

The Dirt of Deeper Change

I remember a time when Gill and I moved into a new home. It had a backyard! With my farmboy zeal I got stuck into turning the *yard* into a *garden*. Some things were already in place – mature fruit trees, a tap for the hose. Some things had to go



– obvious things like weeds and rubbish and rusty forgotten tools, but also some healthy plants and shrubs that were simply in the wrong place; they had had their time and now their fruit was waning, their shade was blocking the sun, and their suckers were running amok. After a hard days labour with all manner of tools and a lot of sweat, digging and hoeing and raking, I proudly revealed the outcome to my young wife.

She was not impressed. “Well done,” she said with a subtle friendly hint of mockery, “you’ve made some... dirt!”

We had discussed the grand plan, of course – how we could have new fruit trees and a veggie patch. But some of the in-between steps were unclear to her, and also to me. I couldn’t have predicted that a pipe was in the way of where I had plans for a plum tree. Some new beds needed borders, and we’d simply run out of money to line them with something nice; rough outlines from pruned branches would do for now. And of course, I’d been delayed in starting; the season was getting on and some of what we hoped to plant would need to wait for next year.

The lush garden was going to happen! It would grow in its own good time. It would shift and develop as new ideas came along. It would become something like what we had thought it would be, and a whole lot different as well.

But, for now, I had just made dirt.

The metaphor in all this, I hope, is obvious. There are ways of leading organisations (and my experience is with churches) which are akin to *maintaining* a garden. They are effective and necessary: rotating crops, mowing lawns, pruning in season, timing the harvest, and even making improvements and modifications.

But deeper changes are changes of *identity*; they shift things, they are akin to **making a yard into a garden**.

These changes tackle the deeper questions of who we actually are, and the essence and application of our mission and calling. On the ground it often comes with a sense of *stagnancy* ("everything is always the same") or of *urgency* ("we're not doing what we need to be doing, we're wasting ourselves"). This leads us to re-examining the old, both embracing and letting go of the things we've inherited. It leads us to dreaming some dreams about what might be, even as we realise that it might not turn out exactly as planned. It allows significant change.

And early on in the process, it can often look like all we do is just make dirt.

Leadership at this point can seem fraught and complex. It requires *assertion* because some things must be done away with. It requires *courage*, because some of the "systems" of the organisation will begin to fail or fall as they no longer have their normal referents. It requires *vision*, because what is imagined must be first and foremost. The temptation is to retreat from the plan: to patch things up by making adjustments to a rota, or tweaking a job description. But this will not be enough, the leader must show the way to "go into the soil and die" in order to live again.

At this point, a leader may feel that everything is collapsing around them. And they will need to grieve and mourn along

with everyone else. Because things are less predictable, they will often have to do a lot *themselves*, or with a close core team who can hold to the sense of identity and call that has motivated the change in the first place. Others, who knew what to do the way things were, may feel idle or unwanted.

They will need to be encouraged to have a well-earned fallow season, and to then find the place where they flourish in the new.

Slowly, as green shoots appear – in God's timing not ours – the time of dirt fades away. Amorphous plans begin to take a shape in reality. And the systems for maintaining and *enjoying* the new thing will come more easily.

But you can't go directly there.

Sometimes, it looks like you've sweated hard, and worked yourself to the bone, just to make dirt.

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Holiness, Discipleship

Worship,

Have you noticed our tendency to *mechanise* the human and Christian experience of life?



Back in our church planting days, we noticed that much of the relevant theory viewed a new church as a *mechanism* which could

be adjusted by programs and processes, techniques and good management. These things weren't bad ideas but they were more suited to expanding the *existing*, effective at cloning the sending church and often doing little towards connecting with the disconnected.

It was more useful to think of the church truly as a *plant*. Leadership would thus turn towards more organic things such as nurture and care, and a *responsiveness* that recognised that ultimately we were reliant on Someone Else to provide the growth.

One of the current buzzwords in church life at the moment is *discipleship*. The tendency to mechanise has accompanied it: discipleship is conflated with programs and processes, techniques and good guidance. Again, these things have value, but they primarily help individuals and churches expand and improve the *current, existing* rhythms of life. They are less effective in fathoming new depths of ourselves and how we are called by God. At the extreme of it, we equate "discipleship" with spiritualised self-help programs that actually hinder our call towards a richer faith, a deeper transformative trust in God.

The growing wisdom that counters this tendency places discipleship on the foundation of *worship*. This is a thoroughly biblical idea. Everything from the Ten Commandments to the Lord's Prayer and the prevailing narratives in between acknowledges first and foremost God's Sovereignty, Lordship, and the simple *worthiness* of his adoration. It is the beginning of our response to him. Passages like Romans 12:1-2 demonstrate how the "living sacrifice" of discipleship adheres to worship.

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed

by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.

Discipleship derives from worship.

But finding the foundation of worship doesn't totally avoid our waywardness. After all, forms of worship in every tradition can also be treated mechanically and become emptied and disconnected. In the extreme, we are warned in these last days to be aware of actions that *"having a form of godliness but denying its power."* (It strikes me as less and less odd as I get older and more cynical that the list of blatant vices that precede this statement in 2 Timothy 3 could ever have been mistaken as a "form of godliness").

What, then, does our worship draw upon?

To be sure, it is a grace of God, a manifestation of the Holy Spirit that causes us to groan and cry out *Abba Father!*. Here, as Romans 8 shows us, is a point of connection, the "Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God." This is an organic, relational, responsiveness. Our worship draws upon a childlike reaching out to God. It is the same spirit as Psalm 42:

*As the deer pants for streams of water,
so my soul pants for you, my God.
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When can I go and meet with God?*

Such a thirst for God in worship is much more than a transcendent experience or a moment of inner awareness. The framework of the Old Testament places this worship in the dust of every day, and a longing for a Torah-shaped shalom. To thirst for God, is to thirst for his *holiness*, to have his *righteousness written on our hearts*.

Discipleship derives from worship which derives from a thirst for holiness.

The renewed pursuit of discipleship is a welcome development within the church. There is a recognition that it isn't the pursuit of programs, but of cultural change. As we fathom the depths of what that means, we find the pure springs of God's glory. How do we bring discipleship to his church? We need to thirst for him first, and hunger after his righteousness.

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Deep Joy

I'm currently reflecting on suffering as an essential, unavoidable part of what it means to live and follow Jesus.

This song by Page CXVI renders it one of the most profound ways that I've seen and heard.

Now, how to express it in dry, non-musical, words...