

Dying to Grow and The Point of It All

Christmas can be the time substance gets lost beneath frantic frivolities. Pastors, vicars, and ordinary church folk enter into the annual tradition of trying to talk about deep things (incarnation, salvation, Jesus!) without sounding twee or spoiling the mince pies and mulled wine.



It's not just a Christmas predicament, though. The same thing is there, more subtly, throughout the rest of the year. Church life is *always* full of frantic frivolities. There may be less tinsel, but the dynamic remains. We can lurch from Sunday to Sunday. The buzz of activities can be a pervasive background. Our Christmas "church gigs" have an intensity about them; we invest in them, advertise them, and are glad when we are rewarded with the right sort of numbers. But that only amplifies what is already present: our drive to perform and get growing results. Throughout the year, in the midst of the mist of religious supply and demand, we try to talk about deep things, without sounding twee or spoiling things.

I'm not sure it's working that well.

I know I have become wary of activity and busyness.

It's not that I'm into passivity or quietism. I rejoice in the sense of *flow* when a community acts, seeks, worships together. When brothers and sisters are in unity and purpose... well, the presence of Christ is almost tangible. Even as I write this, I can hear the sounds and smell the smells wafting up the stairs from the meal that is being prepared in our downstairs church hall. It's an excellent *activity* with a sense of flow, a weekly expression of hospitality and care, and one of the

highlights of my week.

But I also know what it's like when church activities are not like that: when doing is about duty and not much more, and movement is a going around in circles, a spinning of our wheels. This is when we do things *only* because we did them last year. This is when new opportunities are met with a pang of cynicism: "We've done that, we tried that, that just feels like yet more work." When we take things deep and try to reconnect with the point of it all, suddenly the words sound hollow, disconnected, echo-like. We drown in the shallows.

When it's like that, **it's worth listening to Jesus.**

Lately I've been moved to lay aside all my carefully curated church growth strategies and reflect on the words of Jesus in Matthew 16.

Famously, **he has his own church growth church strategy.** It is founded on Peter's confession of Jesus as Lord: "*Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and **on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.***"

More infamously, Peter tries to take control of this building project. He refuses to countenance the thought of the Messiah laying down his life, and counsels the King of Kings to choose a different path. As Jesus points out, he is moved by "human concerns." Jesus rebukes him and includes this injunction: "*Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. **For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.***"

In Luke 17, the same words are echoed. This time, it is not about the *foundations* of the church, but the finishing touches at the point of our Lord's return: "*It will be just like this on the day the Son of Man is revealed. On that day no one who*

*is on the housetop, with possessions inside, should go down to get them. Likewise, no one in the field should go back for anything. Remember Lot's wife! **Whoever tries to keep their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life will preserve it.***"

How's that for a church growth strategy? **Whoever tries to keep their life will lose it!**

This has led me to two conclusions:

Firstly, this is a key to our frantic activism, at Christmas time or any time else. So often, we are scrambling to not "lose our life;" we do things to keep from demise. Take any church activity as an example: a Sunday gathering, a carol service, a bible study, an advertising campaign, a diocesan restructure. If it exists as an attempt to justify our existence, prove our relevance, deflect our decline... then we are full of "human concerns" and we are in the way. Often the best thing to do is to cease that activity, or shut something down.

But if those same church activities exist to give ourselves away, for the sake of Jesus... they flow and bring forth life. They become *deep*, acts of sacrificial worship, reflections of God's grace, of love to the local community, of sharing our very selves one with another. They encapsulate something precious, the essence of the Kingdom of God.

The same activities can either be a clinging to life (and losing it), or a giving of life for the sake of Christ (and finding it). This is the paradox of Christian leadership towards true church growth: How do you build yourself up by giving yourself away? How do you generate something without slipping into empty activism? My thoughts have taken me here:

Secondly, it lifts our eyes towards the ends, not the means. The big word to describe this is "teleological" – from the Greek word *telos* meaning "end" or "point" or "goal." We need

to be *teleological* and look to our end, to the point of it all.

The writer to the Hebrews has the sense of it when he exhorts us to “run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith” (Hebrews 12:1-12). Paul has a similar motivation when he “sets his eyes upon the prize” (Philippians 3:14). Both speak of activity and perseverance, but the vision is towards the goal. **The goal is Jesus.**

We need a teleological approach to *mission*. When we think about mission, we quickly go to the activities (evangelistic activities, community engagement etc.) or desired outcomes (increased attendance, more activity). This is a focus on the *means*. **The Scriptures look first to Jesus.**

In Hebrews 2 or 1 Corinthians 15, for instance, we see the goal, the *telos*, of mission. It is *not*, firstly, about church numbers, or even social justice, it is about the glorification of Jesus. *Everything* flows from that. “He must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet,” Paul says. Psalm 8 is used in Hebrews 2 to say much the same thing about a “Son of Man” who is “made a little a lower than the angels” only to be “crowned with glory and honour” with “everything under his feet.” We find justice, we find salvation, we find grace in that truth, and nowhere else.

This gives the focus of mission. The point of mission is the rule of Christ, the honour of Christ, the glorification of Jesus. **True worship is mission. True mission is worship.** This is the point. This is the goal. This is our *telos*. If we don’t do it in the name of Jesus, we will end up doing it in the name of ourselves; we will end up clinging to our life, and so losing it.

For sure, those mission activities are not a waste. Delve into Hebrews 2 and you will see them find their place in the light

of Christ's supremacy: Jesus is glorified when his people glorify him. This happens when his people are sanctified and set free from the power of sin and death. Therefore, evangelism and outreach are a means of our mission. Pastoral care and discipleship activities are a means of our mission. Confession and repentance and contrition are a means of our mission. But they are, by definition, not an end in and of themselves. But be aware, we can do all these things in a self-facing frantic way, and so lose ourselves.

Our diocese happens to face an uncertain 2020. It's not alone; the pressure to perform, and survive, and to save ourselves is mounting on the declining Western church. We can cling to ourselves, or we can "lose ourselves" in the truth of Jesus, reigning over all things. We give ourselves to him. We trust him. We repent. We worship. We adore. We devote. We give ourselves to that end. We give ourselves to that goal. We give ourselves and so find ourselves... in Jesus, our Lord.

Merry Christmas.

Conquering for the Commuter

A moment of reflection from this morning's drive while listening to Christy Nockels' *Healing is In Your Hands*:

Amongst the lyrics are echoes of Romans 8:35-39

No mountain, no valley

*No gain or loss we know
Could keep us from Your love*

*No sickness, no secret
No chain is strong enough
To keep us from Your love...*

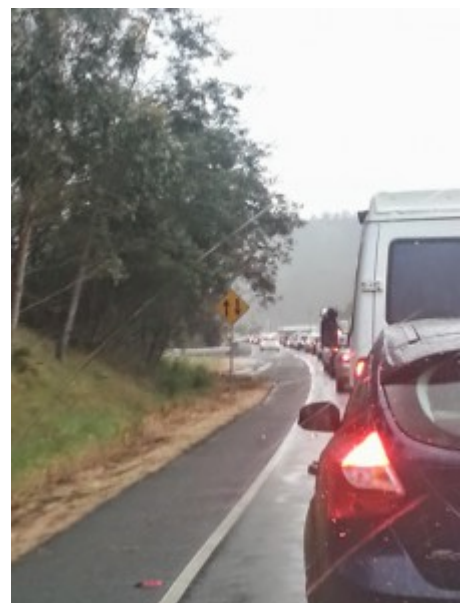
*In all things we know that
We are more than conquerors
You keep us by Your love*

Romans 8:35-39 reads:

35 Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? 36 As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered."

37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 38 For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (ESV)

It's a passage that I know well. It's one of my favourites and has been a source of comfort for me when the emotions of the day feel like loneliness, anxiety, or even abandonment.



The phrase that struck me today is this: **"We are more than conquerors."**

It's one of those phrases that has what I call "teleological significance." It speaks to our *purpose*, our ambition, our direction, our goal. There's two facets to this:

The first recognises that what we observe in and around us in the world is a form of *conquering*. I see Islamic extremists beheading Christians; they are trying to *conquer* the world with their expression of Islam. I see areas of my own society, the Western World, which is blindly slipping into intolerant impositions that gives little value to freedom of conscience; it's another form of attempted conquering. It has ever been the way of the world. This should not surprise us.

The natural response is fear. What does the future look like? Will I and my children and my children's children be safe? To be safe, we look to *win*. We *fight* back. We use the same sword as what we perceive is against us: we spin and tear down, we demolish people as well as ideas, we demonise, we hound, we yell; we try to conquer.

The second facet recognises the reality: we are more than conquerors. And our safety and security rests not on the ways and woes of what is around us, but upon the love of God in Jesus Christ. The Kingdom of God is not headed by a weakened or sin-wracked king, but by the one who has conquered even death. The foundation of our ultimate citizenship is sure, as is the certainty of it's future. God is the God of history, do you think he has abandoned this part of it?

And on that basis we face the conquering hordes (whoever or whatever they might be), not with fear, but in love-filled confidence. We speak and act on truth with our confidence not in ourselves, but in the love of God. We apply ourselves to *his* purpose. We *invest ourselves* in *his* loving works. We seek to capture every thought that's floating through the

social conscience and reimagine it in the light of the fact that God is actually real, and Jesus has actually risen and inaugurated the life of a renewed world. *He* is so much more than any pretentious conqueror. And we rest and work and have our being in *him*.

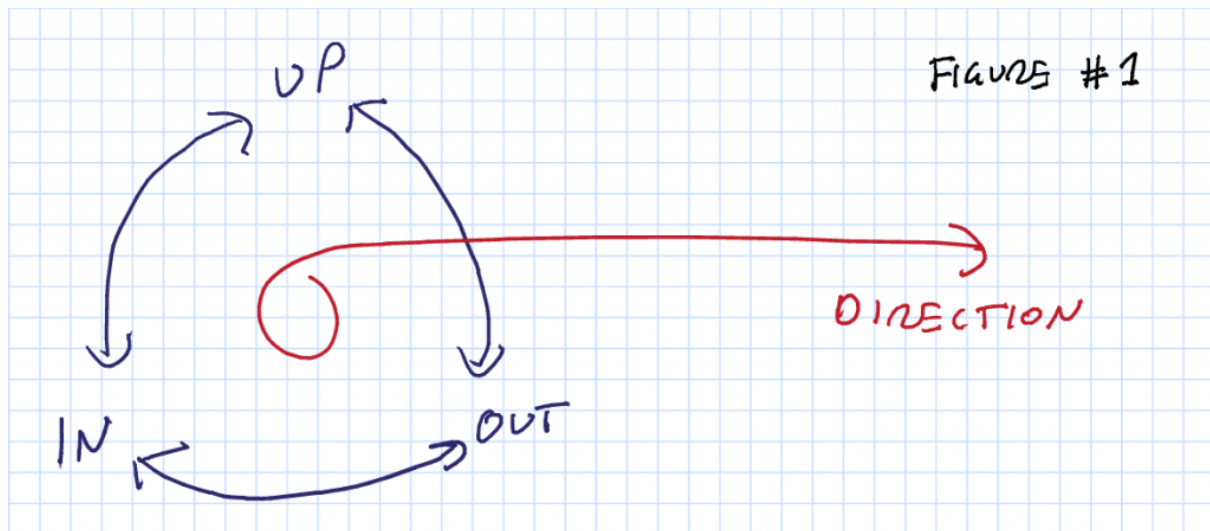
Shapes of Movements

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.



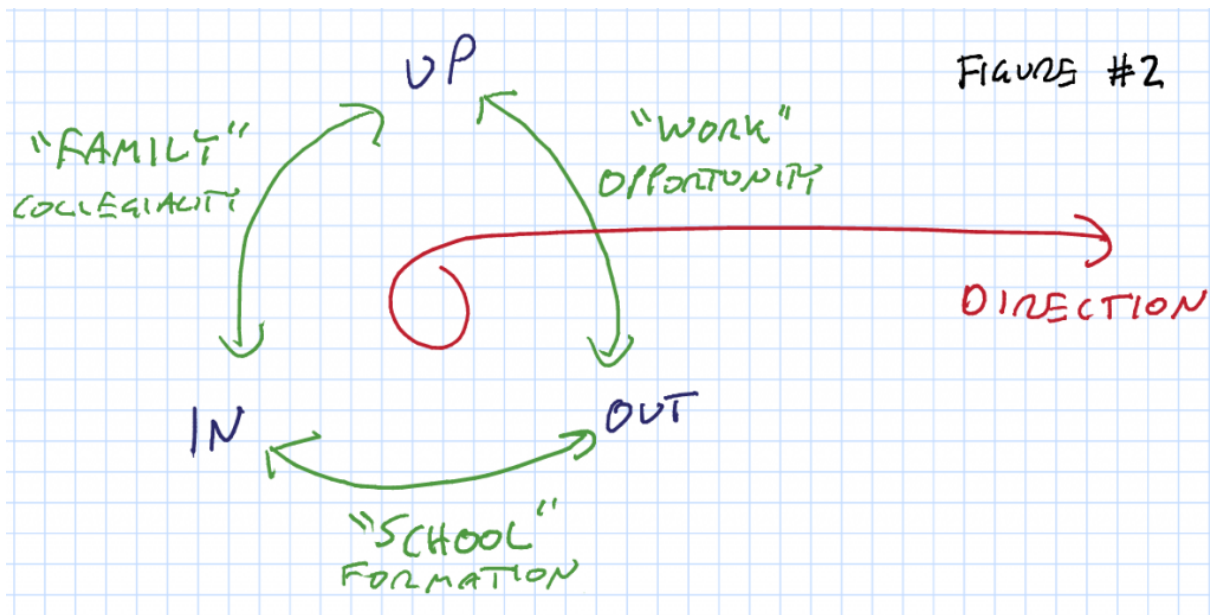
It's these sort of groups, these movements, that change the world.

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.