

## Re-narrating as Missional Practice

‘You have heard it said... but I say unto you...’ Jesus was the master of narrative. More to the point, one of the most fundamental aspects of his earthly ministry was re-narrating people’s understanding of God, God’s mission, and their relationship to both. I would go so far as to argue that what most compelled people to follow, indeed, to bow the knee to Jesus as Lord and Messiah, was not the miracles he performed, the power he demonstrated, or even the future he promised, but the story he told and embodied.

This comes powerfully home in John 6 when, in the wake of a ‘hard teaching’ that was so offensive that many of Jesus’ disciples turned their backs on him, Jesus asks the Twelve, ‘You do not want to leave too, do you?’ To which Peter replies, ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life’. There was something in Jesus’ words, something about the reality he was narrating, which so gripped the Twelve that walking away had become simply unthinkable.

I see this same dynamic at play in the article, ‘The Light of Christ in Queensland,’ by Dean Phelan. The witness of God’s work in that story emerges from what I would call a commitment to re-narrating as missional practice. That is, after the pattern of Jesus, providing space, language, and strategic, invitational opportunity to reimagine the nature, shape, and trajectory of the missional narrative of which we are a part. In offering a theological reflection on Phelan’s article, I want to focus in on three key dimensions of re-narrating as missional practice: leadership, theology, and place.

### Leadership

I have never met Dean Phelan, but I can already tell you that I would follow him. Did you catch the most important line in the article? Here it is, ‘We needed to involve all key stakeholders in a process of healing – ending the divisions of the past and exploring the possibilities of a new beginning based on deep dissatisfaction with the way things had been, and a desire for a new future.’ The courage to recognize and name such a fractured, perhaps even embarrassing, reality is an amazing feat in and of itself, but the posture and skill required of leaders to engage it, is of incomparable significance.<sup>[1]</sup> As one who has the opportunity to engage with a wide variety of church leaders nationally, I can say without a moment’s hesitation that leaders of this stripe are in short supply.

We see reflected in the Queensland narrative something that was endemic to Jesus’ leadership – the inclination and ability to bring hostile people and groups together for conversation and reconciliation. As Jesus archetypally modeled, what is required for these efforts to have meaningful and lasting results is a kenotic orientation to leadership. It is this leadership posture, in which those in positions of influence work *among* and *within* as opposed to *above* and *beyond* the people and systems they feel called to, that creates both a context and a culture in which the Spirit’s leading can be discerned. We see in Jesus’ ministry as well as in this article that it is in humbly, yet bravely, navigating uncharted terrain that space is cleared for the emergence of new categories, imagination, and hope. And it is by these things that a new

narrative begins to take hold.

## **Theology**

As displayed in Phelan's article, the place and shape of leadership in re-narrating as missional practice is indispensable. At the same time, we bear witness to the reality that leadership is not itself the primary 'force' in the work of creating a new narrative for people to inhabit. Rather, God is the one we acknowledge as the primary agent in this act. Said another way, theology, understood not as contextually abstracted ideas about God, but as an embodied and incarnated knowing and pursuit of God, is both the animating force and the defining content of re-narration as a missional practice.

Jesus expresses as much when he says, 'This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled them' (John 6:65). Even in his divine personhood, Jesus is acknowledging that the best leadership – his very own – simply provides a context for divine encounter, which is what leads to the shaping of a new narrative. Something similar is at play in Phelan's story of God's work among the Church of Christ in Queensland. In identifying the Great Commandment, the Golden Rule, and the Great Commission as the foundation for their labors, theology played the decisive role in the assembled group's quest for a new unity and joint mission.<sup>[2]</sup> That is, a re-encounter with Christ and his call to a particular way of living together and for others under his Lordship as held forth in Scripture, and not a more conventional approach to organizational assessment and strategy (important as those things are), was identified as the necessary beginning place for a hopeful future.<sup>[3]</sup>

## **Place**

The final element of re-narration as missional practice is that of place. In both Old and New Testaments, 'place' is an inescapably crucial dynamic of God's mission. Eden, Egypt, Babylon, Nazareth, Jerusalem, Samaria... these are just a few of the places that defined the shape of God's mission in the Bible. Knowing God and discerning the shape of God's mission in particular places is related to what Lesslie Newbigin called 'the scandal of particularity.'<sup>[4]</sup> Our modern (Western) sensibilities are scandalized by the thought of the confining and limited nature of how God can be encountered in discrete contexts. Yet there is no other reality before us, which is the final element to highlight in Phelan's article.

As Jesus' teaching and ministry were intimately bound up with the particularities of the place he inhabited as Messiah, so too was the re-narration of God's mission among and through the Church of Christ in Queensland bound up with the particularities of the people and places involved. This is crucial – those involved in discerning the Spirit's leading did not concoct a disembodied or dis-placed plan to import onto their reality. Instead, they began with the realities as they existed on the ground and worked it out from there. The result was the development of new language (Kingdom Access Points), structures (SALT's), and responsibilities (MAP's) that garnered widespread buy-in as they were developed locally and indigenously. As the story bears out, these elements were both the produce of the work of re-narration that God was doing as well as the means of furthering it for the blessing of many.<sup>[5]</sup>

## Concluding Thoughts

I receive the story of the Church of Christ in Queensland as emblematic of the crossroads at which the broader Church in the West stands. In looking (again!) to Jesus, I believe we can see him engaged in what I have been calling re-narrating as a missional practice – the spiritual art of leading people and communities into new imaginations and thus realities. This article serves well as a case study for how organizations or churches, through kenotic forms of leadership, the centering of theological agency, and a commitment to the idiosyncrasies of their particular places, might seek to follow the pattern of Jesus in this regard.

[1] I highly recommend *Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix* by Edwin H. Friedman, (New York: Seabury Books, 2007) and *The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church to Reach a Changing World* by Alan Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk (San Fransisco, CA: Jossey Bass, 2006) for more on this subject.

[2] It would be enlightening to get a fuller picture of the group's process in arriving at a consensus on these texts. Regardless, it's important to note that the group discerned a starting place not of doctrinal unity (what we commonly believe), but of missional unity (what Jesus has called us to) – love of God and love of neighbor in the Great Commandment, love of the other in the Golden Rule, and a call to disciple the nations under the Lordship of Christ.

[3] For more on the central place of theology in helping people and groups develop and live into new narratives see, *Missional God, Missional church: Hope for Re-Evangelizing the West* by Ross Hastings (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012). and *The Continuing Conversion of the Church* by Darrell Guder (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans Pub, 2000).

[4] See Lesslie Newbigin, . *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*. Rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995)

[5] For more on the essential role of place in re-narrating as missional practice see, *The New Parish: How Neighborhood Churches are Transforming Mission, Discipleship, and Community* by Paul Sparks, Dwight Friesen and Tim Soerens (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), *No Home Like Place: A Christian Theology of Place* by Leonard Hjalmarson (Portland, OR: Urban Loft, 2014) and *Sidewalks in the Kingdom:: new Urbanism and the Christian Faith* by Eric Jacobsen (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2003).