I have looked forward to reading this book, but now that I have begun it, I am looking forward to it less. In the introduction and first chapter Chan lays out his starting points, and while I agree with some of what he says, I am troubled by more of it.

A major starting point for him is that the church is the point of creation; in the mind of God, the church is prior to creation. Creation exists so that the church can exist. The other point of view would be to say that the church exists to redeem creation. I have to confess I had not thought about this in these terms before. Off the top of my head, it sounds strange to affirm that God created the world so that the church could exist (but is this just my theological upbringing talking?). If this is true, then as we look ahead to the eschaton and beyond, we should see the church. It is true that Revelation presents images of a community of worshippers before the throne of God; and I imagine people like Chan would see the New Jerusalem that descends as an image of the Church.

Yet isn’t it also true that the Bible speaks of the creation of a new heaven and a new earth? Doesn’t Paul say that all creation groans as it awaits liberation (Romans 8:20-21)? I can’t so easily give up the idea that the purpose of creation is creation. Certainly God had in mind what he was going to do to draw people to himself; we can speak of good works prepared in advance for us to do, and of Christ being crucified before the foundation of the world. Yet does that lead to the conclusion that the purpose of Creation is to give a backdrop for the Church?

Chan argues that his view gives a better accounting for the whole witness of Scripture, especially the Old Testament. In the view he opposes, most of the Old Testament becomes “parenthetical” to the main storyline. Again, he is just laying out his starting points and not making a full defense of his view, so perhaps I need to reflect on this more at length; but on this surface reading, I just don’t see it.

I wonder if Chan is laying out the only two options, and I am skeptical that we can so finely parse the pre-Creation thoughts of God based on the information we have and our intellectual capacity. Is it possible both are true, without a need to determine priority? God had the church in mind before he created the world; the redemption of the world is connected to the redemption of people. I am tempted to say it doesn’t matter which is prior – except that for Chan, this is part of his bedrock foundation.

It is clear from the outset that Chan is going to land on a “high church” ecclesiology. His approach to the Eucharist and tradition shows this clearly. He doesn’t seem to embrace a fully Catholic view; but he is very close. Certainly he wants to distance himself from a free church view of incorporation into the church: “We are not saved as individuals first and then incorporated into the church; rather, to be a Christian is to be incorporated into the church by baptism and nourished with the spiritual food of the body and blood of Christ in the Eucharist.” (p. 24) He absolutely prefers to think primarily in terms of a visible,
mixed church, rather than a pure but invisible church made up of authentic saints.

He also speaks disparagingly of the view of the Eucharist as merely memorial; it is clear that in his mind, the Eucharist is the real presence of Christ and conveys tangible spiritual benefit to those who partake in it. We can only speak of the Church as the Body of Christ by understanding that we together take in the Body of Christ at the Eucharist, and thus become what we eat.

The church as the Body of Christ is more than just a metaphor for Chan. While he does give the necessary disclaimers that the Church is distinct from Christ at some level, he really stresses that the Church is Christ visible to the world, that Christ is present in the Church (again, esp. in the Eucharist), that the church is a divine creation, etc.

Chan addresses the importance of tradition (which he capitalizes). Here I believe he presents a false dichotomy: either one throws out tradition altogether and each generation is left to figure out what Scripture says with no help from those who have gone before, and is thus dangerously susceptible to accommodation to the fads of contemporary culture; or one takes tradition as the absolute guide by which we understand God, Scripture, church and everything else. Surely this presentation represents not the only two options, but the ends of a continuum. Isn’t it possible to take the record of what two millennia of believers have understood into account without uncritically accepting everything they said? Isn’t it possible that on some occasions in the past people have been too swayed by their cultures, and that our perspective today might correctly see the points at which they strayed? Can’t our approach to Scripture and theology be informed by tradition (even at some points corrected by it as our own blind spots are exposed), without being determined by it?

I am intrigued by Chan’s approach to the Holy Spirit. One the one hand I really appreciate his point that our ecclesiology is weak precisely because our pneumatology is weak. We have not adequately understood the Spirit as a person in his own right.

Protestantism has no sense of the continuation of the gospel into ecclesiology and pneumatology. . . [T]he Spirit . . . is seen as essentially one who helps the church carry out some extrinsic task. . . If the Spirit is linked to the church in any way, it is to the invisible church, such as in the Spirit’s bringing rebirth to individuals. (p. 36)

I agree with Chan’s summary statement that “ecclesiology is essentially pneumatological and charismatic, and pneumatology is essentially ecclesial. (p. 37)\(^1\)

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\(^1\) This is my hesitation with Alan Hirsch’s formulation of Christology \(\rightarrow\) missiology \(\rightarrow\) ecclesiology. In this approach, the church become merely instrumental, and it seems to me from my reading of Scripture that God may have had something more in mind when he thought of the church. Plus, where is the Spirit in this? He also becomes merely instrumental, a means to an end to accomplish the mission.
But I disagree with the implications Chan draws from this. It seems to me that Chan is saying that the primary way the Spirit is present in the church is when he is invoked during the Eucharist, and that the main “miracle” he does is in transforming the Eucharist into the body and blood of Jesus. I am not sure I am following his reasoning correctly; he seems to be saying that the Spirit works in the church to help us fulfill our mission, and that our mission is to be the Body of Christ, and the way that happens is as we together in worship partake of the body and blood of Jesus in the Eucharist.

In his mind, Chan is living out the tension between the “already” and “not yet” aspects of our faith. He sees his approach as finding a middle way between people who in effect say the Spirit isn’t doing much today, and those “Third Wavers” who focus so much on signs and wonders. I don’t see either his assessment or solution as accurate. While his criticisms may be true of some, I don’t think they are true of me, or Risen King, or many “Third Wavers” Chan so derisively dismisses. He seems to equate “Third Wavers” with those who think that the Kingdom has already come but fail to take into account the “not yet” aspect. In my experience, this is manifestly not the case. I could list many ways the Kingdom has not yet come off the top of my head, as could many in the movement he criticizes.

I also find his proposed solution very unsatisfying. Perhaps he will elaborate more in the coming chapters, and assign a larger role to the Spirit that what he has focused on here; and I appreciate the point that we should think of the Spirit at work not just in individuals but in us corporately. Yet it seems like we are discounting a lot of Scripture if we say that the Spirit’s role is mainly, primarily or most importantly involved at the Eucharist. Indeed, one has to have Chan’s great appreciation for tradition to arrive at this conclusion. It also seems to severely limit the Spirit to confine his activity to those times that he is invoked during the Eucharistic liturgy. (I imagine Chan would not say this is the case, but it is the impression I got from the first chapter.) Probably a more accurate reflection of Chan’s thought would be to say that if you look at what the Holy Spirit does (his purpose and mission), and then ask how he accomplishes that purpose in us corporately, you would arrive at the conclusion that the primary way he accomplishes that purpose is by what he does in the Eucharist.

Again, I am sure that I am misunderstanding what Chan actually believes, or caricaturing his position, but it seems that this is close to a magical view of the Eucharist, with the Spirit again relegated to a merely instrumental role. The Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, the Third Person of the Trinity, is more than pixie dust, sprinkled on the bread and wine to transform it into spiritual food and drink in the same way Tinkerbell’s magical endowment enabled the children in Peter Pan to fly. He is Deus, but not deus ex machina, to be called upon at a certain point in the plot but with no wider connection to the story.

After reading Miroslav Volf’s summary of Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger’s ecclesiology, I understand more what Chan is saying and not saying, and in what since he is evangelical instead of Catholic. Clearly Chan holds to an eucharistic ecclesiology (indeed, his whole book is an apologetic for it). Whether he has
been directly influenced by Ratzinger, or whether both Ratzinger and Chan are
developing within their own contexts outworkings of the more widely held concept
of eucharistic ecclesiology, is beyond my expertise and scope of knowledge to
say. Clearly, though, there are many similarities: for example, the ontological
priority of the Church, the conception of the church as *Christus totus*, and the
centrality of the Eucharist as essentially constituting worship (and thus the
church).

As I looked at a footnote from the first chapter, Chan’s view of the
Eucharist became clearer for me. He is not advocating transubstantiation but
holds to a sacramental view. That is, Christ is really present in the elements of
Eucharist so that consuming them has spiritual value and significance; but not
necessarily because the elements are transformed into the actual body and
blood of Christ.

There were things in the second chapter that I agreed with. For example,
Chan emphasizes the close connection between ecclesiology and worship. Our
worship is a theological statement. He goes so far as to say that “there is no
separation between the liturgy and the church. *To be church is to be the
worshipping community making a normative response to the revelation of the
triune God.*” (p. 42) He makes a convincing case that we must see everything
we do, from evangelism to preaching to singing and everything else, as worship
to God. He makes the point that we exist to glorify God, so this makes sense.

He notes that worship is

the defining characteristic of the church. In this world the church may be
many other things: a voice of conscience in the community, a champion of
the poor and oppressed, a preserver of traditional values and so on. But
these functions are not what make it the church, for they could as well be
taken up by other religious and secular bodies. The church’s defining
characteristic is its worshipful response to the call of God to be his people.
(p. 43)

I like that he provides a clear and comprehensive distinguishing
characteristic. This assessment of the church’s identity points directly to its
purpose and makes it relatively easy to delineate its proper activities.

Are there other ways of expressing the essential nature of the church that
could do this as well? What about the church as the instrument of God to
advance his kingdom? This probably would follow easier for those who would
say, *contra* Chan, that Creation is prior to the church. I suppose one could ask,
is advancing the kingdom a proper end in its own right, or only proper as a
means to a greater purpose, viz., bringing glory to God?

In this second chapter Chan continues what I feel is an unfair critique of
“charismatics” and “megachurches.” Certainly there is much that can be fairly
critiqued in these movements; but I believe Chan paints with too broad a stroke
when, for example, he says that a “mass-production church” (which he has
identified just megachurches as the preeminent example of just a couple of
paragraphs earlier) will produce either “a mass of half-committed, fair-weather
adherents or [at its best] a group of psychologically well-adjusted individuals." (p. 46) Again I see here Chan’s fallacy of a false dichotomy. Are these really the only two options? Forming authentic disciples, or at least people who are making progress in sanctification to look more like Jesus, is not a possible result? I guess Chan would say it really isn’t; I disagree and think I’ve seen examples to the contrary. There seems to be an implication that we should automatically think that a church that has its beliefs and form of worship correct is a better church (i.e., a church that is more thoroughly living out the purpose of the church) than a church that has what Chan would assess as inferior worship or some weaknesses in what they believe. What if the “good” church has 30 people and they are all sinful, horrible people and the “bad” church has 300 people who are consistently exhibiting the character of Christ in their lives? Perhaps Chan would say that this is a hypothetical example that could never be the case, because the ecclesiology he is advocating will necessarily show itself in better spiritual formation than alternatives; but it makes me wonder about the basis (or perhaps better, bases) on which we should evaluate churches.

I appreciate Chan’s emphasis that we should not disconnect theology from worship; he even sees our worship as “primary theology” and our thinking about God as “secondary theology.” (p. 49) I like this emphasis, and agree with his point that we must reflect on our worship and let our worship inform our thinking. However, I disagree (again) with his assessment that “doctrinaire evangelicals” and “the more charismatically inclined” (p. 52) represent opposite examples of improper emphases of these two theologies.

One thing he is alluding to has me thinking. He made the point that our worship must be Trinitarian, and that this must be reflected in our liturgy. I am sure he is going to spell this out in more detail in coming chapters, and I strongly suspect he is going to see the Eucharist as the way to do this. I am thinking in much more simplistic terms about the structure of a worship service itself. What if a service had three parts: a time of worship, focusing on God the Father; a time in the Word, focusing on Jesus; and a time of “works” focusing on the Holy Spirit at work among us?

These divisions look tidier on paper than they no doubt would be in practice. It would be appropriate, as we worship God for who he is and what he has done, to reflect on the work of Jesus for us, and the ongoing presence of God with us through his Spirit. Also, not every Scripture passage directly talks about Jesus (unless we limited our preaching to the New Testament); but every passage can be seen in light of Jesus and his work (whether looking ahead or behind to him). Still, I think that the time of worship (singing, prayers, etc.) would more naturally tend to focus on God the Father. The time in the Word reflects the reality that Jesus is the Word of God. And having a third of the service set aside for a focus on the Holy Spirit would correct a deficiency present in many evangelical churches. (We affirm belief in the Holy Spirit and passages like I Corinthians 12-14, but don’t create an opportunity for him to work spontaneously when we are together. I think Risen King does better than many in creating spaces during the service for this, both in the healing stations and the end of service ministry time.) I suppose the classic rejoinder would be that we don’t
have to do everything in every gathering, and that perhaps creating space for the Spirit to move and work may fit better in a smaller gathering like a Life Group. But . . . if the church is the People of God, and as such we should reflect the nature of God, and if our gatherings are the primary time when we are the church, then our gatherings should reflect the nature of God. Plus there is the very practical consideration that at many churches – even those like Risen King which heavily promote small groups – more people come to the “Sunday service” than attend small groups. So if we relegate the work of the Spirit to small groups, we are acknowledging that while worship and preaching are important enough to do with everyone present, making room for the Spirit isn’t. It’s (or perhaps we should say, “He’s”) only for the extra spiritual who are part of a small group. I am all for promoting small groups as an essential, not elective, part of church participation; but the fact is it isn’t seen this way by most people in the church despite our efforts to the contrary.

Having a part of the service dedicated to the Holy Spirit means that not only would we have a natural opportunity for ministry prayer and the corporate exercise of spiritual gifts, but also things that pertain to the life of the community. Announcements become not a business item but examples of how together we are going to live out our identity, and opportunities to see the Spirit work through us. The welcome is not about a program of assimilation as much as it is the opportunity for new people to take the next step toward identifying tangibly with this church. Testimonies are not mere testimonials (“I tried this and it worked”), but examples of the Spirit’s work in our lives directly and through the community. At its best, structuring the service in this way would help with the transition from the “bubble” of a church service to the “real world” of the rest of our lives.² Rather than a sermon from a pastor being the end of the service, the last thing people hear and participate in before they leave are ways that God is actually, currently, tangibly, effectively at work in and through real people.

After reading the third chapter of Chan’s book, my conclusion is that if you agree with his starting points, then the conclusions he draws will make a lot of sense (perhaps even seem inevitable). But if, like me, you question the starting points, then much of what he says is unconvincing or irrelevant.

For example, his emphasis on the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, and the Eucharist as spiritual food and drink that conveys real spiritual benefit to us: if this is the case, of course we are going to observe it every week instead of every month. Why would we not try to find a way to participate every day?

Or take the high value he places on tradition. If you see the tradition of the church as normative and not just illustrative, then of course we are going to structure our worship services around Word and sacrament, as he urges. (This might not be a bad idea in any case, but given his starting points there is no thought needed about this.)

² Although I agree with Chan that in worship may well be when we are at our most authentic and real, devoid of the masks we have to wear in the rest of our lives. Still, I think these terms reflect popular perception, even if they are not theologically accurate.
As I made my way through his book, I also found myself agreeing strongly with a premise or assertion Chan makes, but then disagreeing strongly with the conclusion or application he draws from it. For example, he mentions often the need to embrace the tension between the “already” and the “not yet.” Great; couldn’t agree more. But the practical outworking of this for him is to emphasize the Eucharist more and make sure our worship is centered around it and that we do it every week. It almost seems to me like he relegates the “already” aspects of the Kingdom to Jesus’ earthly life, and the “not yet” to what will happen at the eschaton. So the way we identify with the “already” right now is to remember Jesus’ life and ministry. I think perhaps he needs a third category; kingdom as already, not yet, and now. This is related to what I said earlier about his pneumatology; is the Spirit at work among us now, tangibly? If so, how and where should we expect him to work?

Another example: in this chapter, Chan says that participation and reflection must be ongoing for a community to remain vibrant. The failure to understand these processes is one reason for the failure of evangelical spirituality. It tries to build the spiritual life based largely on teaching and indoctrinating without understanding that it is not critical reflection as such but habits that constitute Christian living. (p. 67)

Again, great, I agree. But (again), what is his strategy for this happening? Emphasize the Eucharist, understand it better, make it the focus, do it weekly. Really?

Chan emphasized the priority of the Eucharist as the “sacrament of sacraments.” (p. 71) In making a case for this, he says that the Eucharist “concerns the person of Christ himself, whereas the other sacraments concern the activity of Christ in the church.” (p. 70) This only is the case if you take his view of the Eucharist; in a memorial view this is not the case. Plus, I think baptism should be seen as concerning the person of Christ; even from Chan’s ecclesiological point of view, baptism is incorporation in the church, the body of Christ. If the church is Christus totus, then how can baptism not be about the person of Christ? Even from my point of view, I think Romans 6:1-11 shows a pretty strong identification in baptism not just with Christ’s activity, but with Christ himself. I will say this in defense of Chan’s statement, however: Jesus did say, “Do this in remembrance of me.” Certainly he says the bread is his body, the wine is his blood, so it is appropriate to remember his sacrifice for us; indeed this is the essence of who he is and what he did for us. But still, he doesn’t say just remember my death or my sacrifice, but remember me. So if in communion we separate out just the death of Jesus without seeing it in continuity with his life, then we are falling short of what Jesus intended us to be doing. Rather, we need to focus on the sacrifice of Jesus for us, but see that sacrifice in context with the rest of his life and ministry – and in context with his resurrection and ongoing ministry for us.

I liked something Chan brought out from the practice of the early Christians. They referred to Sunday as the eighth day of the week. That is a
way of saying that all things are being made new, than the old, purely natural way of things is passing away. God’s creative work continues in us.

Another premise of Chan’s with which I agree, while disagreeing with the implications he draws, is when he says: “Eschatology sustains the mission of the church. The moment it resolves the tension either by becoming totally immersed in the world or by divorcing itself from the world, it ceases to be the true hope of the world.” (p. 83) A. B. Simpson would have said “Amen” to this, although he would have put it in a much different context than does Chan.

Chan made a statement that reminded me of something Volf said in his introduction. Chan said, “The church does the most for the world when it is least like the world.” (p. 84) He then goes on to denigrate any explicit attempts at “relevancy” as hopelessly compromising. I prefer the way Volf addressed it; he said something along the lines that people within and outside the church must be able to identify with it. We must be different than the world, I agree; otherwise what’s the point? But if we are so different, and if what we do is so incomprehensible that no one from the outside can understand it, then does that best position us to fulfill our mission in the world? I am guessing that Chan would differentiate mission from worship, and say that we do mission, sure, so that we can bring people to the church and they can be incorporated by baptism (preceded and followed by instruction). I imagine he would feel that trying to use a worship service to accomplish mission is like using a fork to eat soup; it’s just not what it’s designed for.

I have now read chapters four and five, and I am finding that while I disagree or find inconsequential about 75% of what Chan says, the other 25% gets me thinking enough to want to keep reading. Certainly that is true in these chapters.

In the fourth chapter, he is making a case for spiritual formation being essentially tied to (what else) the liturgy. I like his stress on the corporate nature of spiritual formation, including corporate prayer and purposeful participation in worship as key spiritual disciplines. Again, it could be because this is not the thrust of this book, but I find myself wondering about what individual application there should be. Just from reading this chapter, I got the impression that if a Christian prays humbly and intentionally participates in the liturgy, then spiritual formation will occur (regardless of whatever else he or she does or does not do?). This seems to be the thrust of his concluding statement at the end of the chapter:

In summary, as long as Christians are practicing a normative liturgy, that, praying the prayer of the church, on may rightly assume that spiritual formation is taking place, notwithstanding their inadequate understanding and motivation. To affirm otherwise would be to deny the reality of grace and its mysterious workings. (p. 98)

In this chapter Chan does make a concise statement of what makes the church the church. He says, “To identify Word and sacraments as marks of the

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church is to say that they are the *determinative* means by which the Spirit constitutes the church as one, holy, catholic and apostolic. . . Where the Word is rightly preached . . . and the sacraments rightly administered, there the church is objectively present.” (p. 88)

One point I strongly agreed with (although, again, more with the premise than the application he draws from it) was what he said about a theology of mystery. Just yesterday I was writing about this as I thought about what “my ecclesiology book” would have to include – and now here Chan is, saying much of the same stuff! Chan falls short of my lofty thinking by failing to apply this theology to the church but still summarized it well:

A theology of mystery begins with the most basic fact that God in himself is incomprehensible. . . This truth constitutes the starting point of our theology and is encapsulated in the traditional doctrine of divine transcendence. Christian theology teaches that this transcendent God reveals himself and revelation is God’s communication of himself as the incomprehensible God. (p. 92)

Chan does apply this to the way we think and talk about grace. “This is also why traditional descriptions of grace are always in terms of bipolarities: prevenient and concomitant, operating and cooperating, energy and synergy, and so on.” (p. 84)

The first four chapters of the book are together under the heading “Foundations,” and the last three under “Practices.” The first practice to which Chan turns his attention is the catechumenate, that is, the means of instructing new converts in the faith.

Chan sees conversion as a process that culminates at baptism, much as a couple’s courtship culminates at their wedding. He offers the usual criticisms of evangelicalism’s tendency to see conversion as a “crisis,” a point in time event which stands alone. He also draws a sharp distinction between what he is proposing as the catechumenate and the traditional evangelical “follow up.”

In his opinion, embracing the catechumenate would help address the tendency among evangelical-charismatic churches to accommodate to the culture of consumerism around us. He says, with a good bit of truth, “In a world dominated by the market economy and driven by the media, the church is readily tempted to think of its role in terms of finding the right ‘market niche,’ instead of asking a fundamental question: what does it mean to be a Christian?” (p. 103) I would add my own corollary to this, that for the same reasons, churches can easily fall prey to finding a program, strategy, worship style, or teaching style that “works” instead of asking the more fundamental question: what does it mean to be the church?

Chan identifies the three elements common to most historical catechisms as the creed, the Ten Commandments, and the Lord’s Prayer. By focusing on these, catechumens are instructed in Christian theology, ethics and spirituality. He makes a good case, historical and practical, for structuring instruction around these three loci. I also appreciate that he notes that there will be different

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3 Note heavy irony here
emphases on the application of these topics depending on the social context in which the instruction takes place. (He draws out some pertinent questions that would need to be asked in an Asian context.)

Because I don’t view the sacraments (like baptism) in the same way Chan does, I don’t feel particularly impressed to implement a catechumenate as Chan lays it out. I do, however, like the model of addressing theology, ethics and spirituality as foundational discipleship topics. I think there could be a lot of value in taking people through a course of instruction in the creed (or even the C&MA Statement of Faith). I would want to address ethics from the perspective of the Sermon on the Mount rather than the Ten Commandments; it seems strange to me for Christians to focus our ethical instruction on the very texts that Jesus spent so much time saying, “You have heard it said . . . but I say.” Why not focus on what Jesus said? The teaching on the Lord’s Prayer would be a great introduction to prayer and spiritual formation. Of course, there would be a lot of overlap between these; you can’t discuss the Sermon on the Mount or the Lord’s Prayer without doing a good bit of theology en route.

I’m not sure how this instruction would best take place in my context. Like I said, I don’t see Risen King implementing a catechism that culminates in baptism. Perhaps a Sunday School class? I don’t think a small group would be the best setting. While there absolutely would need to be interaction, opportunity for questions to be asked, and direct, personal application, it seems to me like the thrust of this time would be instruction. If people knew this stuff, they wouldn’t need to go through this. This is along the lines of basic training for the Christian life (whether one is a new Christian or simply an immature Christian).

In this chapter Chan reiterates his by now familiar rants against “Third Wave charismatics” and “evangelical-charismatic” and “free church” idiots in general. One example:

Modern evangelicals find it much easier to grasp the Zwinglian ‘memorial’ theory of the sacraments, since it does not require them to associate transcendence with anything so mundane as water, bread and wine. For many today, it makes better sense if spiritual realities are located within the subjective experience of the person, in the “feelings.” (p. 121)

I guess I can’t speak for all evangelicals, but the reason why I hold to a memorial theory of the sacraments is not because I have a problem “associating transcendence with mundane elements”; it’s because I think that view best adheres to the witness of Scripture.

On his criticism that evangelicals want to locate spiritual realities in subjective feelings, I think there is a point to be taken there. Of course, he is brushing pretty quickly over a heritage in evangelicalism that goes back at least to the Pietists and can be traced through the Great Awakening and nineteenth century revivalists; this is not a postmodern phenomenon or trend. I also say there while we can err on the side of total subjectivity, so that nothing is real unless it feels real to me; there is an opposite but equal danger is complete objectivity, so that we must hang on to something as real even if it never shows
any sign in my actual experience that it is real. Isn’t it possible to acknowledge that there are times when we will have to exercise faith as a discipline, to say that even though I don’t feel like this is real, or that God exists, or that there is a purpose in my suffering, or that our worship is really reaching God, yet believe that in fact all that is true; shouldn’t we also expect that the real God will make himself known at times in our subjective experience? That when we worship God, even though we feeling a certain way is absolutely not the point, that at times we will feel caught up in a transcendent moment, or in some way sense God’s pleasure at our worship? For me this is another example of Chan assigning false motives to those his disagrees with and presenting straw men arguments, as well as his tendency toward false dichotomies.

In the sixth chapter, Chan walks through the liturgy and gives comments or explanations on each element. In his brief introduction to the chapter, he makes a defense of a set liturgy as opposed to free or unstructured worship. In his view, “The church’s liturgy, far from being an attempt to domesticate the Spirit, is simply an attempt to be faithful to the Christological and pneumatologically shaped revelation.” (p. 126) He also make the valid point that even in “non-liturgical” churches, there is a de facto liturgy that is followed. Even in Pentecostal churches, there are times during the service when a prophetic word or a word in tongues is appropriate, and other times when it would be out of order. “The real issue is whether the form adopted is consistent with the norm of revelation, the gospel of Jesus Christ.” (p. 127)

As he walks through the various elements of the service (listed on pp. 129-130), he makes some good points along the way. Still, his apologia for the liturgy will probably serve more to bolster the resolve of those who already practice it than to convince those Neanderthal “free churchers” to adopt it.

One comment that did stand out to me as worthy of further reflection was about the greeting. The sense Chan brings out is that the people are not welcoming one another, nor is the pastor playing host to the congregation, but that God is the host and we are being welcomed into his presence. I guess this goes back to the question of who the service is for; for Chan, it is clearly for “insiders,” especially those who have been baptized. Those who have believed but not been baptized are suffered to attend, as they are on their way to full conversion; and any outsiders or unbelievers who attend do so at their own risk. Clearly, this is not the approach that we have taken at Risen King, or that many other churches have taken; but this gets into bigger issues of the nature and purpose of the church and of our “services.” Still, I think that we could do with a bit more emphasis on our worship as a time to be in the Lord’s presence, not just gather with one another or hear from the pastor.

When I see or experience a liturgy like what Chan outlines here, I wonder if some form of corporate confession and absolution would be a good addition to our worship. We tend to gloss over our sins and go straight to mercy, grace, love, friendship, fellowship, power, etc. But I wonder if those great truths would have greater impact if we also acknowledged our own shortcomings, failure, and outright sins. I’m not sure how to do this; I often include this when I have...
opportunity to pray during the service. But should it be more structured or consistent? Should the people participate verbally rather than just being able to agree inwardly with what a leader articulates on their behalf?

In the last chapter, Chan urges not just an understanding of the liturgy (his focus in chapter six), but “active participation” in it. As he discusses this, he does address to some extent some of my criticisms and questions. For example, he does say that worship should arouse in us “religious affections,” to use Edwards’ terminology. There will be moments of transcendence in worship. Yet he contends that these moments will come “over a period of time as we participate regularly in the liturgy.” He does say pretty directly that the liturgy can become rote or meaningless; but he points out that this is likely to be more the fault of the worshipper than the liturgy. This is actually why he urges the whole catechumenate process; so that participants will understand what they are doing and why, and therefore be able to enter in more fully. He uses the analogy of driving; once we have learned to drive, we can just drive without having to think about it so much. Similarly, once we have been instructed and learned to worship, we can just worship without concentrating on the form so much.

When I look at a liturgy like Chan lays out, and hear the phrase “active participation,” I think in terms of “making the best of it.” This was my experience when I worshipped at some of the churches in Scotland. I had to struggle to make the best of the Agnus Dei, the kyrie eleison, and other “liturgical” elements of the service. But as I “made the best of it” I did find meaning in them. For Chan, it is not a matter of “making the best of it” but rather “making the most of it.” The liturgy, as he sees it, is the only accurate reflection of the history of Christian experience and the best expression of the gospel. Since it already is the best, it just remains for us to make the most of it. Whether we do or not does not change its value or validity (or even, I think I understand him to say, its effectiveness).

He also makes the link between corporate worship and “personal devotions,” although I think he would prefer something like “corporate worship you do by yourself.” He urges using a prepared liturgy of the hours. (It’s interesting that at one point, while giving an example, he underscores the significance of receiving directly from Christ without an intermediary; yet in this discussion he clearly feels that normal Christians should only use worship materials which have been prepared by the theologically astute.) The point of private worship is to better prepare us for corporate worship.

I have to say that this last chapter helped connect some of the dots for me in Chan’s thinking and made more sense of some of what he had said earlier. Not that I necessarily agree with him more, but I have a better sense of his system of thought as a whole. I get now a key difference between what he is advocating and the more typical evangelical/free church way of thinking. In the evangelical model, the locus of Christian experience is me. So “church” is interpreted in light of that. Its purpose is to encourage me, help me grow in my faith, give me opportunities to serve and develop my gifts, etc. I need to be other-centered because this is how God wants me to be.
What Chan is articulating is an understanding of Christian experience in which the locus is the church. So anything I do or experience has to be understood in light of that. I am only a Christian as I am in relation to the church; what I do in my worship when I am not gathering with the church only has significance as it prepares me for that. The Eucharist is not a celebration of what God has done for me in Jesus; it is that act that constitutes the church. I realize I am using exactly the same language Chan used in his set-up chapters; but I am understanding those terms more as I see them in clearer contrast to the alternative.

So now that I see that distinction, what am I going to do with it? I need to give this more thought. Certainly whether one starts with the individual or the church, one will have to get to the other eventually. But which is prior? I think this does have a direct effect of what we do and why; Chan has convinced me of this, at least. I don’t want to simply be a captive to the church culture in which I’ve grown up, yet I can’t help but see the individual thrust in Scripture, especially the gospels. From the women at the well, to Nicodemus, to the thief on the cross – Jesus dealt with people as individuals. Even when corporate language is used, it often seems best to take it distributively (each of you . . ). This bears more thought.

My overall take on this book is that if you agree with Chan’s starting points, you will probably be encouraged and challenged by what he says. If you disagree with his starting points, this is not likely to be the book that changes your mind. While Chan does make several good points along the way, there are also many occasions at which an otherwise cogent critique is presented in such an ungracious way, or is so overstated, that it functions more as polemic that anything constructive. Chan does seem to be writing to evangelicals; but the response he is looking for is repentance, not reflection or dialogue.

A common problem I have with this book, and with the summaries of Ratzinger’s and Zizioulas’ thought as summarized by Volf, is that I just don’t buy into a eucharistic ecclesiology – not a Catholic version, not an Orthodox version, and not a Protestant version. I just don’t see that the Eucharist is what makes the church, the church. Maybe I am so obtuse I’m missing this; but it seems that all these arguments depend heavily on church tradition and practice rather than primarily on Scripture. Especially with Ratzinger and Zizioulas, their ecclesiologies seem built on implications of conclusions reached after logical reflections of aspects of certain writings by certain church fathers who interpreted Scripture and earlier tradition to address problems in their unique historical and cultural settings. I guess a bottom line for me is that I don’t trust the church fathers any more than I trust myself; if I can be deceived and corrupted by the culture around me, if my understanding of the gospel can be inappropriately influenced by my circumstances, then so can theirs. So while we should take church tradition and history seriously (and even let them evaluate our contemporary understanding and practices), Scripture should have the ultimate say. If the Holy Spirit is active in his church today, we can expect that he will help us understand and apply Scripture. If we believe that the Holy Spirit has been poured out on all, not just a few, then we should expect that he will speak to
each of us. I guess even in saying this, I am back to the individual as the locus of Christian experience. God speaks to me, not to me as I am a part of the church (so really the church speaks to me), but to me individually. Then I bring that understanding into my community, where it can be shaped, corrected, etc. But it starts with me and God, not God and the church and then me.

I guess that so far, at least, I'm still an evangelical Protestant. Call me crazy.