

EXTRACTS AND THOUGHTS FROM *THE FAITH OF LEAP*

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For good or ill, we are all players in the living drama going on around us. God has designed us as decision-makers in his very image, as agents of the kingdom, not only to partake in history, but to prayerfully shape and direct it in his name as a true act of worship. And the part we play will depend largely on a clear sense of our mission, on the level of intentionality in what we do, and on the fortitude and integrity with which we do it.

This idea – that we all have our parts to play in a grand unfolding story – is variously portrayed by Tolkien’s marvellous characters in the “Lord of the Rings” trilogy. Such stories have deep appeal because their characters – usually against their own wishes - find themselves embarking on a quest, a mission, the outcome of which involves something immensely larger and more important than their own personal comfort and happiness. Tolkien understood that a quest is never a matter of one’s own desire, but rather of one’s calling. Frodo frequently questions why he has been *chosen* for this utterly dreadful task. However he might struggle to articulate it, he does feel *called*, he feels profoundly obligated to continue his particular mission. He has no guarantee of success, and seems to be constantly moving *toward* danger. *Liminality* is the term we use to describe a threshold experience like this.

Tolkien mythically portrays for us the Christian story and the Quest of the church. As people caught up in the Jesus story, we can interpret life truly only from within a larger gospel narrative where we all play a part in the constant unfolding of God’s purposes in his world. As Jesus’ people we are part of a story that originated in the eternal heart of God, was carried out through the redemptive mission of the Son and continues in the sending of the Holy Spirit and in the commissioning of the church in the power of that Spirit. It’s a story that has unfolded first through Israel but now further extends itself through the messianic movement that Jesus started. But the Biblical people of God, be they Israel or the early church, far from being the end of the story, are rather the “end of the beginning.” They just got the whole thing started – we now carry the baton. But they witness to us, calling us to remain true to the Quest. And so we joyfully continue, perhaps even bring to completion, the Mission with the same kind of faithfulness and integrity that our biblical forebears brought to the task. We are the people born of the *mission Dei*. This means that the church is the result of the missionary activity of God and not the producer of it. The church is therefore defined by its mission and not the other way round.

Far from being incidental to the life of faith, the element of adventure is as intrinsic to discipleship and community as Jesus designed it to be. It is not an overstatement to summarize Jesus’ work on earth as that of starting an adventure. Thus we follow Jesus to the extent that we are part of the adventure he started. We fail to follow him to the extent that we check out of this divine drama, this adventure of mission.

Given the narrative structure of the Bible, we can state that God is an adventurer. He is the subject of a living Story still being told. He extends himself, actively engaging in all sorts of historical events – war, peace, judgement, redemption, salvation, and so forth. He feels deeply the events of the world. The Bible is full of phrases that describe God’s pathos arising

from his involvement in human history. He initiates events; he responds to human concerns; he sings, weeps, cajoles and gets angry. Furthermore, in response to the sinful human condition, he “sends” his Son and Spirit on a (still ongoing) mission to redeem the world.

But any theology of adventure must take eschatology seriously. Even a cursory reading of the book of Revelation gives us a sense of the ultimate meaning of events and our role within them. Eschatology not only gives us an eternal framework to understand the adventure of the church but provides us with an inbuilt theological mechanism that creates a constant, unrelenting, deeply internalized theological pressure on the community of faith. This in itself provides us with an internal liminality, because it urgently presses us towards adaptation to a vision of what can be and is not yet. When our life here strikes us as a mere preliminary phase in the fulfilment of eternal destinies, when we have no home, but merely a temporary asylum on earth, we get the feeling that life as a whole is an adventure. Vision changes us, but a kingdom vision changes *everything*.

Apostolic leaders who create missional urgency will use the following behaviours:

- They create compelling experiences, engendering authentic, deeply-grounded spiritual urgency comes from holistic engagement that aims for the heart.
- They model urgency in their behaviour on an ongoing basis, recognising the power of a clearly lived philosophy.
- They look for possibilities in crisis, using the “burning platform” metaphor as a basis for innovation and movement.
- They confront naysayers effectively, exposing self-protecting motives and false affiliations.
- They lead in the place of liminality, confronting risk with courage and pursuing adaptive learning in the midst of action

The missional mandate of the church is always a communal one. There can be no solution to the problem of fear without the existence of communities capable of bearing fear together. It is much easier to take risks of extending love beyond our circle when we know we are loved and cherished by one another.

It is a widely recognised fact that Westerners tend to distort Jesus’ intent by reading the Bible as written to, and about, individuals. Not so. The Bible was written to *communities*, be it Israel or the church, and it is written to foster community, whether it be the national identity of Israel or the faith community of the church. Just as there is no such thing as an Israel-less Jew, there is no such thing as a churchless Christian (1 Cor. 12:13). Our very identity as God’s people is bound up in the collective identity of being an *ecclesia* – a group of people called, named, redeemed, ruled and loved by Jesus (Rom. 1:1-3; Eph. 4; Col. 1:1-3; 1 Peter 2:9-10; Rev 1-3). We are never going to be the church that Jesus built if we do not take community seriously.

The name we give to the communal phenomenon that forms in adventurous mission and liminal discipleship is *communitas*. The best way to think about it is to imagine the kind of band of companions that form in the context of adventure, around a common ordeal, a challenge, a task, or in pursuit of a mission. This entry into a verge-like experience is called *liminality*. When liminality “happens” (it can be deliberately cultivated) it fundamentally

restructures the nature of pre-existing relationships, friendships emerge from mere associations, and *comradeship* evolves from pre-existing friendships. Being immersed in a *communitas*, participants experience an almost mystical *togetherness* that occurs only among a group of people engaging in a task bigger than itself. We cannot shake the impression that the church Jesus built was meant to experience this form of togetherness...and lots of it. And not just for the sake of love and fellowship, but because we have a mission that requires it! While societies need the stability of normal life, they also need the liminal experience of *communitas*. This is what pushes society forward, infusing it with a freshness and vitality that comes from the deeper communion created by the threshold experience.

The book of Hebrews is the book par excellence for calling us to be an ongoing *communitas*, or, in the words of the writer, to be God's pilgrim people who will faithfully testify, by their continuing status as exiles and strangers, to their desire for a better country, a heavenly city, a homeland (Heb. 11). By their very pilgrimage, they give witness that they are in fact already citizens of that community. Hebrews pictures the Christian community on earth as living like Abraham I tents "in the land of promise as in a foreign land" (Heb. 11:9). The noted ecclesialogist Paul Minear asserts that "the church is by its very nature composed of tent dwellers."

Kurt Hahn, the great educator, understood the importance of liminality for edgework when he pioneered what he called "expeditionary learning". Expeditionary learning uses adventurous (liminal) experiences to create situations of learning.

- Learning happens best with emotion, challenge and the requisite support. People discover themselves – their abilities, values, passions and responsibilities in situations that offer adventure and the unexpected.
- In situations of liminality and risk, innovation inevitably occurs leading to generating and testing viable ideas.
- In liminal situations we discover that learning is both a personal process of discovery and a social activity. Everyone learns both individually and as part of a group.
- Liminality creates conditions of mutual support, empathy, caring and enhanced mutual trust.
- Vital lessons are learned from failure as well as success.

One other principle of liminality should be factored into our equation. We call it the stakeholder principle. It is the idea that all the players in a project ought to have a direct stake in the outcomes, because if strategic choices don't fundamentally impact on us *personally*, it is unlikely that we will make decisions with the kind of seriousness they deserve. We need to act as if our lives depended on it. When all our church ever expects from us is attendance and tithing, we hardly feel as if our lives were at stake. Indeed in medium- to large-sized churches, many people suspect their attendance and tithing won't really be missed. In those churches where the Sunday meeting is the primary project, most members know the show will go on with or without them. This can hardly be called stakeholding, and once members work that out, they find all sorts of excuses for attending every other week, or every three weeks, or less. Most churches are mainly audiences, and any member of an audience is dispensable. As soon as you know you are dispensable, the impetus for attendance is lost.

MYTHMAKING

Myth is the dramatization in temporal terms of things seen from the non-temporal standpoint of eternity. A myth is not about something that once happened, but rather about something that is *always* happening; the narration of a divine event. Myth is therefore not just a story; it is the Story beyond the story, and it is the realm in which people most live. And because it appeals to the depth of human longing and search it acts as a kind of master key to the soul. Myth is important in missional thinking because it helps us understand human longing and therefore human motivation. It also gives us insight into the mythic appeal and nature of the gospel as adventure.

Mission is the church's primary form of adventure, or at least the catalyst of it. By allowing the great divorce between church and mission, we are selling people short. We do not do people any favours by protecting them from the adventure of a missional journey. One of two things usually happens when we restrain our people from diving into adventure. Either they abandon the Christian adventure in search of something seemingly more exciting, or they launch out into a solo experience of mission. Currently the vast majority of young Christians reach adulthood bored with their church experience, and with little or no sense of their calling as missionaries.

LEADING AND RISK

Adaptive leadership moves the system to the edge of chaos – not over, but to the edge of it. Followers want comfort, stability and solutions from their leaders, but that's babysitting. Real leaders ask hard questions and knock people out of their comfort zones and then manage the resulting distress. The leader's role therefore is to ensure that the system is directly facing up to the issues that confront it, issues that if left unattended will eventually destroy it.

By and large, churches are very conservative organizations, and after they have been around just a few years can quickly become somewhat more institutionalized, largely because of the Christendom mode and the assumptions underlying it, but also because of leadership style and influence. On the whole churches seek to conserve the past, and particularly in the historical denominations their primary orientation is often backward to an idealized past rather than forward to a new vision of the future. As such they are often inflexible institutions that enshrine an inherited tradition. Hence, the mainline churches are leading the decline of the church in the West, due almost entirely to the fact that they are closed systems built squarely on an institutional systems story.

Jesus challenges our risk-aversion, tackling it head-on: "For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it" (Matt. 16:25). In fact, he repeats his proverbial statement over and over. It is a central theme of his teaching, and in all four Gospels. If we could be freed from our aversion to loss, our whole outlook on risk would change. We would be free indeed.

GOD AND MISSION

The mistake the church made during the Christendom period was to assume that mission was simply God's unsavoury but necessary activity in a sinful world. Recent scholars have reminded us that mission lies at the very centre of God's nature. Mission is put in the context of the doctrine of the Trinity, not of ecclesiology or soteriology. The classical doctrine of the *missio Dei* as God the Father sending the Son, and God the Father and the Son sending the Spirit, is extended to include yet another "movement": Father, Son and Holy Spirit sending the church into the world.

Therefore it is impossible to hold a nonmissional understanding of the God of Scripture, and it should follow that God's people should likewise be constituted by the *missio Dei*. At one level we must understand the Trinity in missional terms: the Father sends the Son, the Spirit sends the Son from his baptism in the Jordan, the Father and the Son send the Spirit. We should not confine ourselves to speculating on the Trinity merely in terms of community (three in one loving and working together), but also in terms of sending. Therefore if God's people are sent people, mission must be seriously considered as the organizing function of the church.

Basically we think mission is the catalysing function because God is the *missio Dei* – the missionary God. The church is the net result of God's missionary activity in the world, and not only is it the recipient of God's saving mercy, but it exists to live out and extend the gospel of the kingdom in this world. In other words, God's redeeming activity in our lives is the reason why we are in the church in the first place, and mission is therefore built into the very purpose of the church.

MISSIONAL ADVENTURE ON HOME TURF

It is truly an adventurous thing to embrace the risky call to societal engagement in our own neighbourhood and to reach out, and to know and be known by the people with whom we share our roads, schools, malls and cafes. Finding a home and staying there is an essential skill for missional churches. It invites us to learn a dialect, discover a rhythm, and hitch our collective future to that of the village.

Three suggestions for missional living in our home context are:

- Listen to the rhythms of your context. Sit in local places, talk to local people, join community groups.
- Be employed in the neighbourhood, whether formally or by volunteer engagement with local enterprises.
- Say yes to every invitation you receive, accept all offers of hospitality – every party, every meal, every function or committee you are invited to attend.