianity was relegated to the private sphere of humanity, while the "autonomous, rational mind assumed the new public center" (ibid: 9). However, and this seems abundantly apparent, modernity was unable to craft a satisfactory and stable replacement for the loss of its cultural center. So, instead of the felt-experience of marginality in the church vis-à-vis modernity, the church is actually in "pervasive embeddedness in a complexity and fragmentation that renders center-margin language obsolete" (ibid: 12). The pastoral leadership in this context is re-engineered to cope with the church's position. Three accommodations are highlighted: therapeutic pastoral care, techniques for success, and the "ghettoization" of the Christian community.

In the second chapter, Roxburgh works out the marginal position of the church in terms of liminality, a concept adapted from the work of Arnold van Gennep (ibid: 23).

Liminality is the conscious awareness that as a group (or individual) one's status-, role-, and sequence-sets in a society have been radically changed to the point where the group has now become largely invisible to the larger society (ibid: 24).

This study was originally conducted in the context of preindustrial cultures where rites of passage were means by which persons passed through a liminal period from one state, childhood, to another, adulthood. This is the position the church now finds itself, this liminal, in between-ness. While it is often perceived, by the church, as a place of negativity, it can be reconstituted as a position of opportunity.

The church in modernity is in liminality. Rather than seeing this as a great failure and loss, it is a work of the Spirit inviting the church to rediscover its missional heart in unimagined and unexpected places (ibid: 46).

The third, and final, chapter explores what a missional ecclesiology might look like, especially in the context of leadership. Roxburgh introduces three conceptions of pastoral leadership that are appropriate for the church in the experience of liminality. These leadership functions are in marked contrast to the capitulation of pastoral leadership in marginalized modernity. First, the pastor as poet articulates the lived discontinuity experienced by the church and stands in solidarity with it. Second, the pastor as prophet speaks the Word of God to the community of faith; it is a calling-forth of the gospel story of the church for the sake of the world. Third, the pastor as apostle leads the People of God forward into a redemptive witness in the world. Roxburgh concludes with the helpful structural implication that such leadership must function as shared, or team, leadership. The days of the hero-pastor are over.

The Missionary Congregation, Leadership, and Liminality is an important work for missiological and theological study. Roxburgh accomplishes what he calls pastors to do as a poet and prophet. He addresses the social fragmentation that we experience as a church and calls forth an appropriate redemptive response. His work is helpful in moving the church out of the sticky morass of technique and superficial cultural relevancy. The contents of this study compliment the work of Lesslie Newbigin and serve as movement forward in this ongoing dialogue.

It is also an important contribution to this course, Contemporary Culture in Missiological Perspective. Roxburgh's work has helped to distill and frame the broader course of study that this class has offered. Consequently, this also ties directly into my personal area of investigation and call. The formation of a "communitas" (ibid: 49) is an ongoing pursuit in which God is leading me and my faith community. Living as the People of God in a foreign land where we daily experience the reality of liminality is uniquely challenging.

In conclusion, Roxburgh deftly weaves careful research, faithful passion, and a burden for the church in this short work. At times he moves close to scholarly overkill,

but is careful to work out the implication of his research for the life of the Christian community. The contribution of liminality as a construct for understanding our awkward place in the culture of North America is apt and helpful. Thankfully, Roxburgh opens the way for a missional engagement for the church in the world with his conception of the pastor as poet, prophet, and apostle. I continue to find his work engaging and inspiring as a minister of the gospel and would heartily recommend it those concerned about the church's future.