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Donald Roth
donald.roth@dordt.edu

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Discipleship and Metaphor

Abstract

"As an operative metaphor, 'kingdom' encourages an optimistic Christian engagement with the world, often grounded in a goal of transformation."

Posting about Biblical imagery that encourages vibrant faith from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/discipleship-and-metaphor/>

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Discipleship and Metaphor

 [inallthings.org/discipleship-and-metaphor/](https://allthings.org/discipleship-and-metaphor/)

Donald Roth

The Bible is filled with a tapestry of rich imagery, deep doctrine, and sweeping drama, and, ideally, all of these things weave together to drive us to live a vibrant faith which joyfully embraces the freedom that comes from living as sinners saved by grace and called to thanksgiving. Christianity has a long tradition of mining the doctrinal riches of Scripture, and the Reformed tradition (among others) has been similarly sensitive to the overarching drama of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation that animates the Bible. Using a redemptive historical reading of Scripture, we are also familiar with cultivating a rigorously Christ-centered understanding of the Biblical text, helped by metaphors like Christ as the True Vine, Living Water, or Good Shepherd.

However, I believe we sometimes fail to examine the power of imagery in shaping our understanding of what it is to actually live out our response to the Gospel. . This may be especially true when it comes to the process of putting practical meat on the bones of Biblical calls like “love your neighbor” or “make disciples of all nations.” In particular, I believe there are what I call “operative metaphors” that often guide Christians in this process, and I believe that exploring and understanding two of the most prominent of these metaphors (“kingdom” and “pilgrim”) can provide a means of both understanding some key debates in the Christian world and more critically engaging our own beliefs.

Operative Metaphor and Historical Imagination

The Biblical call to discipleship is not without significant explicit content, but reasoning out how Scriptural commands and principles should be worked out in today’s world can be difficult. An “operative metaphor” is Scripture-based imagery that can frame the big picture of who we are, how we relate to the world, and how we balance the tension of living in the “already and not yet” of these last days. That is, these metaphors help us to operationalize our understanding of the Word of God.

Perhaps this is already overly complex language. What does it mean to operationalize our understanding? The theologian Walter Brueggemann talks about reading the Bible as a process of “cultivating historical imagination.” By this, he means that, as Christians, we seek to breathe in the Bible’s “peculiar memory and promise” in order “to become a responsible participant in that covenantal history, to share in its perceptions and nuances so that our life-world conforms to that which is central to the Bible.”¹ Beyond possessing a mere historical awareness of the Biblical context, historical imagination is about being able to discern the spirit of the Word and apply its wisdom in new contexts, and in that process of faithful improvisation, imagery often provides a more fulsome guide than we would be able to glean from detailed regulation or theological treatise.

Rather than dwell on abstractions here, then, let’s look at this in its application through what I believe to be two of the most common and prominent operative metaphors for Christians: the image of “Kingdom” and the metaphor of “Pilgrim.”

Disciples as Kingdom Citizens

Particularly in the Kuyperian branch of the Reformed tradition, Christians are very accustomed to imagining their call in the context of “kingdom.” “Kingdom citizens” speak of doing “kingdom work/service” which can serve to extend, usher in, or advance the kingdom. Of course, this “kingdom” is the Kingdom of

God, usually realized in its broadest possible sense. Christians animated by this operative metaphor often seek to press Christ's kingdom claim into "every square inch" of creation, whether this means the natural world or man's cultural development of it.

As an operative metaphor, "kingdom" encourages an optimistic Christian engagement with the world, often grounded in a goal of transformation. It also gives an eternal significance to even the otherwise mundane aspects of life. All of our cultural work becomes, as Andy Crouch calls it, "the furniture of heaven."² For believers motivated by this metaphor, a nearly assumed *solus deo gloria* permeates life in a way that encourages confidence in innovation and comfort in participation in broader culture.

Disciples as Pilgrims in Exile

At the same time, many other Christians, including others in the Reformed tradition, imagine themselves primarily as "sojourners," "exiles," and "pilgrims on the way." Drawing from our identification as strangers and exiles in passages like 1 Peter 2:11 and Hebrews 11:13, these Christians also have conception of the Kingdom of God, but this imagination is usually more narrowly considered in terms of Christ's redemptive work in the church with a keen longing for the fuller realization of Christ's kingship in the final consummation. For those who are animated by this operative metaphor, the kingdom is a longed-for home that we have not yet arrived at.

As an operative metaphor, "pilgrim" draws deeply on the experience of the Judean exiles in Babylon. The cultural calling is an echo of the prophet's words in Jeremiah 29:8-9: "... seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare." There is engagement, but, as David VanDrunen describes it, this cultural engagement is a joyful, detached, and modest engagement that expresses "gratitude for the small blessings that God bestows for a time" while recognizing that "our cultural products themselves are not meant to endure into the world to come."³ For believers motivated by this metaphor, there is a suspicion of becoming too complacent with the world, and comfort is found primarily in fellowship with believers now and a hope of better things to come.

Why Does this Matter?

So what is the value or importance of talking about operative metaphor? While I don't believe that these are the only two operative metaphors out there, these two ways of imagining ourselves as disciples of Christ resonate with different aspects of living in the "already and not yet" of the kingdom, and they each can have a powerful impact on shaping the imagination of a believer. It is a further contention of mine that, while we may resonate with both of these metaphors at different times in our lives, we will never resonate with both equally at once. Nevertheless, both remain completely true at one time. So how are we to properly balance living in this tension? I believe that we should engage in a process of self-examination to see what imagery drives how we imagine discipleship, and we should think about how that impacts the way we will act as disciples, then we should intentionally engage in dialog and community with those who resonate with different operative metaphors so that our many parts might act with collective wisdom as one Body.

So where do you find yourself? Do you resonate more with "kingdom" or "pilgrim"? What other operative metaphors might be guiding the imagination that shapes your life?

Footnotes

1. Walter Brueggemann, *The Bible Makes Sense* (St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2003), 25. [↩](#)
2. Andy Crouch, *Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling* (Intervarsity Press, 2008), 170. [↩](#)
3. David VanDrunen, *Living in God's Two Kingdoms* (Crossway, 2010), 166. [↩](#)