

Reforming, revisionist, refounding: Practical theology as disciplined seeing

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My focus in this chapter will be on the act of looking and what exactly it might mean to *perceive* something. By perception I mean the ability to see, hear, or become aware of something through the senses. The act of perceiving something is difficult and complex. The key point I want us to bear in mind throughout is this: *the ways in which we perceive something will determine what we think we see and what we think we see will determine how we respond to that which we think we see*. A primary mark of our age is uncertainty and fragility regarding our perceptions of the world. In a time when “fake news” and “alternative facts” seem to be the order of the day, it is sometimes difficult for us to know exactly what it is that we are looking at when we look out on the world and how we should properly respond to what we think we are seeing. In this Chapter I want to work with the delicate and complex tension between looking at something and perceiving it and to draw out some of the ways in which this tension relates to practical theology.

Perceiving the world faithfully

Let me begin with a perspective on practical theology that will help give a basic shape to the conversation that follows: Practical theology is a critical reflective discipline that seeks to explore the world through the lens of theology, with a view to enabling faithful thinking, accurate theological perception and authentic Christian practice. Developing attentive, disciplined perception requires a deep re-forming of how we go about looking at things and how we discern and assess our perceptions of the things that we look at. For the purposes of this paper I will focus on three concepts that are central to that endeavour: reforming, re-visioning and refounding. These three concepts, as we shall see, enable the practical theologian to perceive and to re-conceive the world in quite particular ways.

Let me begin with a basic observation: *It is quite possible to look at things and not to see them*. What I mean by that is simply that the frame of reference one uses to observe something will, to a greater or lesser extent, determine how we perceive any given

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situation. The act of *looking* and the act of accurate *perceiving* are not necessarily synonymous. It is quite possible for two people to look at the same situation and to perceive it quite differently. One of the tensions within, for example, the practical theologian's use of the social sciences, is the fact that the social sciences contain their own world views, assumptions, plausibility structures and cosmologies and even theologies, many of which sit uneasily with orthodox Christian theology, but all of which deeply impact upon how we look and what we see. There is a world of difference between looking at a





group of people praying and seeing these actions as aimed towards their creator, as they cry out faithfully in an attempt authentically to participate in God's plan of redemption for the world, and looking at a group of people engaging in a communal ritual – prayer – and seeing how this action seems to bring certain psychosocial benefits in terms of personal wellbeing and social cohesion. Theological perception and socio-psychological perception both emerge from reflection on the same phenomenon, but they conceive of it quite differently. One interprets what they see in terms of creation and creatureliness, the other perceives the phenomenon in terms of “the world.” Both are in some sense correct, but there is a significant layer of interpretation that is not available to the psycho-social look. It is precisely this missing layer that is fundamental for accurate theological perception.

Barth on miracles

Robert Sherman observes that in his discussions on miracles, Karl Barth argues that there is only one reality: “the kingdom of heaven has come near” (Mt.4:17). The historian, the psychologist the ethnographer and the psychiatrist are not looking at a different world from the theologian. There is no “divine course of events occurring alongside a broader creaturely history” the natural and the “supernatural” are not in fact distinct realms. All of reality is God's reality. That being so, miracles are not the “occasional interruption of a mundane order” (Sherman 2005, 98). There is no mundane order to break into. There is only one history: God's history. All events are open to a variety of inter-relations, all of them which may contain truth and significance. The difference is that Christians have an extra level of interpretation which situates all events within a broader, more all-embracing framework. It is this framework that allows them to perceive the event as an act of God (Barth 1956).

Barth denies the existence of a “divine course of events occurring alongside a broader creaturely history” or of a distinction between “a distinctly natural realm and a distinctly supernatural one.” Thus for Barth, too, it makes no sense to think of miracles as the “occasional interruption of a mundane order” (Sherman 2005, 98). We should therefore acknowledge that the same events are open to different interpretations; “the world and its workings do not interpret themselves, ... they do not supply their

own meaning” (Sherman 2005, 101). In Barth's view, scientists and historians must be permitted to offer scientific and historical explanations of these events, but Christians recognise that there is another level of interpretation. Here, Christians situate the event within a more all embracing framework which allows them to perceive the event as an act of God.

Bringing to the fore this theological hermeneutical layer is central to practical theology. As this layer is drawn out, so our perspectives on any given situation are changed. Such a change of perception does not necessarily invalidate other ways of interpreting the event, but it does place those interpretations in a quite different hermeneutical context which determines the aims and goals of the practical theologian in significant ways.

Reformation

In beginning to get into the issues surrounding how and why practical theology enables and facilitates such a change of perspective, we will now turn to the theme of *reformation*. In her book *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is changing and why*, theologian Phyllis Tickle, points to the ways in which the church moves towards radical reform every 500 years (Tickle 2008). Her basic thesis is that every 500 years, the Church goes through what she describes as a “rummage sale,” during which it cleans out some of its previous forms of spirituality and replaces them with new ones. This does not mean that previous forms of spirituality become obsolete or invalid. It does however mean that particular ways of thinking about theology and practice lose pride of place as the dominant form of Christianity. The historical reforming rhythm she seeks to capture runs through Constantine in the late 4th early 5th century, the Great Schism of the 11th century, the Reformation in the 16th century, and now the Postmodern era in the 21st century. Each of these epochs have been significant points of reference for substantial changes. For Tickle, our understanding of church and gospel is always emergent and inevitably dialectical. The old does not disappear and the new does not fully disconnect from its historical roots. Rather, it is as the old and the new come together in dialectical interchange that new ways of seeing the world and being Christian begin to emerge.

Importantly, Tickle draws our attention to the fact that it is very difficult to know the full implica-

tion of any of these reformations until after the fact. The law of unintended consequences means that powerful movements don't always have the outcomes that their movers and initiators intended. Luther's intention was to reform the Catholic Church in response to some clear injustices and unfaithful practices. His intention was *not* to form a new way of doing or being church. His protest and reform was intended to bring the church back to faithfulness; to give it a new perspective. The consequences of his protest and reform turned out to be quite different from his original intention. Reformation is always and inevitably ambiguous.

The ambiguity of reformation is summed up quite poignantly by Stanley Hauerwas in his reflections on Reformation Sunday. In Hauerwas' view:

Reformation names the disunity in which we currently stand. We who remain in the Protestant tradition want to say that Reformation was a success. But when we make Reformation a success, it only ends up killing us. After all, the very name 'Protestantism' is meant to denote a reform movement of protest within the Church Catholic. When Protestantism becomes an end in itself, which it certainly has through the mainstream denominations in America, it becomes anathema. If we no longer have broken hearts at the church's division, then we cannot help but unfaithfully celebrate Reformation Sunday (Hauerwas 2013).

Reformation contains lament as well as joy. Reformation relates to radical change that emerges from protest and a desire to re-form the church in ways that better represent the coming Kingdom of God. This is a laudable goal, but the positivity of the reformation dynamic easily slips into a theology of glory if the fragmentation of Jesus's Body that has been a consequence of the reforming impulse is not fully recognised. Hauerwas is correct in asserting that reformation is not an end in itself. If the perceived endpoint of reformation is simply a better form of Protestantism, Catholicism or any other Christian faction, then we have missed the point and overlooked the unifying eschatological force that should be driving our desire for protesting and reforming. When reformation fragments Jesus's Body, we need to recognise this fact in songs of lamentation that run in delicate and dissonant harmony with our hymns of glory. The reformers plea to be reformed and always reforming should contain a deep element that begs us to hold on to a desire for reconciliation and unity. Forms of reformation that re-wound Jesus's body are modes of protest that have forgotten how to look at the cross. That is why an

ecumenical organisation such as the International Academy of Practical Theology is so important. The very fact that within this organisation we come together in hospitable inquisitiveness, indicates that we recognise the desire for reconciliation that can easily become a victim of ongoing reformation.

Practical Theology and Reformation: Orientation, Disorientation and reorientation

Not all of us may agree with all of the details of Tickle's analysis and conclusions, but she does seem to be on to something interesting. As we celebrate the 500th anniversary of the last reformation, the world is shifting and changing in ways that are unpredictable and deeply disconcerting. We live in a time of great turbulence and change inside and outside of the church. Brexit, Donald Trump, substantial church decline within the Western world, mass immigration caused by war and famine, ongoing destruction of civilisations, the online abuse of innocents ... the list goes on. Many of the assumptions that we had about the world have shifted, some of them quite radically. The world is changing, but we are not quite sure whether that is a good or a bad thing. It is difficult to tell if we are in the midst of a reformation (we may well be), but at a minimum we are living in a time of profound change and deep *disorientation*.

It is interesting to note the connections between reformation, our current situation and the psalms, in particular the psalms of lament. In his book *The Spirituality of the Psalms* (Brueggemann 2012) Walter Brueggemann draws attention to the ways in which the psalms are intended not only to reflect our experience, but also to restructure it in ways that teach us to see the world in quite particular ways. He notes that some of the psalms, particularly the lament psalms, are intended to function therapeutically in enabling people who have experienced deep suffering and injustice to articulate their pain and find fresh ways of perceiving the world. Brueggemann schematises the psalms according to a threefold pattern that he suggests is intended to facilitate different ways of looking at, perceiving and responding to situations. The schema runs from *orientation* to *disorientation* to *reorientation*. *Orientation* is found particularly in the Royal psalms. These psalms assume and proclaim that the world is good and stable; God is in his heaven and the covenant is



being faithfully upheld. The royal psalms sum up how the people of Jerusalem must have felt as Jesus rode into the city. God is good! God is here! God will win! But then something happens that shakes the psalmist's world. This leads to a period of *disorientation*. The old maps just don't fit; the old coping measures don't help him to cope. "Why me oh Lord! How long!" The old visions seem to make no sense any more. He quite simply no longer sees the world in the ways he used to. He looks out on the same space, but everything has changed. The psalmist cries out in desolation "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?" But then, something changes and brings about a sense of *reorientation*. Within the majority of the lament psalms there is a profound change in the way that the psalmist perceives the situation. The change is initiated as he comes to recognise the significance and presence of God's unfailing love. "But I have trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord, because he has dealt bountifully with me (Psalm 13:6)" He remembers God's *hesed*; God's unending and faithful love. The horror of the fearful moment remains, but is profoundly re-conceived by the memory of God's unfailing love. The psalmist begins to *perceive* things differently. He looks out at the same situation, but he perceives it quite differently. As his perception of the situation changes, so the psalmist moves from the language of lament to the language of joy and worship. His theological attentiveness, leads to a change of perception which moves the psalmist to engage in a quite different set of liturgical practices. As he "takes a second look" at the situation and allows his theology to change his perspective, he sees and responds differently. The pain of the event is not taken away; it is perceived differently in the light of the reframing revelation of God's gracious presence. Grace and redemption did not enter the situation. They had always been there. The psalmist had not, for whatever reason, been able to perceive them.

It is very important to note that the reorientation of the psalmist's perception, is not a movement backwards towards his original orientation. Suffering changes things. There is no going back. His reorientation recognises what was, but now sees even that differently in the light of God's unending and faithful *hesed*. It's a little like the ministry, passion and resurrection of Jesus. The excitement of the triumphal entry into Jerusalem is shattered by the pain and disorientation of the cross. But the shadow of

the cross is lifted by the wonder of the resurrection. The reorientation of the resurrection is not a movement back to the glory days of the entry into Jerusalem. Rather it is a revelation of something radical and new; connected to what has gone before, but not determined by it. The endpoint of this Spirit led movement is a dialectical, eschatological newness; a newness that respects the significance of what has been, but opens up new vistas for understanding and faithful living in the present and on into the future.

Reformation and reorientation

Now, what is interesting and important here is that *the structure the psalms offers us for understanding and dealing with vicissitude is the structure of reformation*. The movement from orientation to disorientation to reorientation is precisely the dynamic that occurs within the process of reformation. When Luther looked around at the church, he saw certain things that the rest of the church either didn't see, couldn't see, or chose not to see. Their settledness and orientation blinded them to certain things that Luther perceived as obvious. The church was in a state of dangerous disorientation even though to look at it as an insider, it seemed to be quite gloriously oriented. However, the way that the church looked at itself and saw itself differed radically from the way in which Luther looked at and saw the church. One viewed the church through a hermeneutic of power and glory; the other viewed the world through a theology of the cross. Both *looked* at the same thing but *perceived* it quite differently. The crucial theological difference was that Luther's perception of the situation (what he saw, what he felt, how he acted and the telos of his actions) was shaped and formed by a different set of assumptions from those recognised by the church. As he looked at the church with a theological attentiveness that had been shaped by his ongoing emersion within the strange world that is revealed within the bible, so he saw things differently. Like the transforming moment when the psalmist allowed God's *hesed* to reinterpret his tragedy, so Luther's scriptural formation meant that he looked at the same thing as everyone else was looking at but perceived them quite differently. His changed perception was intended not to reject all that had gone before, but to reorient it and put it to its proper purposes.

The dynamics of reformation and reorientation capture some vital dimensions of the practical theo-

logical task of facilitating faithful perception. Reformation, reorientation and practical theology are deeply interconnected. They take very seriously what is, in the light of what is still to come. All three seek to change perceptions and to affect deep bodily changes in practice. They primarily desire that we return to God and find new peace and new ways of being in the world and perceiving what it means to be in the world faithfully. Understood in these ways, the pattern of reformation and the psalmist's experience of reorientation and the tasks of practical theology are closely connected in their desire to disorient and to reorient church and world and put them to their proper purposes.

Re-Visioning: Developing theological attentiveness

The key for the psalmist and for Luther was the ability change their perception of their situations by engaging with a renewed theological attentiveness. In his essay 'The Cultivation of Theological Vision: Theological Attentiveness and the Practice of Ministry (McGrath 2011 107–123),' Alistair McGrath suggests that "theological attentiveness" is central to the practical theological task. Theological attentiveness is a way of paying attention that allows our perception to be shaped and formed by the world that is brought to us through our engagement with Scripture, tradition and theology. It is formative knowledge that engages the whole person as the whole person turns themselves towards God. Karl Barth has pointed out that the world that is created as we pay attention to the Christian Scriptures is very strange (Macdonald 2000). The strange new world within the bible reveals a world that is filled with odd narratives, sometimes dysfunctional people and dissonant occurrences. Nonetheless, strange as it may be, it claims to be the *real* world; the world as God is revealing it to us. It was that strange new world within the bible that caused Luther to set in process a reforming dynamic that would revolutionise church life. It was this strange new world that drove Calvin to try to create "a small piece of heaven on earth" in Geneva. It is this strange new world that drives pope Francis to embrace disabled people – those who are shunned and rejected by the world – and to insist that caring for oppressed people should return to central place in the practises of the church. It is that strange new world that shapes the practical theologians ways of engaging with, in-

terpreting and perceiving the world. Theological attentiveness means allowing that strange new world within the bible to shape and form our perceptions, and to transform our intellectual and bodily practices.

Theological attentiveness requires what McGrath describes as a "discipleship of the mind (McGrath 2011, 108)." The idea of disciplining the mind resonates with what the apostle Paul talks about in Romans 12:2 when he talks about renewing our minds. It involves what McGrath describes as "the cultivation of a Christian "map of meaning" – a distinctively Christian way of seeing things (McGrath 2011, 108)." This is an individual and a communal task wherein Scripture, doctrine, tradition and practice function together to shape and form minds, emotions, bodies and imaginations in ways which reform our perception of the world and re-order and expands our options for acting in the world. The outcome of such disciplining results in the development of "principled seeing". Principled seeing McGrath suggests, enables us to "grow by looking" Seeing things as they really are, penetrating beneath the surface of appearances, is both the goal and the outcome of the cultivation of perceptual attentiveness (McGrath 2011, 112) McGrath concludes: "The Christian faith thus offers a way of seeing reality that brings about a transformation and a transvaluation of our understanding of the world, and our place within it. It strips away our delusions about reality, illuminating it and bringing it into sharp focus so that we may see it as it really is (McGrath, 2011, 108)." Cultivating perceptual attentiveness results in reoriented vision, which in turn results in forms of practice that are faithful, theologically discerning and practically transformative. It is this kind of theological attentiveness that sits at the centre of the practical theological gaze.

Refounding: Practising theological attentiveness

So what might all of this look like for practical theologians? In seeking an answer to this final question, I want to introduce one more concept namely; *refounding*. The idea of refounding relates to modes of practice and forms of changed perspective that reveal radical alternatives to what is currently available. In his work on how churches deal with trauma, disruption and change, the anthropologist and Roman Catholic priest Gerald Arbuckle calls for the



church to consider the need to *refound* itself when it is faced with major changes. To refound something, he suggests, is not simply to renew it. Refounding is much more radical than renewal. Renewal often means shuffling around current ideas and concepts in order to make changes that can be envisaged within the current set of plausibility structures in any given context or situation. Refounding is deeper, thicker and more radical. It is much closer to the psalmist's process of reorientation than it is to the renewal of that which once was. Refounding requires what Arbuckle calls: "a quantum leap in creativity (Arbuckle 1996, 92)." To refound something is to reorient it on a radically new foundation; to see it in a way that is continuous with its history but quite different from the way in which that history has worked itself out up to that point. In order to refound something we need to put to one side our current assumptions and presumptions and return to those root narratives, cosmologies, symbols and myths that offer what he describes as "a set of felt meanings in an orderly pattern (Arbuckle, 1996, 25)." Refounding has to do with embarking on a creative exploration of theology, Scripture and tradition and allowing these ways of looking at and being in the world to enable us to perceive the very foundations of the thing we are looking at differently; in a way that changes how we see the situation and offers a fresh range of possibilities for action and response.

Refounding who we are: Same body, different person

In concluding this chapter I want us to reflect on some work I have been doing on brain injury and personality change. In looking at what it might mean to have the same body as one had before a trauma, but to appear to be a different person after it, we will be able to see the importance of refounding at a most profound level: refounding who we and whom others think we are. By focusing on this perplexing human experience we will be able to draw together the various threads that I have laid out in this chapter and begin to tease out something of the practicalities of my argument for doing practical theology.

Let us begin with the idea of personality change. Personality change relates to a discontinuity in personhood post injury. The American Psychological Association defines personality as referring to "in-

dividual differences in characteristic patterns of thinking, feeling and behaving (The American Psychological Association 2018)." Personality change is thus framed as a change in one's personal identity. The assumption is that neurology and continuity of thought and behaviour defines personhood and identity and that damage to one's body is equal to damage to one's identity; who one is in the world. From the perspective of psychology and neurology this is accurate. If we come to perceive identity in the terms offered by psychology and neurology, we will most probably assume that the most adequate response is grief, lament and some mode of rehabilitation, with the latter being primarily perceived as a movement backwards towards as close an approximation of what we have been in the past as we can imagine. However, if we seek to operationalise the idea of theological attentiveness and look not for renewal or rehabilitation but for reorientation and refounding, an interesting new set of possibilities begins to emerge. The question then becomes: *does brain damage that brings about a shift in our perceived identity actually alter who we are?*

Think for a moment about the kind of language that we use around people with advanced dementia or other forms of serious brain damage. People quite frequently say things like: "She is not the person she used to be." "I would hate to be like that;" "Life wouldn't be worth living without memory." Apart from the obvious question – "How do you know?" – such language indicates not just a perceived change in a person's personality, but a disappearance of the self altogether. As our brains deteriorate or are damaged, so we somehow gradually or immediately disappear. The problem here is twofold. Firstly, such language is the product of what we might describe as a pathological imagination, that is, a way of imagining certain conditions and experiences that is driven by the assumption that they are first and foremost pathological. Such a way of imagining begins with the assumption of loss and negativity and proceeds accordingly. Nestling at the heart of such a mode of imagination is a particular understanding of the self: *the autobiographical self*. The understanding of the self reflects John Locke's description of a person. Locke describes a person as "a thinking intelligent being that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing, in different times and places." Within this understanding of identity and personhood, who we are is determined by memory and awareness. To be "me" I need to remember my past, have an awareness of

who I am in the present and be able to project a possible future. If I can't do that I am perceived to no longer be the person that I was. So continuity over time and history is necessary for me to retain my identity. According to this understanding of what the essence of identity comprises, brain damage clearly does bring about personality change and the destruction of our selves.

However, if we reflect on such a situation in the light of the idea of refounding, interesting new possibilities begin to emerge. Arbuckle tells us that the process of refounding begins as we engage with the founding documents and allow these documents to reshape and reform our vision of the future and in so doing attend theologically to the situation. What then within our "Christian map of meaning," to use McGrath's phrase, can help refound people's identity when their stories seem so different from the way that they were?

Identity in Christ

Karl Barth introduced the idea of soteriological objectivism as a way of framing what it means to be a creature. George Hunsinger reflects that "Soteriological objectivism...means that there is finally no other truth about us than the truth of who we are before God in Jesus Christ. We have no existence before God that stands in independence of Jesus Christ. 'The truth of our existence is simply this—Jesus Christ has died and risen again for us. It is this and this alone which is to be proclaimed to us as our truth' (Hunsinger 1991, 103.)

The idea of soteriological objectivism opens up a whole new way of viewing the truth about who we truly are. The truth of who we are is not to be found in who we might think or remember ourselves to be. Rather, the truth of who we are is found only in Jesus. We are who we are "in Christ." This understanding draws us to the letters of Paul and in particular Paul's frequent use of "in Christ" language. Paul speaks of the saints being 'in Christ Jesus' (Philippians: 1:1). In Romans 8:1 he talks about 'those who are in Christ Jesus.' Again in 2 Corinthians 12:2 he describes himself as a man "in Christ." For Paul, one's identity is not found in one's own body but in Christ. Importantly, in Colossians 3:3 Paul states: "For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God." This is a truly mysterious passage. Paul urges us to realise that as Christians, we discover that we are not who we may have thought we

were. Our identity is not comprised of *our* memory, knowledge about ourselves or the state of our current capacities. We are who we are *in Christ*, and importantly, even that is hidden from us.

This passage offers a beginning place for refounding our identity when we experience brain damage. All of us tend to assume that we know who we are. However, that may not be the case, at least not in the obvious way that we might assume. Think about I in this way. Before I became a Christian I thought I was a pretty good reason. I encountered Jesus and discovered that I was a sinner in need of reconciliation with God. What I thought and assumed about myself turned out to be wrong. It was only as I encountered my identity in Christ that I began to understand who I truly was. If someone experiences biographical, intellectual or behavioural discontinuity, that is experienced as a change in one's personality – that cluster of behaviours that we assume makes us who we are – Paul's reminder of the true source of identity refounds this experience and offers a different point of orientation and a different set of responses. Within the Christian map of meanings we discover that our identity is given and held by in Christ. If someone asks me who I am, my response is no longer "I am John Swinton, a theologian from Aberdeen." I am that off course, but that is not what defines me. There is another level of interpretation that can be applied to my situation. Who I am is who I am in Christ and that will not change. As the apostles Paul puts it: "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:38–39)" There is nothing in scripture to indicate that any of this changes when we encounter brain damage.

Such a mode of refounding opens up fresh space for new and innovative pastoral practices – lament, grief counselling to manage the changes – that can enable us to manage the changes without losing the hope of the Gospel¹. Refounding our lives in Jesus keeps the cornerstone of our lives firmly in place in all circumstances and at all times.

1 For further details on what this might look like see Swinton, John (2017) *Becoming Friends of Time: Disability, timefullness and gentle discipleship*. Waco: Baylor Press.



Conclusion: Practising double vision

In this chapter I have argued that a key task of practical theology is to change our perspective on the world in such ways as to transform our minds and create spaces for transformative, creative theological responses that would not be available if the practical theologian was not involved. I have offered three core concepts: *reformation* (Protest and reform with a view to reclaiming faithfulness) *revisioning* (reorienting our understanding of situations in the light of the reframing power of the bible) and *refounding* (returning to our core documents and traditions in order to look differently at situations and experiences). Taken together these concepts help us to understand something of the nature of the transformative theological attentiveness that practical theology brings to the theological enterprise. Our very brief reflections on brain trauma helps us to embody and visualise something of the practical implications of our theological endeavours and to illustrate the way in which, properly conceived, theology is always for the sake of practice and practice is always for the sake of the Kingdom God.

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