


Becoming people who can live alongside in keeping with what I have laid out here requires that we, in our being, become different ourselves. First. Foremost. And that will “catch,” and form people.

Paul is context specific and so must we be. Christ always lives His life in and through real people in real contexts. To be in Him and in our place and time are not two different things. There is no other way to be in Christ.

And if that is true, then “being” and “being alongside” is everything.

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“Insider” Movements: How Do They Keep “Right”?

He was wearing store bought camouflage pants and a white shirt when we left his guest room to join me for a visit to a Scripture study that was primarily involving what most would call “seekers,” members of the majority religion in our area wanting to read the Bible and learn.

This man was exploring a longer-term call to work in this part of the world, and was visiting us as part of his process. He came from Central America, and between his English and less of my Spanish, we did well.

After the study he had lots of questions. His asked about this group, of course, and about the nature of the movement which was, then, still pretty new. There were a number of more fully formed fellowships, with leaders.

At one point he asked, “so who makes sure they don’t get it wrong when they are reading Scripture?” I am afraid I was not at my best and my first reply was simply, “well, who makes sure *you* don’t?”

Later I gave him a more complete answer. However, while I answered with an emotional tone of frustration, in fact my reply contains some important truths.



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Perhaps most important, my reply implies that the same God my friend relies on can also be relied on to guide new movements. No matter what safeguards or processes we may think are good and wise and even needed to assure theological quality control, in the end there is someone else who is not only responsible, but has promised to lead us into truth!

I have over the years become more and more convinced of the reliability of the fact that the Spirit of God will use the Word of God to guide and teach the people of God.

However, having said that, like most things it is not either/or, nor is the fact that something being simple gives us a reason to be simplistic.

I can't be simplistic about the process: I don't just point to a Bible and say good luck!

I can't be simplistic about the aim: the question about making sure a movement doesn't go wrong implies that we know (and agree) about the exact things to include in the camps of right or wrong. I am not suggesting that moral and doctrinal issues are relative or purely subjective. But we do need a certain level of humility as Christians, and it is good to recall that not all Christians agree on everything, not even on some very important things.¹

The question about how movements grow and develop and stay healthy is complex, but it *is* vital. When people ask me about how a movement can avoid taking wrong turns, I take the question seriously. And I take it seriously with leaders of movements.

This brief article is intended to show how I have approached this.

How Does It Work in the Bible?

In Acts 15 we find leaders wrestling with a profound question. Gentiles had come to faith, and the Spirit had come upon them (before baptism), and they had not been required to be circumcised, nor were they told this would be needed later. Keep in mind this was not a cultural question: circumcision was a command from God. It was

¹ Examples: Protestant versus Catholic versions of the canon, free-will and sovereignty, the place of the Spirit and spiritual gifts today, and more.

a religious question. It was a theological question. It was a biblical question.

How did they "get it right?"

They got information from the context: what the Spirit was doing, reports from the field, if you will.

They probed Scripture: some pointed to what Moses had said (which would have meant circumcision); James later turned to citations of the prophets.

They discussed (for a long time, and evidently pretty vigorously!).

Then they decided (as a group of leaders, James said it seemed good to *us*...).

And then? Then, as we know Paul, took the letter of James and went to declare the decision to the Gentile believers. In the letter was the decision about circumcision and also, among other things, a prohibition about eating meat offered to idols. This was all met with joy.

He kept going, and got to lots of new places, including the city of Corinth. And Corinth became a messy church to say the least! It is likely that Paul wrote three letters, not just the two we have (which may include parts of the third one).

But my main point: when Paul writes 1 Corinthians 8 he addresses the food offered to idols question. He does not cite the Acts 15 event or decision, and does not mention the letter, which supposedly had already decided this issue. And in addition, he does not teach that food offered to idols is wrong (in itself). He does suggest it depends, it is contextual, and the deciding factor is not the meat, but who I eat it with and whether what I do will harm their conscience.

The issue isn't spiritual purity, but primarily relational unity and love.

But that is not what the Council (including Paul) agreed to in Acts.

It is good to recall that not all Christians agree on everything, not even on some very, very important things.

What is happening?

The texts and how things unfold, suggest that Paul was continuing to seek the Lord's mind and will, and continuing to adjust based on new evidence or new situations.

In other words, in addition to the four steps above:

They got information from the context.

They probed Scripture.

They discussed.

Then they decided.

There seems to be a fifth, at least for Paul:

He re-evaluated in the light of new information or situations.

How does that help in a movement?

Here is a case.

The issue of polygamy first hit one of the movements I have been most closely involved with in the early 2000s. One of the believer's parents arranged a second marriage for him and he was unsure what to do.

Some of the leaders asked my opinion and I suggested we see what the Scriptures had to say. We looked at Old Testament examples of men with more than one wife, and we looked at Genesis 2, Ephesians and 1 Timothy 3. The decision made by the leaders then was that it is okay if a believer has more than one wife, but not if he is a leader. Then we agreed we would keep studying and learning.

Sometime later there was a big earthquake in which many people died. Our leaders were able to share the gospel and do relief work and many people became believers.

One of the believer's parents arranged a second marriage for him and he was unsure what to do.

However, there were also many widows so the question of marrying more than one wife came up again. We again looked at many of the same Scriptures. But this time we also saw the Old Testament statement that if a man fails to marry his brother's widow he should be cursed!

It was suggested that it is okay but not for leaders. But then one brother said that perhaps leaders should be setting the example of marrying their brothers' widows. So for some time this was the idea, but only in that area of the movement.

In 2007 or 2008 we were holding a leader training event. About twenty-five men from different parts of the country were there and we were studying leadership in 1 Timothy. It was not our plan to address polygamy in that meeting, but 1 Timothy 3 brought it to the forefront again.

In the group was an older man, a man who had been a respected religious leader before coming to Jesus (the equivalent in his religious heritage of being a bishop). He was sitting quietly as the others very emotionally argued their different points of view about marriage and polygamy. Finally he simply cleared his throat and everyone became quiet.

He said, "God has a plan A, one man, one wife. We see it in Genesis, in Jesus' teaching, and in Ephesians and in Timothy. This is Plan A. This needs to be what we teach in our movement. This is what our next generation will follow. I know that some of you are in difficult situations. Maybe you already have more than one wife. Or maybe your other leaders do. Or maybe your parents and relatives will pressure you. God is merciful. This is a difficult time of change. But God's Plan A is one man and one wife. That is what we will teach and that is what we will try for."

