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# Imagining Discipleship Through Narrative Metaphor

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# Imagining Discipleship Through Narrative Metaphor

## **Abstract**

"[This is] a call to unpack important dimensions of who we are and to appreciate the impact that the stories embedded in our imagination can have, both on what we believe and how we live that out."

Posting about examining our discipleship from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<http://inallthings.org/imagining-discipleship-through-narrative-metaphor/>

## **Keywords**

In All Things, discipleship, narrative theology, metaphor, antimony

## **Disciplines**

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## **Comments**

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# Imagining Discipleship through Narrative Metaphor

 [inallthings.org/imagining-discipleship-through-narrative-metaphor/](https://inallthings.org/imagining-discipleship-through-narrative-metaphor/)

Donald Roth

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2017

Today, we come to the culmination of this brief series looking at the role of both imagination and also what I've termed *narrative metaphor* in how we approach discipleship. If you haven't had a chance to read the previous two articles, I encourage you to follow the links [here](#) and [here](#).

If you've come with me this far, we're at what many of my best teachers considered the most important part of any analysis: the "so what?" Perhaps this is a nice little theory, but what practical application or difference does it make to embrace this way of looking at our psyche or to go along with this whole narrative metaphor concept?

The practical implication is both simple and profound: If our imaginations play such an important role in our formation of meaning, including how we're predisposed to react, then narrative metaphor is a form of cognitive bias of which we should be aware. Further, if these biases lie along important tensions in the Christian faith, then they may only underline how incapable any one of us is in relating the full truth of the gospel by ourselves. Ultimately then, the concept of narrative metaphor can provide a useful vocabulary for articulating an important dimension of our faith.

## Narrative Metaphor as Cognitive Bias

Have you ever had a moment of revelation and said, "I've never thought of it that way"? What makes a mind-blowing realization so—well—mind-blowing, is that it shatters the framework we've built up around an idea by drawing us along a new angle of insight. According to Steven Pinker, one of the basic attributes of what makes our conscious minds so amazing is our ability to construe a particular scenario in multiple different ways.<sup>1</sup> This is almost like a child examining a Rubik's cube from different angles, looking for a solution; just so, taking on these different cognitive perspectives can yield new insights.

In a similar way, we can think of the web of metaphors which make up the substance of some of our definitions. Some theorists over-emphasize the degree to which our more abstract thought is bound to the metaphors that we build on, but I think our tendency is usually to make the opposite assumption. Metaphors are useful precisely because they give us an angle of meaningful insight, so *of course* the metaphors that we use will predispose us to favoring certain insights. There will always be some bleed-over from one concept to another.

There are reasons to believe that this effect is especially true when it comes to narrative metaphors for discipleship. For instance, imagining discipleship through the lens of a pilgrim tends to emphasize a degree of separation from the world that really resonates for some people, while such separation is nearly abhorrent to others. In looking through the eight narrative metaphors which I proposed, you may have felt a similar sense of resonance and reticence between different descriptors, likely tied to the dispositions you associate with those various concepts.

If narrative metaphors are particularly energizing elements of the webs of meaning that go into something as complex as discipleship, then they may exert a gravitational pull that either confirms or compels certain theological propositions (I'm not confident that causation flows only one way or the other). At the same time, if certain theological propositions stand in tension with others, we may find that the range of metaphors with which we resonate is reduced, which only strengthens certain theological dispositions—and so on and so on in a feedback loop that, unnoticed, could lead to dysfunctional belief and practice. Thus, narrative metaphor should be thought of as a cognitive bias<sup>2</sup> that has the capacity to be problematic if there happen to be areas of our faith where such tensions exist.

## Narrative Metaphor and Antinomy

Of course, we all know that these tensions *do* exist. Our faith is in an infinite, immutable God who has done the seemingly impossible by saving a sinful humanity from the debt it racked up against God's own justice by rebelling in the Garden. We believe in a Savior who is both God *and* man. We ourselves are simultaneously saved and sinners. Our faith is riddled with facts which defy the neat logical categories into which we try to fit the world.

J.I. Packer borrowed the term "antinomy" from Kant when describing one of these tensions in [Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God](#). I like the concept of antinomy as he defines it—"the appearance of a contradiction between conclusions which seem equally logical, reasonable, or necessary"—and I think it applies to a number of tensions which exist along the same theological ground that the concept of discipleship covers.

I lack the space to go into all of these tensions at depth, but I've mentioned a few before. As Christians, there is a tension between our emphasis on word and deed, faith and works, justification and sanctification, and so on, such that we can't fully express one without seeming to lessen the other. Even the Apostle Paul anticipates this reaction to his description of the gospel with his hypothetical "Shall we sin that grace may abound?" in [Romans 6](#).

As Packer says, "our minds dislike antinomies." I learned this concept in college as the phenomenon of *cognitive dissonance*. Trying to simultaneously consciously affirm two contradictory concepts creates a nearly tangible tension for us that we find viscerally unpleasant. We respond to this tension by seeking to (1) reject one concept in favor of the other, (2) minimize the relative importance of one concept in favor of the other, (3) minimize the relative importance of both concepts, or (4) abandon both concepts altogether. The tricky thing about important theological antinomies is that they deny us all but the second option. This is why Packer's advice is to recognize the impossibility of getting it perfectly right—instead, we must guard against expressing one side of an antinomy in a way that excludes the other.

## Narrative Metaphor and Discipleship in Action

This is where it all comes together. If the metaphors that we utilize are a key component in how we imagine and therefore pursue discipleship, and if those metaphors bear an affinity to theological tensions that bias us toward one side or another of important theological antinomies, then we cannot do this alone. We need to be aware of our own tendencies and biases, and we need to be in conversation with those who lean the other way, because we'll actually do a better job of expressing the truth together than we can by ourselves.

This is not a call to minimize the importance of theological categories, and it's not a call to relativism. It's a call to unpack important dimensions of who we are and to appreciate the impact that the stories embedded in our imagination can have, both on what we believe and how we live that out. It's a possible explanation for why we sometimes seem to be talking past one another, and it's the start of developing a vocabulary that might help us reconnect. It's another angle from which we can look when examining ourselves and our discipleship, and, ultimately, I think there are insights to be mined from this concept that might be desperately needed by today's church. What do you think?

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## Footnotes

1. Steven Pinker, *The Stuff of Thought: Language as a Window into Human Nature* (New York: Penguin, 2007) at 26. [←](#)
2. Although bias is usually a negative term in the way we talk about it, I mean this more in the capacity that the term serves in psychological and sociological literature. In that context, bias is a fact of life, and the focus isn't so much on *whether* our perception is skewed so much as it is on how much and what to do about it because

it is. ↩