# Narrative, Identity, and Discipleship (Updated[1])

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## Identity crisis

We had been talking about "renewing the mind" one morning in a discipleship group for Middle Eastern Muslim followers of Christ. During a break, I was surprised to find Ahmad[2] in the kitchen, staring out of the window. He was obviously upset.

> "Are you OK?" I asked, worried I had said something to offend him.
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> As Ahmad turned to face me, I could see tears in his eyes. "What is it?" I asked.
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> "For 30 years they have filled my head with lies!" retorted Ahmad, slapping his head with frustration, "How can I ever get it out?!"

Looking back on that conversation eight years ago, I can now see the danger signals that marked the beginning of an extremely difficult period for Ahmad and all those in relationship with him. Although we had tried to "contextualise" our approach somewhat, Ahmad was experiencing an identity crisis: evaluating the last 30 years of his life narrative, he struggled to recognise anything worth salvaging. At the time, I was not aware how important narrative was in discipleship.

## Two modes of thought

Jerome Bruner postulates two distinct and complementary modes of thought.[3]The first, *paradigmatic* thinking, seeks *objective* understanding by freeing experiences from context and time. Modern science is founded on this type of thinking. By systematically reducing everything *downwards* into its constituent elements, science attempts to show how the world is ultimately governed by universal laws. Paradigmatic thinking answers the question: "How?"

The second mode of thought is *narrative*. In complete contrast to paradigmatic thinking, it is both context and time oriented. Thus, it seeks *subjective* understanding by fitting particular experiences together into a historical sequence to produce a meaningful story. Narrative thinking gazes *upwards.* It tries to perceive the "big picture" and thereby answer the question: "Why?"

Since the Enlightenment, the West has tended to favour paradigmatic thinking due to the illusion of objectivity it offers. However, the downward gaze of science is unable to find any purpose or meaning behind the laws of cause and effect.[4]

## Narrative and Identity

Identity is closely related to narrative thinking. My identity—including all my relationships[5]—is constructed in the present as I selectively recollect and appropriate experiences from my past.[6] Not only does this narrated montage of memories tell me who I am and who is important to me, but by stringing these events together to form a coherent story, it also fills my life with meaning and purpose.

This sense of purpose shapes my values, goals and future choices. By projecting my story forward into the future, I know what I should do next. As I stay true to this idealistic narrative, my decisions grow into habits, and eventually take on a permanence that I and others begin to recognise as typically "me."[7] Ricoeur calls the permanent facets of identity *idem* and the idealistic self-narrative *ipse*. He defines *character* as where these two aspects of identity overlap as permanent traits.

Obviously, one's self-narrative is highly subjective. The world offers many alternative narratives, all of

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[1] The original version of this paper: Barnett, J. (2009), "Narrative, Identity and Discipleship", in *Musafir: A bulletin of Intercultural Studies*, 3:2, Dec 2009, pp3-5.

[2] A pseudonym.

[3] Bruner, J. (1986), "Two Modes of Thought", in *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, pp11-43.

[4] Polanyi, Michael, 2002, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a post-critical philosophy,* reprint London: Routledge, [1958], pp284-285.

[5] Wallace, C. (1999), "Storytelling, Doctrine, and Spiritual Formation", in *Anglican Theological Review*, 81:1, pp39-.

[6] Crites, S. (1986), "Storytime: Recollecting the past and projecting the future", in *Narrative Psychology: The storied nature of human conduct*, T.R. Sarbin ed., Westport: Praeger Publishers, p163.

[7] Ricoeur, P. (1992), *Oneself as Another*, trans. K. Blamey, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp121-.

which may appear to fit a selection of "key" historical facts. While only God's perspective can be truly objective, the world's counterfeits whisper once more, "Has God *really* said…?"[8]

**Implications for Discipleship**

While the patterns of discipleship depicted by New Testament writers vary somewhat,

> …in every case—whether through the use of expressions "disciple", "to be/become a disciple" or "to follow", the concepts of imitation, example, or patterning , or statements and exhortations regarding authentic Christian existence—teachings regarding Christian self understanding and practice are to the fore.[9]

That is, the emphasis is always on a close practical identification with Christ and his mission. Motivated by love and empowered by the Spirit, disciples choose to imitate and obey Christ, which in turn leads to Christ-like attitudes, and character.[10] However, since these themes—identification, relationships, purpose, decision-making, and character—are all rooted in narrative thinking, discipleship must be essentially a narrative process. Christian discipleship "involves learning the story of Israel and of Jesus well enough to interpret and experience oneself and one's world in its terms."[11] That is, one's self narrative must be realigned according to God's objective revelation of reality.

A new story leads to a new future. The *ipse-idem* dialogic implies that although one's character is determined by the self-narrative, one is still free to choose *which* narrative one lives by.[12] Two life transforming steps disciples can make are to realise they can choose, and then to accept responsibility for their choices. This is good news for those whose previous stories have been deterministic and without hope. To internalise the Gospel story—by believing its perspective of one's past and envisioning oneself in its future—is to have *hope*. To make one's choices in the present according to that story is to live by *faith*.

**Unhelpful attitudes and methods**

This process can be traumatic though. Once-pivotal events or achievements may be found on re-evaluation to be less important—perhaps even considered "rubbish."[13] Conversely, other events, at one time insignificant, may be recollected afresh and woven into one's new identity. An important aspect of discipleship therefore, is to help disciples through this process of realigning their life-narrative with the reality of the Gospel. However, some attitudes and methods need addressing in order to do that effectively:

*The apostasy narrative and its twin terrors*

Firstly, "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!"[14] Unfortunately, this verse has been used by those whose conversion paradigm requires an apostasy narrative, to encourage disciples to make a complete break with the past. Of the five types of conversion described by Rambo,[15] *apostasy* is the most radical, requiring a total repudiation of previous narratives. I know several believers whose initial steps towards Christ began within Islam, through reading about him in the Qur'an. Yet, they were urged to repress such details from their testimonies and to denigrate their pasts, because they had now "come from darkness into light."

However, the context of 2 Corinthians concerns arrogance—perhaps even bigotry—within the church. Paul responds by urging the believers to stop regarding others "from a worldly point of view."[16] Thus, it would completely contradict Paul's intention to interpret "new creation" as meaning new believers must repress their cultural backgrounds.

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[8] cf. Gen 3:1.

[9] Longenecker, R.N. (1996), *Patterns of discipleship in the New Testament*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, p5.

[10] cf. John 15; Phil 2; Col 1,3:8-10; Eph 5; Gal 5:22-.

[11] Lindbeck, G. (1984), *The nature of doctrine: religions and theology in a postliberal age*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, p34.

[12] Taylor, D. (2001), *Tell me a story: the 1ife-shaping power of our stories*, St. Paul, MN: Bog Walk Press, p2.

[13] cf. Phil 3:8.

[14] 2 Cor 5:17.

[15] Rambo's list comprises: tradition transition, institutional transition, affiliation, intensification, and apostasy. Rambo, L. (1993), *Understanding Religious Conversion*, New Haven: Yale University Press, pp38-40.

[16] 2 Cor 5:16. cf. also Gal 6:15.

The apostasy narrative often leads to a painful identity crisis since there is no overlap or continuity forged between the convert's new story and their past. There are two terrifying aspects to this crisis:

The first is the terror of becoming unrecognisably "other." If the old self-narrative is deeply ingrained within a believer's *idem*-identity, they may see a complete stranger when gazing at their self in the mirror of their new *ipse*. Hardcastle, suggests this is why those with life-defining self-narratives such as chronic addictions are often unable stop:

> …to do so would mean that a significant part of who they are would cease to be… Addicts… can't genuinely imagine their lives—their particular lives—without the addiction. To stop means to become someone else, someone unknown. And for most of us, that is a scary thought… Some addicts can re-invent themselves as someone recovering or someone sober. These individuals manufacture entirely new life stories, but some, many, cannot.[17]

Even for those that do attempt to reinvent themselves through denigration and/or repression of their pasts, Rambo's research links apostasy with severe identity crisis: "The past is powerful because that is the world in which we dwelt for years, and it lives in our minds and hearts. There is no easy escape from the past, no easy transition to the future."[18]

Malouhi, a Syrian believer, also testifies to the psychological pain of "attempting to remove from his life any traces of its religious culture… [and] recalls friends… who responded similarly and ended up mentally ill."[19]

In retrospect, it seems Ahmad's strategy for decreasing the "disconnect" between new and old identities was to attempt to selectively repress incompatible aspects of his life-story. For example, questions concerning the salvation of his father and grandparents, whom he regarded as pious and good, were too painful to address within the strictly evangelical tradition of the church he had attended. His inability to establish a coherent self-concept appears remarkably similar to that which Fuchs describes in his research into *borderline personality disorder*: "The result is… a *fragmentation of the narrative self*: a shifting view of oneself, with sharp discontinuities, rapidly changing roles and relationships and an underlying feeling of inner emptiness." [20]

The second, related, terror is that of *anomy*. According to Berger, society provides a grand narrative of the world where "meaningful order, or nomos, is imposed upon the discrete experiences and meanings of individuals."[21] To reject this narrative is to risk becoming *anomic* or "worldless."[22]

> Not only will the individual then begin to lose his moral bearings, with disastrous psychological consequences, but he will become uncertain about his cognitive bearings as well… The socially established nomos may thus be understood, perhaps in its most important aspect, as a shield against terror. The ultimate danger of... separation is the danger of meaninglessness. This danger is the nightmare *par excellence*, in which the individual is submerged in a world of disorder, senselessness and madness. Reality and identity are malignantly transformed into meaningless figures of horror.[23]

This description seems overstated. Yet Meral, himself a Turkish believer, appears to identify strongly with Berger's powerful language, using "anomy" often in his writings.[24] Summarising interviews with 28 converts from Egypt, Iran, Jordan, Kuwait, Nigeria, Turkey and the United Kingdom,[25] Meral finds it to

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[17] Hardcastle, V. (2008), *Constructing the self*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins, pp134-135.

[18] Rambo, L. (1993), pp53-54.

[19] Chandler, P. (2007), *Pilgrims of Christ on the Muslim road: exploring a new path between two faiths*, Lanham, MD: Cowley Publications, p29.

[20] Fuchs, T. (2007), "Fragmented Selves: Temporality and Identity in Borderline Personality Disorder", in *Psychopathology*, 40:6, pp379-387.

[21] Berger, P.L. (1967), The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion, NY: Doubleday, p19.

[22] Berger, P.L. (1967), p21.

[23] Berger, P.L. (1967), p22.

[24] cf. Meral, Z. (2006), "Conversion And Apostasy: A Sociological Perspective", *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, 42:4; Meral, Z. (2008a), "How I became a 'so-called' Turk?", *Hurriyet Daily News*, 3 January 2008.

[25] Meral, Z. (2008b), *No place to call home*, Christian Solidarity Worldwide, p7.

be a common phenomenon:

> The first outcome of apostasy is anomy – the loss of a clear framework. For a Muslim, Islam provides a clear interpretation of the cosmos and practical guidance on how to live…To leave Islam for another religion is to undo one's upbringing and perception of the world… When alienation and anomy is internalised by the individual, along with the knowledge that his own families has turned against him, and that his society, government and security forces will not protect him, a life long struggle with depression, loneliness, fear and anxiety can result. All the converts interviewed for this report spoke of their anxieties and deep sense of loneliness.[26]

*Paradigmatic evangelistic and discipleship tools*

Secondly, satellite TV and the internet bring Muslims increasingly into contact with evangelistic ministries that use "modern" tools such as higher criticism and reasoned apologetics. However, if the main fruit of modernity in the West has been secularism and unbelief, why should one expect different fruit amongst Muslims? While paradigmatic thinking is perhaps effective in demolishing faith in Islam, I have experienced that those coming to Christ via this route can struggle to re-establish faith in anything. Although our faith is reasonable,[27] it is deeply rooted in the narrative mode. Thus, "faith is not primarily a factual belief. …It is rather the sense of having one's place within a whole greater than oneself, one whose larger aims so enclose one's own and give them point that sacrifice for it may be entirely proper."[28]

Thirdly, many discipleship programmes are also paradigmatic. The assumption that correct theology will bring about correct lifestyle and character echoes Descartes' "I think therefore I am." This Enlightenment model also informs the emphasis on "systematic theology" often found in churches and seminaries. As we have seen however, the most important areas of discipleship are dealt with in the narrative mode.

Some days after our conversation in the kitchen, Ahmad informed me of a decision he had made: "For 30 years, I allowed everything that came into my ears to go straight down into my heart… But, from now on, everything has to go through here [pointing at his head] before I allow it down into here [pointing to his heart]." This was the wrong decision I believe, and yet somehow the system we were a part of in those days had encouraged him to lower his gaze.

**Narrative discipleship**

What might narrative discipleship look like then? Moses' life makes a useful study,[29] although the same patterns repeat throughout scripture. The basic storyline is familiar: a seeker; divine revelation; an impossible task; the promise of "with-ness,"[30] faithful obedience; a crisis of faith; miraculous intervention; expanded faith; joyful worship; leadership and multiplication; and a hunger for more. This, scripture appears to insist, is what happens when our lives get caught up and woven into God's story—the greatest story ever told. Helping disciples recognise these "faith episodes" in their own stories can help bring order to the chaos and hope for the future. It is likely that a number of these episodes have occurred long before the "point of conversion" that Western evangelicalism has elevated so highly.

The role of the Spirit is vital in this process. Much of the burning-bush experience involved God revealing *his* perspective of world events, and bringing coherence to Moses' fragmented self-narrative of failure. The journey of faith starts here, kneeling before the burning bush—an event rarely experienced in the theology classroom.

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[26] Meral, Z. (2008b), p68.

[27] 1 Pet 3:15.

[28] Midgley, M. (2002), *Evolution as a Religion: Strange Hopes and Stranger Fears*, New York: Routledge, p16.

[29] The following was inspired by Blackaby's narrative-orientated discipleship tool: Blackaby, H. (1990), *Experiencing God: Knowing and Doing the Will of God*, Nashville: Lifeway Press.

[30] cf. Krallmann, G. (1994), *Mentoring for mission: A handbook on leadership principles exemplified by Jesus Christ*. Hong Kong: Jensco, pp39-.