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# SUBTERRANEAN

WHY THE FUTURE OF THE CHURCH IS ROOTEDNESS

**DAN WHITE JR.**

*Foreword by JR Woodward*

*Afterword by David E. Fitch*

The landscape of Christian spirituality in the West is no longer lush with green grass and wild flowers blooming. Instead, across the country we find dry terrain where churches no longer can expect interested seekers, yet most of our solutions for addressing this predicament link to anxiety around our performance and personality. Rather than going back to the boardroom to cook up new techniques for a trendier church, let's ask more meaningfully rooted questions.

*Do we know how to be present in our neighborhoods?*

*Do we know how to be present in community?*

*Do we know how to be present to the in-breaking kingdom of God?*

There is a growing groundswell discovering that we have become uprooted and detached from each other in the way we express being the church. We need a *subterranean* movement that plunges below the surface into a way of being the people of God that carries an unwavering incarnational creed. Dan White Jr. uses crisp criticism, narrative theology, and tangible practices to uncover a hopeful pathway for being radically rooted in God's world.

**Dan White Jr.** co-planted Axiom Church when five families submerged into the city of Syracuse, New York to cultivate communities in diverse neighborhoods. He is also a church strategist with the V3 Movement, coaching cohorts from around the country through an eighteen-month missional training system. Finally, he is also co-founder of the Praxis Gathering. Dan finds deep delight in dwelling around the table with good coffee and a good conversation. He blogs at [danwhitejr.com](http://danwhitejr.com).

"Dan White has penned a well-written, distinctly prophetic book on incarnational mission. In it he calls us to a life beyond the standard cultural obsessions and to a faithfulness that is rendered through rootedness, abiding, witness, and service. A welcome addition to the books on prophetic missionalilty."

—ALAN HIRSCH, Author & Activist

"For too long the church has caved in to the desires of a world addicted to self-destructive speed and geographic displacement. But no longer, says White. God is seeking to *re-place* his people, to invite us into the radical act of stopping in a restless world, to be deeply rooted, to be witnesses to the life our world could experience if it truly surrendered to Christ. This inspiring and practical guide will help you in that monumental endeavor."

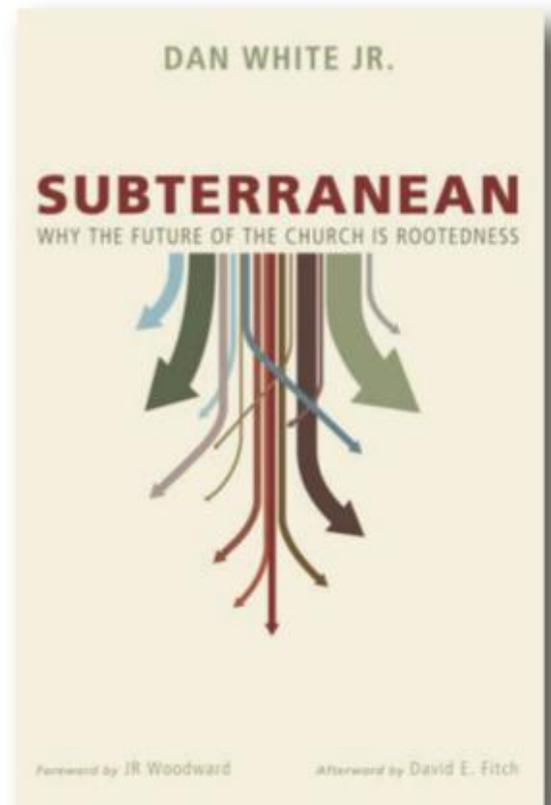
—MICHAEL FROST, author, *Incarnate: The Body of Christ in an Age of Disengagement*

"Want a sneak peak into the future of the church in North America? Read this book. Better yet, want to join in this bold new future? Join with others and create local practices as inspired by this incredible resource. Rooted in courageous practice, White has written a pioneering guide that pinpoints the cancerous defaults of the contemporary church, while also casting a practical vision for how we can all join in God's abundant future."

—TIM SOERENS, coauthor of *The New Parish: How Neighborhood Churches are Transforming Mission, Discipleship, and Community*

"The bias toward up is powerful in church culture. As leaders, we want to be up-and-comers and eventually at the top. If our grand vision isn't realized, we pull up stakes and move on. In this fine book, White makes an impassioned case for down. "Up-rootedness" abstracts us, but "rootedness"—in community, place, and the unfolding work of God—is the truly radical trajectory of the church. It's difficult to imagine a more important message."

—JOHN PATTISON, Co-author of *Slow Church*



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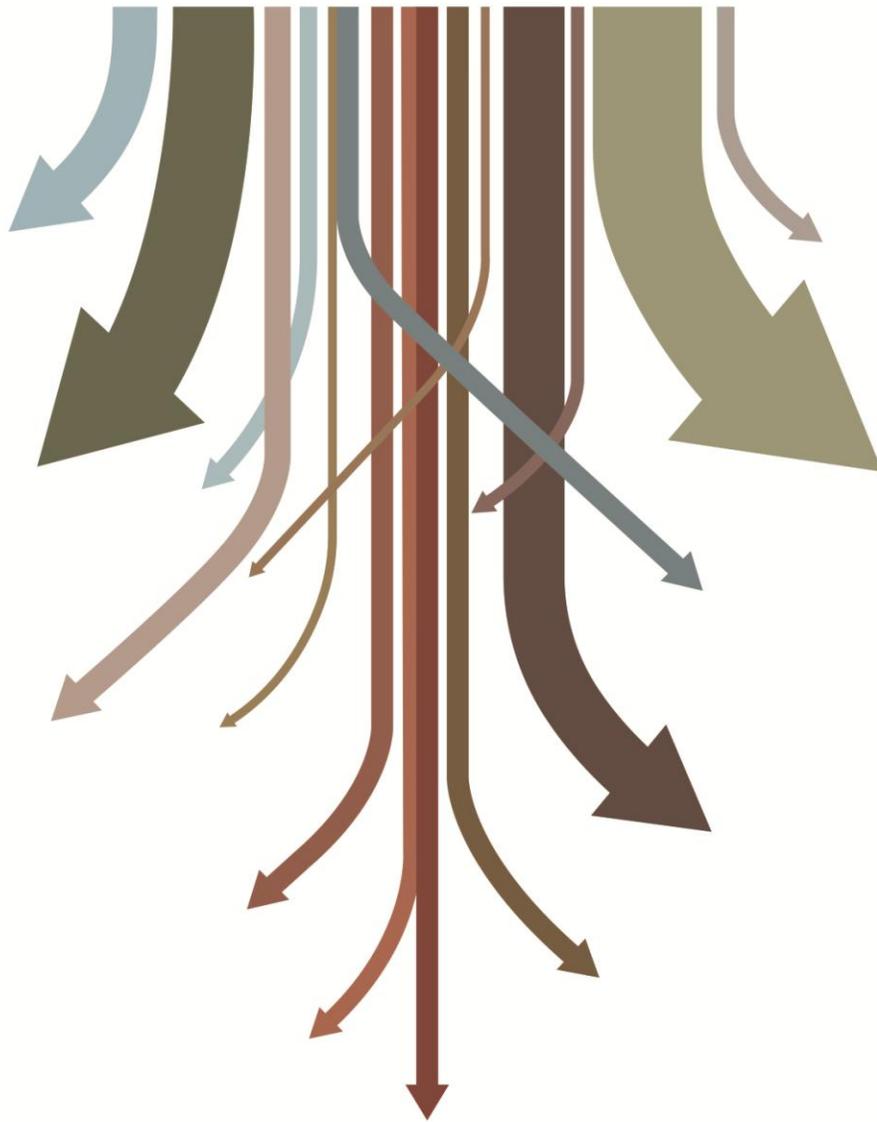
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**DAN WHITE JR.**

**SAMPLE CHAPTER ONE**

# **SUBTERRANEAN**

WHY THE FUTURE OF THE CHURCH IS ROOTEDNESS



*Foreword by* **JR Woodward**

*Afterword by* **David E. Fitch**

*To my wife, who has been my mutual partner in living  
into the content of this book.*

*To the Leading Community of Axiom Church for sharing  
in the work of these rooted practices.*

SUBTERRANEAN

Why the Future of the Church Is Rootedness

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# Foreword

From the moment we could speak, we have been asking questions; it's the way we grow in understanding. When we asked our parents a question we were not often satisfied with the first answer they gave. So we followed up with the classical question, why? After hearing our parents respond, we quickly weighed their response with our current knowledge, and within less than a second, we probably asked another question, "Why is that?" If you've interacted with kids, you undoubtedly have lived this experience. We have engaged in the art of asking questions from the moment we could speak. At some point in our youth, however, we begin to pick up the notion that "right" answers might be more important than good questions. Our culture conditions us through reward and punishment that having the right answers is preferred.

Much of our education trains us to give quick answers. We pass our classes in school with better grades if we've produced the right answers. We pass our driving test because of right answers. Very few of us are nurtured to ask good questions and keep asking good questions. We have learned that answers gain respect, while questions might display ignorance. Oh yes, occasionally we were told, "No question is too dumb." But quietly we were thinking, "Only the ignorant ask questions." The consistent conditioning we experienced in every other part of our lives was that the smart have instant answers, and the not-so-smart are left with questions. Yet, the art of learning to ask good questions is one of the more meaningful skills we can develop as humans. Asking questions assumes curiosity and a hunger to learn. Engaging in the practice of thoughtful questions will place us in a humble posture that is rewarded with deeper understanding and greater wisdom. The doorway to discovery is entered through asking thoughtful questions.

People who master the art of asking questions become skilled at revealing the heart of the matter—what is really going on under the surface. They ask questions that provoke us to consider how our underlying assumptions about life and ministry may lend themselves to "unintended consequences."

Jesus' ministry was marked by asking good questions. Growing up in Jewish culture, he was schooled in the art of asking questions. When, at twelve years old, Jesus was traveling with his family back from Jerusalem to celebrate Passover, Mary and Joseph thought Jesus was with them, but they traveled a whole day before they realized he was missing. Three days later, what do they find Jesus up to? He was "sitting among the teachers, eagerly listening to them and *asking them questions.*"

Jesus matured in the art of question-asking and he practiced it often. In fact, asking questions was one of the fundamental ways he shaped his disciples for the work of the kingdom. When he interacted with the crowds, he would typically ask a question following a parable. When the Pharisees or Sadducees posed questions to Jesus in attempt to trick him and make him look bad in public, seldom did Jesus respond with a direct answer. More often he would ask them a question.

Why did he do this? Jesus understood that questions help guide people to the beauty of the truth. He knew that good questions expose false assumptions. He knew that before we can

reconstruct a proper view of reality, our false underlying assumptions (often uncritically adapted) must first be deconstructed. Good questions lead us to the truth, and ultimate truth is found in God incarnate in the person of Jesus.

As you read this book, you will discover that Dan White Jr. is adept in the art of asking careful but potent questions. Throughout this book, he asks questions that will provoke us to look at the underlying assumptions we have about ourselves, our ministry ambitions, and about how to be the church in the world. As a prophetic pastor, Dan is willing to ask difficult questions of himself first, and then pose them to the world around him, potentially turning it upside down. Dan is interested in more than tipping over the apple cart with questions; he is interested in helping the church find the way of Jesus.

The questions weaving through *Subterranean* are pointing us to the concrete person of Christ, not an abstract idea. When we see Jesus, we see God “taking on flesh and bones and moving into the neighborhood.” Dan employs the tool of *good questions* to help us recover this Jesus-like posture that our churches have potentially given lip service to. If you are satisfied with the status quo, then don’t read this book. Dan, like a reliable guide, will question your underlying assumptions and invite you into real reform.

In Part I of this book, Dan deconstructs the more popular versions of the church today. The questions he asks are the questions he soaked in himself when he lived under some of his old assumptions. Don’t move too quickly through this part. There are social forces at work in our leadership and ministries that need to be questioned. Before solid reconstruction can take place, deconstruction must do its work. Be assured, as you continue on to read Part II, you will find Dan gradually engaging in the work of reconstruction and renewal. So press on.

As you journey through Part II, you will realize that Dan has opened space with his questions to enable us to follow the Incarnate One, who left a realm in which time and space had no consequence. Jesus did this in order to live in a particular time, with a particular people, in a particular place. This is the pattern for what the more *rooted* church looks like, and Dan offers offer you and your church tools and pathways for being this kind of Christian community. Dan has been practicing ministry with these new foundational convictions for some time now, so he has tested wisdom from on-the-ground application.

The church is in a desperate state and this book will not pummel you with cool ideas; instead, it will unfold the essential character for what the kingdom of God looks like sprouting up in a local place. The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed. Jesus illustrated what the prophet Zechariah said, “Don’t despise the day of small beginnings,” for in time this tiniest of seeds, when nourished, develops roots and grows into a tree. This pattern has deeply influenced Dan’s ongoing ministry and it has the potential to renovate the presence of the people of God in the world. Honestly, this book is basic in its premise, “What does it mean to be the rooted church?”—yet the work to recover rootedness is not a simple task. That is why this book is so important for the future of the church, as we need to move beyond simplistic, fast-growth, big-impact, and latest-trend answers to truly recover those vital roots.

As you read, be sure to underline the questions that speak to you. Then ask yourself, why does this question stand out to me? What is God saying to me through this?

Record those questions, ponder those questions, dialogue with others about those questions, and I assure you, you will grow in real knowledge. But if you want to grow in wisdom, you have to ask yourself a couple more questions: In light of what God’s Spirit is saying

to me, what does God want me to practice? How should I put this into practice with others?

Jesus said, "The kingdom of God is for those who are like children." Like its title, this book will dive deep. Be willing "like a child" to learn afresh what it means to join the subterranean movement of the in-breaking kingdom of God.

JR Woodward  
National Director, V3 Church Planting Movement

## Preface

It's probably not a great marketing move to admit you are not a natural writer. Being a writer was never on my bucket list. Since I was nineteen years of age and scanning over the last twenty years, all that I've ever wanted to be was a pastor. I've always preferred the exhaustive work of being with people more than the exhaustive work of putting pen to paper. I'm an introvert, so dwelling with people with hopes of transforming together has seemed to require all of the energy I could muster. To write just sounded like an extra burden. Yet over the years I have consistently journaled. Reading my journal exposes my thoughts, my tossing and turning with ministry. My journal entries show a pattern over the last fifteen years; the pattern of an annoying inner dialogue that was growing in strength and would not be alleviated by journaling. Some of my inner dialogue reflected the wandering chats my wife and I would have late into the night about the nature of the church and its future. As a called and career pastor with the wonderful privilege of ministering in various denominations, conservative or progressive, liturgical or contemporary, Bible-preaching or justice loving, large budgets or lean budgets, all my reflections were piecing together around some core common issues. My meager inner dialogue came screaming to the forefront when I had the opportunity of a lifetime to lead a successful megachurch. As a relatively young pastor this is what you fantasize about, right? Every vocational field has a ladder to climb, whether named or not named. A busting-at-the-seams church with all of the trimmings was supposed to be the prize for all my theological studying, conference attending, and leadership-skill building. So I glared the opportunity in the face, ready to walk into the promised land, and realized something wasn't right.

God had been taking a jackhammer ever so gently to the foundation of my ecclesiology, which was rattling the bones of my self-understanding as a ministry leader. It was evident in my journal entries and in my percolating conversations with some close companions. My conscience was increasingly uncomfortable with what it meant to be a "successful" pastor and I was uncomfortable with the cultural description of what it meant to be a successful church. Success, though never stated overtly, was dependent on many of the factors that made me the high school quarterback or earned me public speaking awards or helped me pull off huge fund-raising events. I had personality, charm, and could infuse energy into a room. As a decent communicator I knew how to draw a crowd. Honestly, my framework for being the church was biased by my shiny skill set.

Rewind, as a couple of previous summers I experienced a disruption. I decided to read through the early church letters afresh, asking one simple question: *What is the church?* I wasn't looking for sermon material; I just wanted to see the forest for the trees. With my Bible and a five-by-seven notebook alongside I meandered through Acts, Corinthians, Ephesians, and Thessalonians with that question written at the top of every page. After a few weeks, I remember vividly sitting in a lawn chair, head resting in the palm of my hands, realizing I was reading something unfamiliar to me and it was unraveling me. I've studied all this before, slicing, dicing, and cooking it up to deliver to others, yet on an experiential level it looked strange and foreign. I had not known experientially the ecclesiastical life found in the New Testament, now scribbled in my notebook. I had a genuine sense of feeling like a sham, like a

carpenter who somehow avoided ever being in the woodshop. I had versed myself in organizational principles, better church methods, communication tactics, and research on relevancy, and it had drifted me away from the axioms of being the body of Christ. I don't mean body of Christ as a Sunday event and a midweek program, I mean body of Christ as unfolded in the imperfect community of *oikos*. *Oikos* is the Greek word for household. However, its meaning is much broader than what we typically give to the definition of household. For us it means those who live under one roof. However, for those living in the Ancient Near East during the time of Christ it came to mean the *metaphoric* family that intentionally oriented around each other, in a particular place. The *oikos* is the imperfect, messy, relational, organic but organized amoeba of the first-century church. *Oikos* was the hot mess of God's in-breaking kingdom that supported early Christians for mission in a city, for maturing in love, for the practice of the Eucharist, for the collision of racial diversity, for resistance to paganism, and for being shaped as disciples. This is where the activity was. There was no other option. This was church undiluted and I knew very little of this alternative life exposed and explained by the Apostle Paul. I had led many discipleship programs, participated in many small group Bible studies and preached many captivating sermons, but very little of it inched me closer to the grit and grime of *oikos*. I'm not an idealist believing we can duplicate what occurred 2,000 years ago, but I certainly believe something primordial needs to be resurrected in our efficiency-constricted, personality-driven, entertainment-addicted, community-starved, size-obsessed culture. Sitting there that sunny afternoon I was being reinvigorated but in some ways paralyzed. I felt the hammer of change pounding away at my identity but I did not know how to move into the spaciousness of practice. So for the next few years I privately churned in conversation with my gifted wife. I did my best to serve faithfully at the ministry posts God had given me. Everything came to head for me when I was offered that "successful" pastoral position at a megachurch.

All my dreaming and ruminating about a new but old way forward as church was going to be tested, was going to be pressed through a gauntlet. For me the acceptance of that successful church job was a temptation offering me a shortcut around what God had been teaching me. Yet I was not emotionally ready for the cost. I wanted that job so desperately but was so conflicted that I decided to get away for three days to pray, fast, and get some clarity. I got a cheap hotel room in an adjacent city and began seeking wisdom. By the end of day two I came up completely dry; my prayers were cluttered and my headspace was no clearer. I found nothing at the bottom of the barrel of my mind. So out of pure frustration I decided to go for a walk downtown that night. It was the dead of winter. I bundled up like an Eskimo and began stumbling around the city with no direction and a grumbling attitude. On my walk I came across a homeless brother sitting up against a building on the icy sidewalk. As I approached him, he waved me over. I hesitantly came closer and he motioned to the ground saying "sit down." I sat down and I could see his breath puffing under the dim street light, as he turned and asked, "What are you afraid of?" I responded with a caught-off-guard "Huh?" My new homeless friend responded with quoting "I will never leave you nor forsake you. Be strong and courageous. . . . Be careful to obey the law I've given you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, then you will be prosperous and successful. Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for God will be with you wherever you go" (Josh 1:5-7). I was aghast. Horror gushed into my heart and I knew what was happening. I was a Baptist boy

but this holy interruption was hard to pass off as merely a crazy homeless guy. He was a vessel of truth. The message was clear. I was riddled with fear and my insides began to split open. I cried tears of honesty for the first time in a long time. My homeless friend got up slowly, using my shoulder as a crutch, and moseyed down the street around the corner. I sat there and I could feel my cowardice. I feared failing, I feared not making any money, I feared not being successful. My ego was in an Olympic wrestling match with the idea of success. God spoke through a homeless brother to break up the hard ground of my soul to make space for absorbing the fresh water of new directions. Soon I drove home, walked in the door, and immediately told my wife what had happened. She said, "We can't be afraid." So I turned down the job the following day. Fast forward, and it hasn't been easy, but I've been attempting to practice a more rooted way of being the people of God in the world. I have had the joy of making this trek with others. My own blue-collar practice is dripping from the pages of this book and it is by no means perfect. I've tried to be honest throughout about my own inner temper tantrums to reorient around rootedness.

I recall that story because it is my story and it has framed much of the issues I will press into. I believe the future of the church is a rooted one; one that submerges itself in community, in neighborhoods, and in focused faithfulness. The recovery of a rooted church will collide with real leaders, trained in real "success" strategies that have formed real personal images of being significant. Everything about rootedness will collide with our inner dependency on versions of success built on personality, expediency, and efficiency. When pressing into the future of the church our own leadership habits must go through a maximum dynamic pressure. Maximum dynamic pressure is what a space shuttle goes through at the point it punches through the atmosphere. The integrity of the shuttle is taxed, exposing the craftsmanship and character of its construction.

*Is the church of the future dependent on magnetic personalities or rooted practice?*

## **THE COLLAPSE**

The Western societal structure was shocked in the decade following the turn of the millennium, by the bombings of the World Trade Center, the collapse of the economy, and the growing difficulty of attaining the American dream. Rather than a carnival of prosperity we find ourselves discouraged in our dashed hopes, secluded from each other, and strangely detached from contentment, even though we have more at our fingertips than ever. We are sputtering to apprehend a sense of self, an established identity. So we reach into the panoply of accessories to be labeled as a video gamer, a granola mom, a starving musician, an environmental activist, a Jesus freak, a popular blogger, a gym rat, etc. These descriptors offer some bobbing life preservers in the turbulent social ocean, but we know it, we feel it . . . they don't offer us rootedness. The church in the last decade has tapped its best leaders for solutions and they've responded with louder preaching, worship bathed in light shows, candles and incense, and a behemoth array of Christian living programs. We practice a neurotic ecclesiology, anxious around our personality, whether that's to be a strong preaching church, a strong worship church, a strong family church, a strong justice church, or even a strong biker church. Will people gravitate towards our personality? We read research telling us what Millennials want

and then attempt to engineer experiences that will appeal to them. This causes us to bounce about like chameleons. Or, to shift metaphors, we are like an insecure adolescent wondering if people will like the new shirt we just bought.

All of this running around after fads is bankrupting our rootedness. We have not scrutinized the Trojan horse of our church ingenuity for what violence it does in our midst. This was the algorithm between all my church experiences; the church has become *uprooted*. When we are uprooted we are more dependent on personalities for energy, more fragmented from each other, more opportunity-chasing and less faithful to the beauty and brokenness in our neighborhoods.

## **A GROUNDSWELL**

There is a growing groundswell of people around the country looking for a new way to be human, with other people, in a particular place. The Christendom complex is crumbling and rather than bailing on the church, some are reconstituting their commitment to the first seedlings of what made the church peculiar and powerful. This is not a project that worships nostalgia. Instead, it is a sobered reach back into history for guidance and forward application. There is a primal recognition that we are to be placed firmly with each other, with a long-term mission, with a passion for where we live. This burgeoning movement is not made in the kiln of the consumerism factory that cooks up new techniques for being a trendier church. Rootedness resists that arms race of “cool.” Rootedness seeks to plunge below the buffet of choices, magnetic personalities, and manufactured buzz into a subterranean way to be the church carrying with it an unwavering incarnational creed.

## **THE UPROOTED CHURCH**

The book is divided into two halves that reflect the route my own formation took. First, we’ll walk through a sticky patch of “sacred scrutiny” on how we are *uprooted*. We’ll do some essential deconstruction, leveling the land for our future work in the second half. We’ll expose the forces that have needled their elbow in the spine of the church, causing us to bend towards:

### **Excessive Personality**

The competition is on to be a significant church. Whoever is bigger and bolder often wins in the court of who’s more observably impressive. Our ambitions to be significant have pushed us to become disinterested in and potentially have disdain for embracing limits. In our surge to build significant churches we’ve unintentionally *severed* the character of *presence*.

### **Extracted Perception**

Information is king in our social economy. To know more is to be more and is to be equipped for competing in the world. So creating efficient faucets that gush out spiritual information has

become a priority. In our surge to download information to hungry learners we've unintentionally *severed* the character of *practice*.

### Expedited Production

Our modern imagination for having an impact channels most of our energy on how quickly something can take off. Restraint in our ambitious goals seems silly and only slows us down. There is a demand within us for production and production immediately. In our surge for microwave-speed impact we've unintentionally *severed* the character of *patience*.

I hope to tell a convincing tale of how we've coalesced with these social forces and how they are deteriorating our incarnational nervous system as a church.

## THE ROOTED CHURCH

The second half of this book will be more hopeful, offering some essential helps for being a subterranean church. We will move toward a reconstruction of a radical rootedness. We'll plunge into three overlapping practices:

### Rooted Fidelity

Faithfulness is the primary muscle formed and shaped in the first-century Christians for the work of cultivating the kingdom of God. The muscle of fidelity has become neglected, no longer undergoing a daily exercise routine. We've become increasingly more faithful to our own individualized spiritual experiences that demand very little from us. Fidelity is the concept of unflinching loyalty to something exterior to our own wants and putting that loyalty into consistent practice for sake of subverting the social forces that seek to erode us.

### Rooted Locality

We are made to find our identities in a particular place. The incarnation of God in Christ has boated ahead of us and created a wake for us to follow in regards to living locally. There is a labyrinth of life and culture in our neighborhoods that must be recognized, respected, and reoriented around. The future of the church must strip away all of the gimmicks in order to dwell in a place with the flesh-and-blood people living there.

### Rooted Community

We are made to belong to people and become new with people. From the beginnings of the creation story we are made for interdependence with others. New creation is the work of cultivating community; it is an all-out rebellion against the cultural surge of self-reliance, isolation, and self-actualization.

In no way is this book exhaustive in drawing us into rootedness. I've attempted to simplify large concepts, theological narratives, and my own application into something accessible. We

are uprooted and the questions we must explore are not mere landscaping. We cannot landscape while there is an earthquake on a plate-tectonic level. Let's submerge past the appearance of our best methods and creative techniques to recover what will nourish the church; we need to go *subterranean*.

# Acknowledgments

This book is situated within my own story; the formative events, questions, and explorations of it. My own experience obviously colors my hypothesis in the book. I'm at peace with this reality. I've never been one comfortable in the halls of academia. Seeing myself as a blue-collar practitioner first and foremost certainly shapes the content of this book. I have an allergic reaction to literature prescribing solutions that were boiled in mere ruminating or manufactured within an ivory tower. Ideas are candy in our consumer society. Ideation has become a best-selling meme, but earthed-out practice *with* others is like the rarity of spotting a Sumatran tiger in the wild. I concede that others have better ideas that hypothetically could progress us beyond our current circumstances. Maybe I'm different, but my best ideas always get harangued and humbled when pressed out into practice with others. This is what I've attempted to discipline myself to in *Subterranean*. I did not want to write anything that has not had to run through the obstacle course of practice. This limits the scope of the book and maybe the appeal. What the church could be stirs me up, but it's the daily rhythm of being the church with real people in a real place with a real mission that has rewired my DNA.

There are many authors who have influenced me deeply over the years. These include John Howard Yoder, Alan Hirsch, John Perkins, Christine Pohl, Dallas Willard, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Scot McKnight, and Jean Vanier. But my most formative spiritual directors have been mentors and disciples in real time. Those directors formed me in various ways as I observed parts of their lives and gave them permission to apprentice me. I owe much to Dr. George Snyder (rabbi), who shared numerous cups of coffee with me dialoguing about historical Judaism and the concerns of a young pastor. The late Jim Dejidas impacted my formation greatly as he affirmed me and equipped me to press into urban ministry challenges. John Hawco was a significant up-close spiritual force in my life-modeling love for God and fiery passion for the ecclesia. Marlene June Eissens spent many hours with me discussing and discerning emotionally healthy ways for me to be in ministry. Not all of my disciples would agree fully with the premise of this book, but I want to acknowledge the gift of their influence on my development.

I want to thank my parents, Dan and Elly, for being emotional and practical support in my venture to plant a church. Growing up in a love-filled home gave me a sense of being that still gives me stability today.

Finally, my wife and friend Tonya has for twenty years loved me faithfully as well as graciously addressed regions of my life that needed maturing. Without the strength of her emotional and intellectual touch I would be unstable. Thanks also to my son, Daniel, who had patience with me, always asking "When will you be done working on *Subterranean*?" My own family has provided me belonging in the harshness of the world while simultaneously compelling me to practice more rooted ways of being the church.

## PART ONE

### **The Suspended State of the Church**

CHAPTER 1

## Hotels or Trees

Growing up, my family had a huge willow tree in the backyard. The tree defined the entirety of that grassy space as its sleepy branches drooped down, creating a canopy to play under. I scaled that tree many times, finding a better vantage point for squirt gun wars waged with neighborhood kids. The neck of that tree was as thick as a car, so it created a perfect disappearing spot when playing hide-and-go-seek with my brother. When I flashback that tree was almost like a character in my life. Its whimsical creature-like presence was a sprawling fixture in the adventures of my childhood. Just about a year ago I drove through that neighborhood after being away for thirty-plus years. The neighborhood looked quite different, as the houses had been remodeled and a new development of stores was now eating up a portion of the block. Yet towering in the same space was that massive willow tree with the same big sleepy look, as if it had been waiting for me to come back and lean up against its trunk. I was quite surprised it hadn't been cut down. Maybe someone else had appreciated its presence.



**WILLOW TREE**

### FANTASTICAL OR FAITHFUL

In my travels, I've seen some impressive human-made structures that obviously required much time and money to construct. The architectural precision of the Atomium Hotel in Brussels is fantastical: it's an almost sci-fi building, made up of seven suspended spheres, connected by

twenty tubes to wander through, each offering a panoramic view of the city. The dream of the hotel at its building in 1958 was to inspire humanity toward a better future, characterized by harmony, brilliance, and progress.<sup>1</sup> The almost-otherworldly shape of the structure was an invitation to celebrate the dawn of tomorrow's world. Yet for all its elegant engineering I find the symbol of stacked shiny steel not prepared for the real longings of the future. It is the power of that willow tree in my childhood backyard that stands more as an unassuming symbol for what the future aches for. Our ingenuity, intelligent ideas, and cutting-edge approaches cannot replace the souls craving being rooted. We can build churches higher to the sky and host worship events that explode in stadium-size emotion, but the missional future of the church needs a deep reflection on and recovery of its roots. The tree is a delicate organism in our technocratic world. Human progress could cut down that tree tomorrow, but nothing can replace the existence that tree testifies to. That tree echoes a primordial story.



**ATOMIUM HOTEL**

### The Kingdom Tree

Trees are a leading symbol in ancient religion and in modern times. Trees are living organisms that often outlast the brevity of humans and the animal population. Trees are at the pinnacle of the plant world, transforming the earth from a barren state into a place capable of supporting other forms of life. They tower when we fall and they are still alive when we die. Our planet has the magnificence of the mahogany trees in Honduras, the Douglas fir evergreen trees forming a

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<sup>1</sup>. "Futuristic & Universal," [www.atomium.be/History.aspx](http://www.atomium.be/History.aspx).

canopy in the Pacific Northwest, the pines in the Black Hills in South Dakota, and the Ivenack Oak, located in Poland and now 800 years old. Trees are enchanting in their personality as they grow slow but grow strong. As we lean back and look up, they incite wonder. Our finger tips can feel their rough bark and our noses can smell their sweet scent. Their earthbound presence is also undeniable.

Trees are tremendous and magical bodies that have occupied a unique place in Jewish thought, closely relating to man's relationship with a life-support system. The Jewish Midrash stresses this importance for ancient Israel to prepare new lands for the long term: "When God created the world, His first action was to plant trees, as it is written, 'and God planted trees in Eden.' So [for] you, too, when you enter the land of Israel, planting trees should be your first involvement."<sup>2</sup> Trees are symbolic of a sustainable life that nurtures other life. Stroll through the Scriptures and you'll uncover an emblematic appearance of trees, with their qualities of perseverance, beauty, and care for those who linger under their branches. Over one hundred times trees are emphasized. God's faithful work in the world is frequently illustrated in the symbolism of a tree.

In Genesis it says, "out of the ground the Lord God grew trees . . . and placed in the midst of the garden the Tree of Life" (Gen 2:9). So in the opening sequences of the Bible a tree immediately indicates God's presence. The Tree of Life stands at the center. *The tree declares God is here*. Not only is God here but his presence is secured and soaring in the midst, sourcing life to the rest of the wild habitat.

The fig tree is also a species mentioned in (Gen 3:7) and later the fig tree enables someone to view Jesus when Zacchaeus climbs a sycamore (a type of fig tree). The tree not only symbolizes God's presence, but also helps us get a better view.

Another distinct tree that makes an appearance is the olive tree. In the life of Israel the olive tree is symbolic of their role in God's plans. "Behind and underneath all of this is a holy, God-planted, God-tended tree. If the primary root of the tree is holy, there's bound to be some holy fruit" (Rom 11:15–25). Additionally, the oil from the olive tree acts as the fuel used in clay lamps, supplying the tabernacle with light (Exod 30:24–25).<sup>3</sup> The manifestation of a tree is a distinct representation of God's sustenance.

Isaiah declares prophetically about the new kingdom community that will be assembled by the Messiah, "The Spirit of God is on me, sending me to speak good news to the poor, healing for the heartbroken and freedom to all captives . . . they will be like 'Oaks of Righteousness' planted by God to display his goodness" (Isa 61:3) The tree offers us a new identity that testifies to the creator God.

Standing at the center of time is the cross, a tree where God shockingly dies, naked and vulnerable. God is murdered and allows his enemies to spill his blood down the lumber of a tree. It is here that we get our most unusual picture of how the tree symbolizes God's finer work in the world. The tree is an enigma in the way it explains God's collision with humanity.

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<sup>2</sup>. Wolff and Neril, "Trees, Torah, and Caring for the Earth."

<sup>3</sup>. Wahm, "Significant Trees in the Bible."

There is a supernatural botany to God's movement into the world, establishing shalom on earth as it is in heaven.

Finally, in the new city recorded in Revelation 21:9–27 we get a sweeping portrayal of the renewal of all things. In the intersection of streets, on the other side of the river, stands that original Tree of Life quietly and powerfully present, bearing fruit as it brings healing to all the peoples of the world.<sup>4</sup> This tree's roots go deep but its branches rise over the entire earth as its leaves scatter the will of God. Ultimately the tree is well suited to symbolize King Jesus' rule in the in-breaking kingdom.

### THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS LIKE A TREE

This tree orients everything. The entire world, my city, my neighborhood, my community, and my life is in the shade of God's in-breaking kingdom. Like a tree, the kingdom brings life into lifeless situations, giving off oxygen to those needing to breathe in grace, grafting itself to a specific location, sprouting at a pace the eye cannot always observe, and persevering through the harshest of seasons. The tree is rooted to this earth. Jesus' entire life was a kingdom commencement of heaven's rule coming to this soil and sod for the revealing of God in our places. Jesus-life is not an abstract principle; it is an earthbound collision with people, with places, and with systems saturated in a historical reality. From the very moment Jesus begins to gather ragamuffin disciples they are recruited towards this earthbound work. Jesus picks up the long, drama-filled story of the Israelite people chosen to be the tangible presence of Yahweh in the world and recalibrates it towards being a grounded church for all tribes. *Church* is a loaded word, flooding our minds with all kinds of images from the last thousand years. Yet Jesus and his disciple movement are the first seedlings for the relational infrastructure of a church. In Jesus, God is gathering people under his reign to participate in the renewal of the world. God's reign is concerned with undoing humankind's Tower-of-Babel posture that oppresses the weak and creates isolation. God's reign recovers our desires from the burning heap of self-indulgence and restores our identities as loved ones who love others. The kingdom is not an esoteric idea or a far-off place in the clouds or Christianized government or a 501c3 doing social good. The kingdom of God is the people of God submitting to the King's will in the place they are called to dwell. The kingdom tree sprouts up in the concentrated place where we seek to be the ecclesia, meaning, to be the gathered body of Jesus-followers committed to each other, committed to a place, and committed to the remembrance of Jesus as true King. The kingdom of God drives us deep into the church and the church drives us deep into the world. A kingdom community has no greater calling than to cultivate its active life together in light of this truth. We are invited to massage a richer and thicker reality of this into human imaginations. There is nothing truer than God in Christ's work to cultivate his kingdom tree in a place. Everything, every last inch of our living, is to reorient around this supernatural collision of heaven and earth; yet let's be honest, it takes disciplined vision to maintain focus on this sometimes hard-to-measure project. When

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<sup>4</sup>. Taylor-Weiss, "What Trees Mean in the Bible."

you compare the attention grabbing, glitz and glam of the Atomium Hotel in Europe to the slow and sleepy growth of a tree, it takes a different set of eyes to see what is infinitely more valuable.

## UNASSUMING PRESENCE

The Tree of Life will not compete and clamor for attention. It will grow in subversive, quiet, and even hidden ways. It does not leverage typical channels of human marketing and mass-culture hype in the form of powerful personalities, political offices, and perceptive strategies. The kingdom of God is different than humankind's version of success. The church's fascination with modern progresses, sexier methods, and new social innovations can create disinterest in something as meek as the movement of the kingdom of God. When we think "kingdom" we often conjure up images of mighty armies triumphing over their foes or a wealthy family creating a dynasty. The idea of kingdom can lean towards the acquisition of more power, more popularity, and more capital in the form of people. This cultural current is running through many church leaders and subsequently many churches, with a currency that has traumatized our love for the mustard-seed smallness of God's style of work. Much of our modeling of "kingdom" looks like the acclaimed hero, the awarded philanthropist, or the fastest-growing start-up company. But the kingdom of God is not a lesson in how to grab attention for the glory of God. Rather, it's a lesson in how to get smaller to move meaningfully into the mess of human brokenness.

Honestly, Jesus wouldn't make a great modern politician, a good visionary, or successful stage personality. His most central message of the kingdom of God is often clouded and cloaked in the language of parables, fictional stories.<sup>5</sup> This drove his disciples crazy! In Matthew 13:34 the writer makes the point that "Jesus did not say anything without using parables." A parable would often end with the refrain "whoever has ears, let him hear." A parable would often include a hidden message that would be accessible to some and confusing to others.<sup>6</sup> At one point the disciples share their absolute frustration with this approach. "Why do you speak in parables like this?" As if to say "Jesus, why are you doing this? You're telling stories but nobody is getting your point, can you find a clearer, cleaner, more captivating way to communicate?" I find it irritating but intriguing that God's campaign is often subtle and scarily ambiguous about something so important for all of humanity. *Why not just make it plain speak and crank it up loud?* Rather, Jesus entices listeners to tune their listening to a different frequency. The kingdom of God can be easily drowned out and stepped over in our surge to be the church. We may pass by the tree everyday and it fades into the scenery, going unnoticed. But when we have eyes to see, we behold the Tree of Life budding up when previously overlooked. We see God's kingdom forestry. God's kingdom is being planted among us but trees do not fight, they

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<sup>5</sup>. McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus*, 45.

<sup>6</sup>. Ibid., 46.

bear fruit. We are not coerced by the kingdom of God; we are not battered into submission and overwhelmed with the sheer sensory overload of its presentation. Rather the Tree invites us, intrigues us, and mystifies us. The creator of the world is gathering people together not to compete with the machinery of the world but to point out what is sprouting up unnoticed in this place. God is restoring relationships in creation, albeit in slow, subterranean, and subversive ways. God treasures this world like a gardener does her garden, tending to it, watering, weeding, and watching over it. And now Jesus' strategy is one of covert recruitment: "come labor with me to build a Tree of Life in your place." We must begin to look at every facet in light of this *kingdom Tree*, allowing it to loom over our present pursuits.

The tree as a metaphor for the kingdom of God may not scratch our itch for a blockbuster approach to cultivating a church for the future; this is the upside-down way of the kingdom. The Tree of Life speaks to an alternative future that does not revolve around the dynamo of personality, but rather the character of rootedness. The hotel is the icon of posing, posturing, and performing to establish a visibly secure identity; yet we are being summoned to a new way of being human, a submerged pattern for shaping an identity. "Identity" is that hard-to-quantify interior fabric that we feel makes us who we are, but we feel is perceptible by an audience of our preference. Our mind's eye has an emotional coliseum assembled, where we desperately hope our caricature is taken in with distinct features. It's what we want people to know us as. Hear this: our understanding of *how* the kingdom of God sprouts up in the world is directly related to the way in which we will seek out being visibly significant in the world as leaders.

## PUMMELED BY NOISE

The church is in a precarious place, sitting atop the rubble of super-sized growth.<sup>7</sup> We've racked up a lot of wins. Whether you serve in a small or big church is not the issue. No matter the size of the church you lead or participate in, Western church leaders' imaginations and metrics for success are shaped by the most celebrated success stories. Our collective intelligence knows how to succeed at "church." This question of "how to be a successful church" has weighed heavy on me as a pastor for the last decade, knowing that beyond the phenomenon we've whipped up, God is cautioning us in 1 Samuel 16:7: "The LORD does not look at the things human beings look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart."

In 1936, Adam Smith coined the phrase "unintended consequences"<sup>8</sup> to explain acts intended to cause a specific outcome that create other outcomes that are not the original one intended. There are unintended consequences for "best church practices" in our life together. Our razor-sharp leadership has unintentionally *severed* the palatable, rooted embodiment of the kingdom tree in our neighborhoods. Our well-organized approach to building a successful church has done damage to our bodies, like a hard-working miner now stuck with lungs ravaged

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<sup>7</sup>. Fitch, *The Great Giveaway*, 121.

<sup>8</sup>. University Discoveries, "Law of Unintended Consequences."

by rock dust. We have done injury to our own roots.

Don DeLillo's novel *White Noise* portrays Jack Gladney, a successful professor. Jack's world is filled with achievements but is being unsettled by the bombardment of information and the hypocrisy in his own life. *White Noise* explores themes that were emerging during the late twentieth century, like rampant consumerism, media saturation, novelty academic intellectualism, the disintegration of relationships, and human-made disasters.<sup>9</sup> Jack is becoming more attuned to the noise always babbling in the background of his life. The first part of *White Noise*, called "Waves and Radiation," chronicles his contemporary family life that appears as a frenzy of activity, human detachment, and the surge of narcissism from the abundant availability of goods and services. Then suddenly a lethal black chemical cloud, an "airborne toxic event" unleashed by an industrial accident, floats over Jack's town. The airborne toxic event becomes symbolic of the white noise engulfing the Gladneys—the radio transmissions, sirens, microwaves, and TV murmurings that constitute the magic of American life. Jack at one point says in a satirical exclamation, "this is why people's eyes, ears, brains and nervous systems have grown weary, it's a simple case of being abused by noise."<sup>10</sup>

The church is living under an airborne toxic event created by the chaos of our own pragmatic, robust church noise. We have the residue of success on our hands but we are under a chemical cloud gasping for air, fresh air. There is a tactile quality that eludes us in the bone and marrow of our collective presence in the world. There is a way to be meaningful Jesus communities on God's earth that our "success" is not awakening. We are "winning" but we are tragically losing.

## THE NUMBERS LEASH

We've heard the statistics about how the church in the West is fading fast. Every year denominations report they are hemorrhaging numerically. The category called the "Nones" is on the rise. In America, there are more than 13 million self-described atheists and agnostics, as well as nearly 33 million people who say they have no particular religious affiliation.<sup>11</sup> In my own city 96.5 percent of the city inhabitants do not attend church.<sup>12</sup> There are a million opportunities offered to the church that can spread its message wider, elevate its leaders higher, expand its budgets deeper, and grow its influence stronger. I sense it is a major misstep to address renewal in the church by starting with how to propagate it or prevent it from shrinking. Not once when addressing the seven churches in the book of Revelation does God mention numerical growth or the urgency of attracting more people. Honing our strategies for

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<sup>9</sup>. DeLillo, *White Noise*, 134.

<sup>10</sup>. Ibid, 94.

<sup>11</sup>. Pew Research Center, "Nones on the Rise."

<sup>12</sup>. Payne, "Least Churched Cities," 19.

stimulating growth doesn't seem to be the concern of the New Testament letters. How many converts did the disciples make when Jesus sent them out on their first mission? We don't know. Matthew seems uninterested in this metric. We've allowed our fixes to be led around by the numbers leash. We are twisting and turning under the strain of numbers.<sup>13</sup> The unnerving truth is God gets heated when leaders survey the success of their organizations using numerical metrics. "David took a census of the people of Israel commissioning Joab to count the inhabitants of Israel. 'Take a census of all the people of Israel—from Beersheba in the south to Dan in the north—and bring me a report so I may know how many there are. But Joab replied . . . 'But why, my lord the king, do you want to do this?' The king insisted that they take the census, so Joab traveled throughout all Israel to count the people. . . . God was very displeased with the census. Then David said to God, 'I have sinned greatly by taking this census. Please forgive my guilt for doing this foolish thing'"(1 Chr 21:1–8).

We need to stop emphasizing the most obvious, simplistic cultural signs of success. Albert Einstein said, "That which counts is often the most difficult to count."<sup>14</sup>I've found this to be true. Numbers tell us very little about rootedness. Our location in a postindustrial, Western, efficiency-oriented economy has influenced our framework for ministry. We are conditioned to think in terms of verifiable, stock-market-type results, seeing churches like machines. We tweak this program and adjust that program, add some marketing, crunch the numbers, and produce results—a "if you do this, you get that" mentality. We need to snap the numbers leash. We need a fresh exploration into being the church that has little to do with the numerical soap opera we all like to get caught up in. Rather, we have agricultural kingdom work to do, work that cares less about spreadsheets and more about getting rich soil and earth under our fingernails in our life together and in the life of our neighborhood. We need to confront our contemporary assumptions about what it means to be a significant church.

*What assumptions about growth do we need to confront?*

## TEARING UP ROOTS

Years ago a friend of mine wanted to put up a garage in his backyard. I still don't know why he asked for my help since at that point I had a fear of power tools. I've learned how to swing a hammer since, but back then I felt like an Alaskan bobsledder in the ghettos of Mexico. But I jumped in, uncertain if I'd do more harm than good. My friend had a computer-generated blueprint for constructing this two-car garage that included a small loft. He had been planning this garage for the last two years, saving up some money and meeting the appropriate town ordinances. When I arrived we started digging with a rented backhoe and went to town on a thirty-by-thirty-foot area. We roped out the section and were precise on how far down and wide we dug. A week later we poured the foundation with some help. We slaved in the hot sun

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<sup>13</sup>. White Jr., "The Numbers Leash."

<sup>14</sup>. Quoted in Garfield, *Peak Performance*, 112.

and completed the first stage. We went through all the phases of framing, roofing, and electrical installation. Two months later we hung the metal garage door and had a completed garage. It wasn't my garage, but I took a lot of pride in that accomplishment. With great planning, lots of work, and the right tools we had built something to feel good about. A few years later at a party I had asked him a casual question about his garage. He reiterated that he loved it. It was wonderful during the snowy winters and he was also enjoying the loft for jamming with some musicians. He then stated with regret that a huge tree a few feet away from the garage was dying. It was a beautiful oak that his kids had climbed on and swung from. A source of great family memories was suddenly decaying. His hunch was that we had unintentionally extirpated its roots when we dug the garage's foundation. Roots are the principal organ for sustaining a tree. The roots anchor the tree's body, and can store reserve food. Roots usually grow beneath the surface of the soil and extend from the base of the trunk. Roots grow downward for stability, absorbing nutrients. Without a significant portion of its roots my friend's tree could not survive. In our effort to build an impressive structure we did damage to that beautiful tree. This is the exact predicament we find the church caught in. We have been planning the church, building the church, using the best tools to assemble the church—but we have unintentionally severed some vital, life-sustaining roots in the process. My premise is that we've excavated the very roots we need for anchorage of the in-breaking kingdom of God and nourishing life together in the world.

*What roots have we unintentionally demolished?*

This book is concerned with that nuance. Typically we think of nuance as a small, lesser, potentially insignificant conversation. The future of missional presence in the world will need a revival in our attention to nuance, which is, granted, the hardest thing to count. Rootedness probes around in the material of our character rather than in the clearer categories of what "works." Rootedness is less interested in the sheer utility of our outcomes and more interested in whether or not our practices humanize or dehumanize ourselves and others. Rootedness as I'm handling it gives resolute respect to what is occurring on a subterranean level.