

ReFraming Failure:

Lessons from a Post-Modern Clapham Sect

Rebecca Pousette tells the story of a course which now has 9000 participants in over 30 countries, following a depressing start with Christian oil executives in Calgary.

Seven years ago, under the leadership of Paul Williams, the Marketplace Institute at Regent College, Vancouver in Canada brought together a group of Christian oil executives in Calgary, Alberta to strategise how they might influence the city for good. The group was called *ReFrame* and was modelled after the Clapham Sect, the group of prominent London evangelicals at the turn of the 19th century who came together with shared Christian conviction to work for social reform, most famously for the abolition of the slave trade. Calgary, a Canadian city known for its deep Christian heritage, industrious western spirit, and growing global influence in the energy sector seemed an ideal context for *ReFrame*. They hoped to reconcile economic, environmental, and social concerns with their faith, and collaboratively work towards gospel transformation in the city.

ReFrame shared a common desire to maintain the integrity of their faith in every aspect of life and a passion for impacting the oil sector with the gospel. What quickly became evident however was that they did not share a common understanding of what

holistic, reconciling Gospel transformation looks like. Many lacked a vision of faith that held up under the dominant and competing narratives governing economics, environmental science, and theories of social cohesion. Differing views on creation stewardship and intelligent responsibility emerged, and it became impossible to move forward with a cohesive vision and mission.

The Calgary Clapham Sect experience confirmed what had become apparent to the Marketplace Institute: there was a discipleship gap in the western church. While many Christians had a passion for Gospel, they often lacked a vision of their faith that could inform or hold up under the competing pressures and complexities of modern life.

Ceri Rees, current Director of Public Engagement at Regent College, explains that “part of the reason for the tension and disconnect people feel is that we have narrowed the gospel to the realm of the private and sacred, to our worship on Sunday and our personal piety. We have forgotten that Jesus Christ claims lordship over all of life: our work, our play,

our families and our engagement in civic life.” This privatised understanding of the gospel is enforced by a dominant secular culture that perpetuates the idea that faith is irrelevant to the public realms of science, business, education, and politics.

The rise of a global faith and work movement in recent years gives testimony to this acute sense within the Christian church of a divide between the private and public. As Marketplace Institute staff engaged in work with believers around the globe, they realised that it was going to take more than a renewed theological vision of work to bridge this gap. Philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre writes, “I can only answer the question ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’”¹ *ReFrame* Producer and former Marketplace Institute Director Mark Mayhew states “we realised that for Christians to engage their vocations and places of influence with a prophetic voice and confidence in the transforming power of the gospel, they needed a fresh encounter with the gospel story that makes sense of all of life.”

