

Healing Our Broken Humanity

Chapter 7: Reinforce Agency

“Agency is the ability and freedom to make unrestricted and independent choices. Individuals and groups need agency to be able to express themselves fully. They need agency to contribute meaningfully.”

Social scientists often connect agency and structures/systems. Agency is the ability to make free, independent, and unfettered life choices and to put those choices into action. Structures and systems are those cultural and social contexts that influence, shape, and sometimes restrict those choices and actions. Examples of structures and systems include things like race, gender, class, religion, politics, economics, and traditions. These structures and systems often prevent personal and collective agency but also have the potential to function positively when they are ordered for human flourishing and the strengthening of agency within appropriate boundaries.

It is sadly the case that church structures and systems have often had the effect of squashing personal and collective agency for various groups of people. But when these structures and systems are transformed by the values and ethics of Jesus they can be liberating and empowering.

The debate about the relationship between agency and structure centers on the questions of which of the two has the most influence in determining the future of a person or group. Structures and systems will always be present and they will always have an effect on choices and actions. The goal is to help individuals and groups to express as much agency as possible within particular structures and to work at reforming structures so that they promote agency and human flourishing.

“As Christians two things can help motivate us to reinforce another person’s or group’s agency. The first is transformed theology of the church. The second is a renewed vision of what a healthy, missional church looks like. God calls the church to be a unified and diverse body. God invites the church to join with him in reaching and transforming every tribe, people, ethnicity, and nation. God works in and through racial, gender, linguistic, and generational diversity. This mosaic emerges out of God’s extravagant hospitality, welcome, and love. God is at work reconciling the world in Jesus Christ, calling every ethnicity, and both women and men, to join in the ministry. Since all this is true, how can we not reinforce the agency and voice of others?”

“This yearning for new life within the church then spills over into our hope and action in the world. God loves justice. God calls his church to work for justice in the world. This includes putting our energies into helping all people in society...to have an uninhibited and valued influence and input. Our goal as the people of God in the world, is to help people exert influence over their lives, circumstances, societies, churches, and destinies.”

Churches can embrace and incorporate practices that reinforce people’s agency both inside and outside the church. Some of these include:

- Providing occasions for minority and females voices and perspectives to be heard
- Invite minorities and women to develop ministries and practices in the church
- Worship in ways that are indigenous to all cultures and groups in the church
- Make sure minorities and women take part and lead in the ministries of the church
- Resist using theologies and models that only reflect majority culture(s)
- Invite minorities and women to shape their own theologies and ministries
- Give fresh weight to the ideas of those who are not part of the majority culture
- Seek to pursue diversity in unity, even when it is hard work
- Work hard for diversity in whatever area of influence you have
- Be willing to make the sacrifice of losing/sharing your role to hear other voices

Practices, Challenges, and Activities for Small Groups

Seek out marginalized and minority perspectives. Join a community or Christian group made from various ethnicities and genders, and listen and learn from their perspectives and experiences. Invite women, people of color, and marginalized people to present at your small group. Ask them to help you think about race and gender issues, and to help you understand faith, justice, and reconciliation better.

Talk about your own prejudices. In your group, talk honestly and openly about your prejudices, racism, sexism, and blind spots. Don’t be afraid to talk about this and pray for the courage to change, and make commitments to do so.

Advocate for those who’ve been silenced or denied agency. Speak up for those who have been silenced in your culture, neighborhood, or church. Talk with church, business, political, and other leaders. Write letters. Speak at events. Demand change. Become an ally for minorities and marginalized groups. Use your time, money, and voice to demand that others are heard.

Get involved. Your small group and church can’t do everything alone. You need to join with other groups seeking to make a difference.

Discussion Questions

Are you familiar with the term agency? What does it mean?

Why do those in power often treat minoritized or disadvantaged groups like helpless victims and rob them of their autonomy and agency?

How do church systems, traditions, practices, and structures sometimes squash personal and collective agency?

Look at the list of practices under the subheading “Embracing Corporate Practices That Reinforce Agency.” What would you add to these practices?

What needs to change for you and your church to help reinforce people’s agency, especially supporting marginalized and minority groups?

What steps will you take to apply this practice fully and in the long term?