

Mentoring, Spiritual Direction, or Discipleship

One of the most important dynamics in living churches is that of intentional one-on-one relationships that help individuals mature in their faith. We have our Sunday gathered worship times, and our small groups, and prayer triplets and things like that, but intentional personal *investment* is invaluable. Many of us can reflect on the individuals who have invested in us over the years, be it formally or informally; they are invariably God's gift to us.



These *investing* relationships, however, are not all alike. There are a number of words and phrases that we use to describe them. The three I want to pick up on here are “discipleship”, “mentoring”, and “spiritual direction”.

Understanding the differences between these is important. There is a lot of overlap, but the semantics informs the intention of the relationship. And the intention helps guide the expectations of those who are entering into it. It also allows each form of relationship to be valued in its own way.

Here, then, is how I would describe these three forms of investing relationships:

MENTORING: This is a broad category and the word has a high semantical overload. It is also the word that most readily overlaps with secular domains.

Broadly speaking, the mentoring relationship is a *reflecting* one. A mentor helps you to analyse and articulate what is already there. In mentoring, goals are clarified, actions are identified, resources are suggested. A mentor is someone to “bounce off”, to run ideas past, to seek

advice from, and to approach with questions. They willingly allow their experience to be tapped.

The process is driven and shaped by the person being mentored.

The mentor does not direct, and will not even provide accountability unless it is requested. The scope of mentoring can be quite small, focussing on professional life, or a particular issue or obstacle.

SPIRITUAL DIRECTION: The key to this form of relationship is in the phrase itself. It is *spiritual* in that it considers life holistically and deeply, and with particular attention to our relationship with God. It explores matters of conscience and calling, prayerfulness and petition.

It is *direction* in that the relationship is “directive.” This is not in the sense of a manipulation or domination, but in the sense that a doctor can be directive in pursuit of increased health for the patient. The direction is cooperative and always constructive.

The spiritual direction relationship is about *shared discernment*. The spiritual director assists with self-reflection but also speaks truth from a shared source of inspiration such as Scripture. The director can bring spiritual exercises, or directions to explore: forms of prayer, actions of repentance that need to be considered.

DISCIPLESHIP: For many “discipleship” is not easily grasped. It is sometimes an empty phrase that is used as a churchified version of “mentoring” or a hipper version of “spiritual direction.” However, the best framework for considering discipleship is “apprenticeship”, in the older sense in which a more experienced person shares *life* and *purpose* with an apprentice, not just vocational skills.

Jesus was a discipler. His disciples travelled with him, ate with him, argued with him, and learned from him. Only rarely did he exclude them from his activities and his time.

Discipleship is about *sharing life*.

The relationship is shaped by vulnerability and openness. A way of life, and necessary skills, are passed on through allowing the other to observe and participate in the inner life that is then expressed outwardly. Vocation is not just about skills but about foundational motivations and values, about *what moves and guides and what is done in response*.

Someone who is discipling needs to be willing to open their lives and explain and demonstrate what moves and shapes them.

They will find themselves challenged by the relationship, as much as they invest in the other person.

In this way the Christian discipler is not making their own disciples, but disciples of Jesus. They bring another into both the interior and exterior of how they follow Christ, and so bring others into that same "fellowship" where Jesus is the guide. Paul's "*imitate me as I imitate Christ*" expresses this dynamic. Good discipleship therefore doesn't create dependence, it creates *community at which Christ is the centre*.

Similarly, propagation is *inherent* to discipleship. The sharing of life includes the sharing of the discipling dynamic itself. Discipled people will find themselves discipling others, in their own way. There was wisdom in Jesus' ways, his discipling ended up founding a movement and changing culture.

I am heartened that the Church of England, and Anglicanism in general, is (re)embracing the language of discipleship.

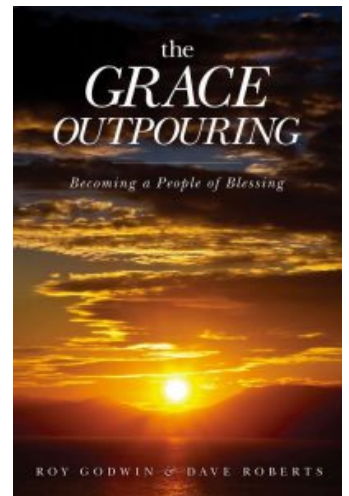
The General Synod report, *Developing Discipleship*, (written by Bp. Steven Croft, soon to be the Bishop of our Diocese of Oxford), approaches it with an understanding of the depths and breadths of what it means. Likewise, when we use the phrase we must realise that it is not about lipservice to a trend, nor even about advancing oneself: discipleship allows us to put all things, together, at Christ's feet. It is therefore

costly, requires courage, challenges our character, and changes church culture. We should not use the word lightly, but we should certainly pursue it.

Review: The Grace Outpouring

This book comes from Welsh retreat centre Ffald-y-brenin, but that place, and author, Roy Godwin, are not the point.

Here's something from the book, in Roy's words, that gets to the heart of the real issue for me:



A number of years ago I felt a cry rising up in my inmost being – “There has to be more than this.” As I remembered my dreams of what living as a child of God would be like, there was that cry again. There has to be more than this. I was stirred by memories of great days in the past when God had seemed so close, but that’s where they were – in the past. Oh God, there must be more than this.

Looking at church initiated the same cry. *There is so much good, so many signs of blessing in many local churches and fellowships, but looking more broadly at the national scene raised the question “Is this really all that the Father has in mind for the bride of his Son?” (pp180-181, emphasis mine)*

This book taps into a divine sense of dissatisfaction. I don't think it's unique to our time and place; I see it echoed

in the lives of many Christian saints, both historical and contemporary. It's a dissatisfaction that is eschatological in nature (*Romans 8:22-23*) and speaks to the sense that until our Lord returns there is still more gospel work to be done.

The Great Commission to go and make disciples remains in place.

In our experience, Gill and I have encountered people and places that are entirely satisfied with the status quo. Any dissatisfaction is a commiseration about the good old days rather than a cry for more. This is a dry place to be.

But for those who are dissatisfied the next question, of course is "What do we do with it?" How do we act on it? We have seen a variety of responses. All are well-intentioned, but some are problematic. The essence of the problem is this tension: in order to get good things done we take control, but nothing will satisfy if we do it in with and for ourselves.

We've seen it in mission agencies where the dissatisfaction leads to impatience, lack of care, vision without process, and ineffectiveness. We've seen it in congregations where that dissatisfaction turns into yet another program which is an attempt to scratch the itch so as to return to comfort, or prove worth, or not seem lazy, or simply "do what good churches should do." We've both been driven in these sort of ways. It's a frustrating place to be.

There's a difficult tension at the heart of an effective ecclesial spirituality – to be dissatisfied, stirred, motivated, urgent, expectant; and let God be God and *build through us*, not in spite of us. It isn't quietist or passive – things get still get done. But it *is* built upon a foundation of prayer, and being attentive to God's Word and the providential promptings of His Spirit.

The Grace Outpouring hits us at the sweet spot of that tension. It promotes the dissatisfaction, it stirs us to

action, and so it pivots us to turn to prayer, expectant prayer.

Roy, and co-writer Dave Roberts, do this simply by sharing the story of Ffald-y-brenin. Yes there's some explanation and some reasonable theologising and all the other things that get a point across, but in the end they just want to share what God has been doing. Dave writes in his foreword:

...as people who model our lives on a storyteller, we're best advised to do as he did and tell the stories of what God has done. So we invite you to join us as this story unfolds. We'll draw out principles and go to the root sources in Scripture, but we hope that what you read will help paint pictures on the canvas of your imagination that will allow you to be provoked by the Holy Spirit to prayer, compassion, and a mind-set that desires to bless others. (p14)

I can't do justice to the story here, but it truly does creatively provoke.

Along the way we do encounter some of the definitive Ffald-y-brenin experiences. To consider two of them:

Blessing: In the story Roy shares how his was initially an "accidental" tradition – to speak a blessing over all those who come to Ffald-y-brenin. To be a recipient of it is profound. Gill and I experienced this first-hand when we travelled to the centre a few weeks ago; tired and exhausted from a long day of travel and some of the complexities and perplexities of life we were shown to our room, and then to the chapel, where life-giving utterly-relevant personal words were spoken over us in Christ's name. I hadn't read the book before we went; I wasn't expecting it! It set us on course for a deep and meaningful time with God.

We don't always know what to do with "blessing." In some popular thinking blessings are almost like magic, talismanic

words; this is usually unhelpful, and inhibits access to the gospel. For others, "blessing" is simply an indistinct form of prayer. Roy is right when he distinguishes blessing from intercession; as he points out to offer a blessing in Christ's name is a bold, daring, and necessarily humble action of someone who takes seriously the priesthood of believers and the ambassadorial nature of the Christian vocation, and seeks to exercise it with generous care. It may not be a rigorous theological treatise, but I admire the thoughtfulness:

We're invoking the very character of God himself into the lives of those we pray for. They're getting a foretaste of being adopted into God's family. We're opening a door for them to glimpse something of the kingdom of God. God is saying, "I'm going to bless you with everything I've blessed my children with." (p36)

There is something right and properly kerygmatic in turning our holy dissatisfaction into words of blessing, to articulate, to *proclaim* the creative life-giving heart of our Lord and Saviour specifically, personally, and locally.

House of Prayer / New Monasticism: In the story a Welsh Christian retreat centre becomes a "House of Prayer" and Roy expands and expounds this by referring not only to the daily rhythm of prayer that is exercised at the centre, but also to the outward-looking movements that are as near as hospitality and acts of service, as far as intercessions for nations and global movements, and as deep as the revivals of the Celtic and modern Welsh church. I reflected earlier about how this compares to our English context.

Gill and I have brought the daily rhythm of prayer into our home and are seeking to share it in some form with our church.

The daily reminder, using words of Scripture to cause us to bring to mind the characteristics and promises of a faithful God, has blessed us. We have somewhere to give that holy

dissatisfaction a proper beginning, a turning to God, a daily repentance, a discipline of intercession and expectation.

Towards the end of the book Roy connects the dots with the amorphous movement that is becoming known as the "New Monasticism." It has deep and ancient roots of course. In current manifestations it invokes simplicity, purity and accountability in ways that express the holy dissatisfaction in profoundly counter-cultural ways. They are ways that tear down middle class idols.

...Local House of Prayer involves sacrifice, just as it did in the Old Testament times. Among our offerings we will bring our worship (not necessarily singing) and the spirit of the community around us. We will need to set aside our rights, judgmental attitudes, pride, and self-righteousness. We will lay down our bodies and our patterns of thinking as living sacrifices for God's glory and his purposes. (pp167-168)

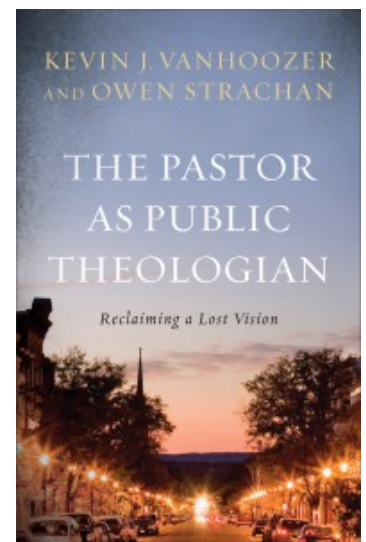


After returning from our recent visit to Ffald-y-brenin, Gill and I have been pondering these things. What I have read of here, and what we have encountered has informed our dissatisfaction. It has renewed our passion for God's Word and Spirit, and a determination to rely on him, rather than to burn-out in our own strength.

These things have been stimulated by our visit, and we will return. But it's not about the place, or the person. It's about doing the hard yards of following God. Of seeking him in the dissatisfaction, not collapsing it, not running away from it, but facing the pain and patience of it, and actively pursuing his way; so that at the end of it all he is glorified as God's people are blessed to be a blessing.

Review: The Pastor as Public Theologian

Like churches themselves, there's a tendency for those of us in pastoral ministry (ordained and lay) to become self-referential; the aim of a "good" pastor is just to be good at it, for some insipid definition of "good" and indistinct definition of "it." As an older priest once told me when I was young and green when I asked about his aims in ministry, it was simply "to survive, Will, to survive."



I know what he means now. Sometimes the vocation becomes merely a lurch of survival from Sunday to Sunday on a merry-go-round of meetings and rotas. It can look like duty and diligence and all manner of virtuous things, but it's hardly the stuff of a world-changing gospel.

All of us in ministry need an occasional reordering, a return to a sense of vocation that cuts across the self-referential malaise and gets us looking Jesus-ward again.

Vanhoozer's and Strachan's *The Pastor as Public Theologian* is a book for such a reordering. It aims to "reclaim a lost vision" and does so in a way that is not just timely but also (as Eugene Peterson claims on the cover) *urgent*.

Personally speaking, it has been a long time since I have read a book throughout which I have exclaimed "Yes!" and "That's right!" and "This! Absolutely this!"

The authors begin by decrying the tendency to dislocate

theology from the work of on-the-ground ministry by relegating it to the academy. The separation of “practical” and “theological” is truly a false dichotomy. With my background in both Pentecostal and Reformed streams it’s one that I have flailed against. It is why I have sometimes described my framework for ministry as that of an “applied theologian.” Application and theology go together.

We are reminded that the straitjackets of this dichotomy are still prevalent. Expectations on the pastor take the shape of counsellor, business analyst, sociologist, manager, entertainer, or educator. It’s these expectations that creep into board meetings, “action planning,” and even (if they happen at all) times of prayer.

The book has been edited to include a number of short “pastoral perspective” chapters from other contributors. One of them, Gerhald Hiestand, wonderfully describes this malaise by recognising that pastors are often “swimming against the current of the atheological swamp that is contemporary evangelicalism.” (p29).

In this way, Vanhoozer and Strachan are not just writing to pastors, they are also writing to *churches*. The reordering they stimulate is not just about church leaders, but about the nature and shape of the church itself.

Theology is in exile and, as a result, the knowledge of God is in ecclesial eclipse. The promised land, the gathered people of God, has consequently come to resemble a parched land: a land of wasted opportunities that no longer cultivates disciples as it did in the past. (pp1-2)

We are writing to you, churches, because you need to be encouraged to rethink the nature, function, and qualifications of the pastors whom you appoint to serve you... We also think you need to reclaim your heritage as a theological community created by God’s Word, and sustained by

God's Spirit, and to remember that you are part of God's story, not that God is part of your story (pastor-theologians ought to be able to help you with this!). (p2)

The key phrase used throughout is the double-barrelled "pastor-theologian." It usefully interacts with their fundamental concerns about the false dichotomy. But it is an awkward phrase with no clear scriptural anchor point. There are some other words which might better serve the purpose.

For instance, **the work of the "pastor-theologian" is the work of a missionary.**

The word "missionary" has its own baggage, of course, but it makes clear that whenever Vanhoozer and Strachan describe a pastor-theologian in action, they actually end up dealing with missiological issues. They end up discussing the demonstration and application of the gospel in the shifting culture of the real world. This is necessarily *theological* work; how else do you apply the gospel but by first understanding it? And it is also *countercultural* work; how else do you apply the gospel but by finding the touchstone points where it pushes back and has something different to say?

Missionary language would have helped the authors as they show us the challenges of this work. Missionaries understand the difficulty of articulating and demonstrating the application of the gospel in the real world. They know that the countercultural gospel, when filled with the theological richness of Christ's death and resurrection, will always be resisted, passively or otherwise.

Make no mistake: it is not easy to go against the cultural grain, and in a real sense, the faithful pastor will always be a countercultural figure: what else can pastors be when they proclaim Christ crucified and then ask disciples to imitate their Lord by dying to self? (p3)

The flock of Jesus Christ is threatened not by lions, bears, or wolves (1 Sam 17:34-35) but by false religion, incorrect doctrine, and ungodly practices – not to mention “principalities and powers” (Eph. 6:12 KJV). Consequently, pastors who want to be out ahead of the congregations must be grounded in the gospel and culturally competent. Public theologians help people understand the world in which they live and, what is more important, how to follow Christ in everyday as well as extraordinary situations. (p23)

In this aspect of pastor-theologian as missionary I particularly valued Melvin Tinker’s short contribution which is a missiological reflection with respect to the UK. Reflecting on a “Babylonian captivity” in English culture, he describes symptoms that I am coming across in my current context:

The nature of the “captivity” shows itself... by relativism in public and private ethics, valuing people by their looks and work, secularization with the marginalization of religion in public life (“privatization”). Taken together, the Christian certainly feels like an alien and is alienated. The gap between what is believed and how it can be practiced (without guidance) can reach cavernous proportions in people’s minds, and so the temptation to capitulate to the world by privatizing religion is strong. (p62)

Secondly, it would have been more helpful for “pastor-theologian” to be understood in terms of the five-fold ministry, and particularly with regard to the apostolic.

The five-fold ministry of Apostle, Prophet, Evangelist, Pastor and Teacher is unpacked by Paul in Ephesians 4. These are gifted roles which have the purpose of “building up the body” to maturity in Christ. Vanhoozer and Strachan explicitly apply the same function to the pastor-theologian who has the work of “growing persons, cultivating a people” (p125).

I would have thought it would have therefore been more helpful to interact closely with these five offices. Rather, although the teaching, pastoral, prophetic, and evangelistic work of the pastor-theologian are all teased out at one point or other, it is an *implicit* correlation.

Instead, they fill the phrase “pastor-theologian” theologically by exploring its ambassadorial nature which “participates” (p48) in the “prophet, priest and king” (p39) offices of Christ’s new covenant ministry. This is helpful, but in sum it most readily describes an *apostolic* form of ministry; the apostolic ministry is inherently representational of Christ (“as the Father sent me, so I send you”, John 20:21) and, in practice, informs, guides and demonstrates the missiological exercise of the other four.

Apostolic ministry is also marked by a *kenotic* (self-emptying) character that *carries* the church, in her suffering and adversity. This is a characteristic that Vanhoozer and Strachan pick up and apply to the “pastor-theologian”:

Here is the central paradox: the pastor is a public figure who must make himself nothing, who must speak not to attract attention to himself but rather to point away from himself – unlike most contemporary celebrities. The pastor must make truth claims to win people not to his own way of thinking but to God’s way. The pastor must succeed, not by increasing his own social status but, if need be, by decreasing it. (pp13-14)

The prophet did not generally minister from a position of earthly power but rather by entering into the people’s suffering. (p46)

The pastor images the old-covenant priest by modeling for the church a set-apart life. This righteous model is designed to inspire, edify, and if necessary critique the people – all for the sake of encouraging them to pursue the Lord with zeal

so that they too may be transformed. The pastor is no more (or less) righteous than the people. Ministry does not scrub away personal imperfections and weaknesses, but rather magnifies them, drawing pastors to first lay claim to divine grace before ministering it to their people. (p51)

Pastoral leadership ought to march to the beat of a different world-defying drummer, participating in Christ's kingship by personifying the cruciform wisdom of God. (p54)

In the end the authors rest the theological task (and hence its doxological, liturgical, didactic, and pastoral expressions) of the pastor-theologian on something fundamentally epistemological and Christ-centred. It is a "ministry of reality" (p108), a communication "in word and deed, in person and work, [of] the reality of the new resurrection order: the renewal of human being" (p107) and of culture. Whatever really is, is in Christ, and is therefore *known* in him.

There is a touching point for this in my own Anglican context. Vanhoozer and Strachan's reordering of vocation brings us continually back to consider time again that which is in Christ. Our ministry is formed and shaped by what is in Christ because what is in Christ is fundamental reality, an epistemological fixed-point in space-time. Moreover, "Scripture alone provides an authoritative account of what is in Christ (p114)." A shared scriptural epistemology is therefore essential not only to the building up of the church (because what is in Christ is the rich common ground of true *koinonia*) but consequentially essential to the unity and collegiality of pastors themselves. As I have reflected on in other places, this is at the heart of current Anglican disagreements.

It is clear that I resonate with the vision that Vanhoozer and Strachan attempt to reclaim. After all, this blog is called

“Journeyman,” which also alludes to a “jack-of-all-existential-trades” (p104) vocation! I’d be happy for that to mean for myself, to be “in some sense a public theologian, a peculiar sort of intellectual, a particular type of generalist.” (p15) I am with Kynes (another minor contributor to the book) who recognises that theology is not dead, but living. Its appeal is both affective and cognitive. It is “truth, goodness, and *beauty*” (p134).

This beauty excites me, it drives me to prayer. It lingers when I think of the society and community in which I am now placed. It is the beauty of our Saviour who gave himself for this world. It is the beauty of God’s rag-tag people. It is the beauty of the new life to which this world is called. It is worth a lifetime of effort.