

# Sampling Some Sermons

One of the tasks of my job is to preach sermons. I enjoy this ministry. It is both analytical and creative. It involves dwelling upon the deep things of God and his word to us in Scripture, and also upon the deep realities of the people whose faith, community, and lives we share. A preacher must allow the text to preach to himself first, and this is a deepening devotional exercise.

In recent times many of us preachers have had our sermons recorded, turned into mp3s, and placed online. It doesn't make us "internet preachers", but it is the "tape ministry" of a previous decade in current form. It also means that, for better or worse, our homiletical efforts are recorded for posterity.



I've recently had cause to review some of my past and present sermons. It is quite the educational experience! There are times for both cringing ("I said that?!") and delight ("Wow, I'd forgotten about that, that speaks to me now."). I've learned a lot from doing it and thought I'd share some thoughts:

For example:

Here is a very recent sermon from St. David's Cathedral. It is something of a "topical" sermon, as opposed to an strictly "expositional" one. It was part of an advent series on the "Signs of Faith" and drawing on the response of Mary to the announcement of the angel.

<http://briggs.id.au/jour/files/2015/01/20141221SignsOfFaithObedience.mp3>

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Like all Cathedral sermons, it's an "aim for 15-20 minute" timeslot and this went a little over. It is preached from within the confines of rather towering pulpit. There is no data projector or any other easily-appropriated form of visual aide. This means that the structure of the sermon hangs on oral cues. That's something I had to "re-learn" when I came to the Cathedral. Here's another example, more expositional in nature, looking at the Parable of the Talents in Matthew 25:

<http://briggs.id.au/jour/files/2015/01/20141116Matthew25ReturnOfTheKing.mp3>

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A Cathedral is an interesting place to preach. Sometimes up to 20% of the congregation are only there for one week, being tourists or short-term visitors to the city. There needs to be a balance of speaking to the regular congregation and the awareness of ongoing contact, with ensuring accessibility for those who are only there for the one experience. On some occasions, particularly the big Christmas and Easter services, you have to be almost like a "visiting preacher" and avoid over-familiarity. The next example is from a Christmas midnight service a couple of years ago. It had to be shorter, speak to a very very general audience, and definitely be on message about Jesus:

<http://briggs.id.au/jour/files/2015/01/20121224TheVoiceOfTheAngels.mp3>

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But I have not only preached in a Cathedral. I have also preached in the "rural town" context of North-West Tasmania.

And not in a pulpit, but in a school hall, a surf club room, and sometimes even outside in a park! In this context much longer, meatier "teaching times" were the order of the day.

It was a more intimate setting with more assumed familiarity

of both congregation and preacher. The homiletical structure could be communicated through visual cues on a data projector, and through peripatetic movements and gestures as wireless microphones allow. Here's a typical example from 2009, preached in the West Somerset Primary School hall. The slides that were used are here: pdf

<http://briggs.id.au/jour/files/2015/01/20090913-1Samuel16.mp3>

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## On Drooping and Tottering

Just a short reflection from one of those mornings when God seems distant and despondency seems close. I have learned over the years that such moments are cues to run towards Jesus, *no matter how much you don't feel like doing that*. And so I turned to where I'm up to in my readings, which happened to be Hebrews 12.



Hebrews 12 is all about how God in his love *disciplines* his people. It applies to times of trial, adversity, difficulty, despondency. “Endure trials for the sake of discipline,” it says, “God is treating you as children; for what child is there whom a parent does not discipline?” (Heb 12:7 NIV)

Which, in and of itself, can feel of no great immediate encouragement. Although I have come to know over the years that it is true, that “discipline always seems painful rather

than pleasant at the time, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it" (Heb 12:11 NIV), what does that mean for the immediate moment? That I should just wallow until it's over?

But Hebrews 12 *does* have an imperative in it, a true exhortation that hadn't really seized me before. It's in verses 12 and 13. Let me quote it using the Complete Jewish Bible (CJB) version, because it makes it very clear:

*So, strengthen your drooping arms, and steady your tottering knees; and make a level path for your feet; so that what has been injured will not get wrenched out of joint but rather will be healed. (Heb 12:12-13 CJB)*

This is an exhortation that looks towards the fruits of the discipline: Strengthen yourself, steady yourself, level off your path. These are both self-caring exhortations and looking-ahead and keep-moving exhortations. They are exhortations that recognise that the *hurt* and the *injury* of the season is real. Something has been *injured* (the NIV talks about that which has become *lame*) and now the task is to move forward in a way that will allow it to heal and not be wrenched out of joint and possibly permanently damaged.

The chapter then goes on to talk about avoiding bitterness and living in peace with one another: the exact sort of thing that would cause an injury to fester.

Today this is encouragement. Despondency can be real. But by God's grace it is not devoid of purpose. And there is a constructive task which is both valid and graspable: to *steady myself, move forward* and so embrace healing. God is good.

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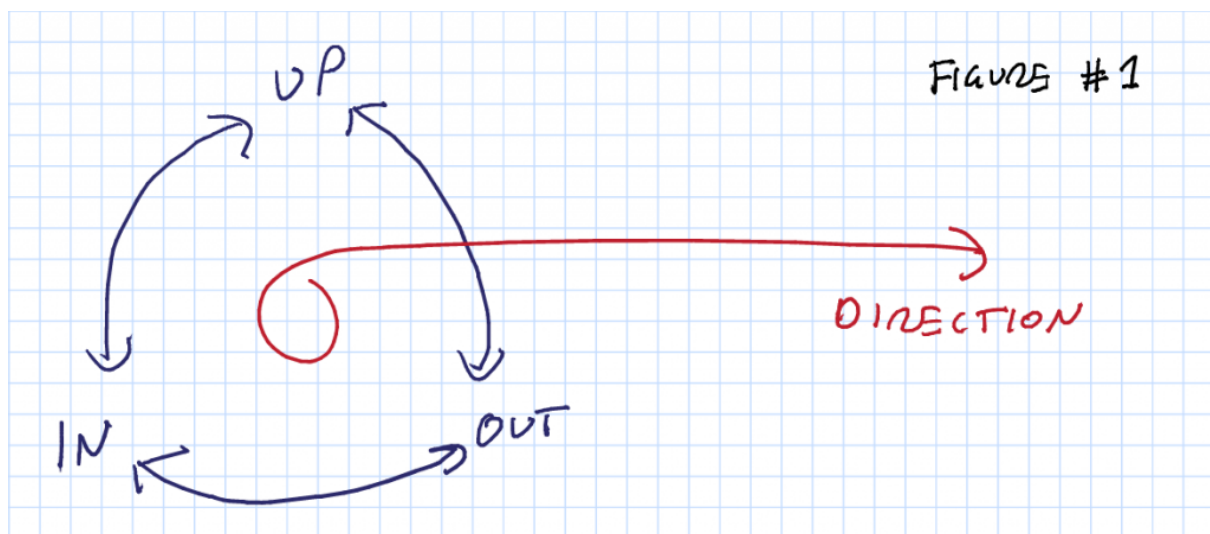
# Shapes of Movements

I guess there a bunch of ways to define a “movement.”

From the broad point of view, not every organisation or gathering of people is a movement. Some groups simply exist to achieve a task, they are *functional* or *operational*. Some groups simply exist for the sake of the members, they are *therapeutic* or *social*. Some groups simply exist around a common point of interest or way of seeing the world, they are *esoteric* or *idealist*.

Using language with which some will be familiar, some groups focus on “OUT” (functional), some groups focus on “IN” (social), some groups focus on “UP” (idealist).

But when a group can incorporate all three aspects, and combine them with a sense of innate *direction*, then **you have a movement that not only achieves a purpose, but moves itself, and those around them, towards a goal.** It’s UP-IN-OUT with DIRECTION.

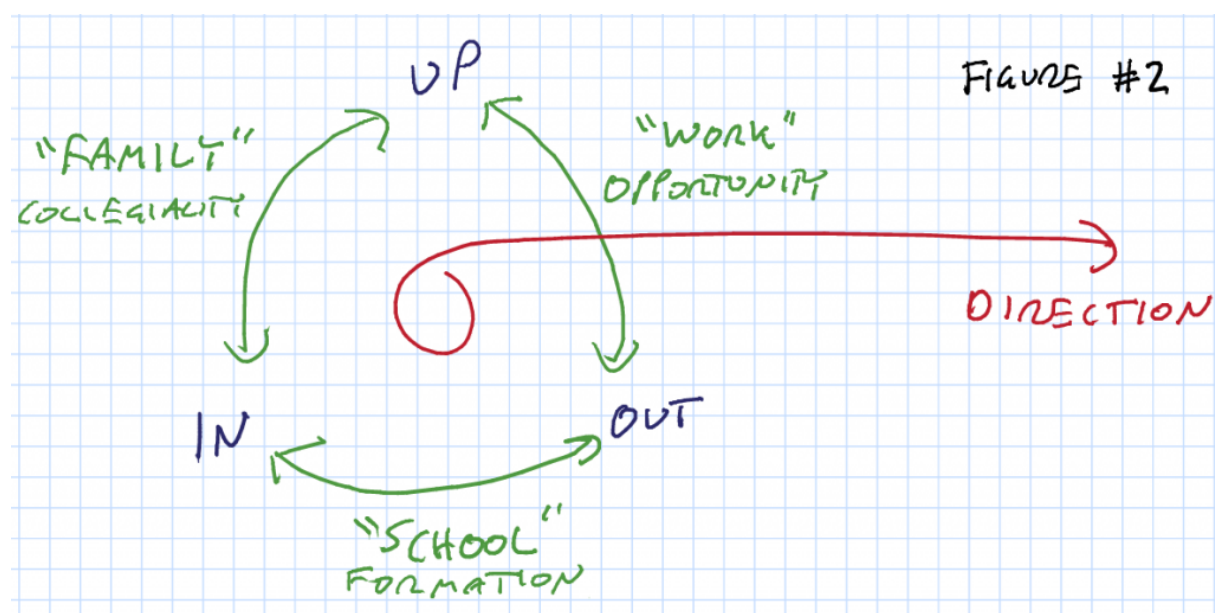


It’s these sort of groups, these movements, that change the world.

But from a closer point of view, they are also the groups to which motivated individuals choose to belong; and that's a belonging in a very deep sense. When people belong to a *group* they simply attend, contribute, and enjoy. When people belong to a *movement* there is an alignment of purpose and place by which that person offers a certain degree of investment and allegiance, and receives collegiality, formation, and opportunity to achieve.

This can also be expressed in "UP-IN-OUT" language, but this time in terms of the interplay between these aspects. And so:

- The interplay between "UP" and "IN" provides a context for *collegiality* where ideals and values interplay with the inward-life of the group. In other words, **the movement is partly a dynamic of "family."**
- The interplay between "UP" and "OUT" provides a context for *opportunity* where functional tasks are guided by the ideals and values. In other words, in the deepest sense of the word, **the movement is partly a dynamic of "work."**
- The interplay between "IN" and "OUT" provides a context for *formation*; part of caring for those within is to help them to grow to participate in the achievement. In other words, **the movement is partly a dynamic of "school."**



I see such a dynamic is at work in a variety of “movements” – from activist groups, political parties, through to football clubs and artistic collaborations. It’s why they are precious to people.

In my own experience, the movements that my family and I have belonged to have been Christian. Jesus is our direction, and therefore the focus of our “UP”, the centre of our “IN”, and the exemplar of our “OUT.” It’s the stuff of “your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.”

We can map out our life-experience by the movements that we have belonged to. On the outside they are mission agencies or dioceses. On the inside, we have experienced “family” dynamics within Christian community; we have experienced formational “school” dynamics, and rejoiced (and struggled) in the seizing of opportunities in the “work” dynamics. When you belong to such a movement it is life-giving. And it’s really hard to leave.

Sometimes movements don’t live up to the name. The “school” dynamic drops away and people are left unformed, un-nurtured.

The “family” dynamic drops away and people are trained up, dropped in it, and left alone. The “work” dynamic drops away, and you have nice mature people who do not do anything, or have the opportunity to do anything. Others throw in the towel and lose their sense of direction. Such movements need revitalisation, reformation, or perhaps to simply fade away.

For those of us who are looking ahead at the moment: it is a *movement* that we are looking for, to join or to grow. The process of growing/changing/starting a movement is the stuff for more thought. But I suspect this is true: it can’t be done alone; and it must be sown within a Christward direction.