

Devoted

BY KEVIN HIGGINS

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Dear Reader,

As you know if you have been reading *Mission Frontiers* for any period of time, one of our consistent themes is “movements.”

We track the number of known movements on our cover.

We talk about movements and what promotes or hinders them; and in this edition, we talk about the “essential elements” of movements.

I want to add to that conversation by going back to one of our source texts, indeed a source text for all those who are concerned for seeing healthy movements to Jesus emerge and thrive: the Book of Acts.

My focus will be on one key word used in Acts, a word normally translated as “devoted.” It shows up several times, but in a very concentrated way in the famous set of verses in Acts 2:42-47. Those verses describe the thriving life of what some would call the “first church.”

In them we see the early followers of Jesus devoted to five things: apostles’ *teaching* and *fellowship*, *breaking bread* and *prayer* and *being in the Temple* together.

My rationale for focusing on these has been shaped by my years of working with emerging movements to try to grow in both numbers and health, in both quantitative and qualitative ways. My premise has become simple: if the DNA is right the body will grow.

I realize that this is overly simplistic, and I am not denigrating the important focus in recent years on various activities, methods, tools and training aimed at helping catalysts of movements be more effective. But my focus here will be on these five qualitative ingredients of healthy movements.

Devoted to Apostolic Teaching

While we don’t know a lot about the content of this teaching from Acts, we do know from the few glimpses we are given that this happened in larger more public settings and house to house (or household to household), as Paul summarizes to the Ephesians in Acts 20.

However, assuming that the letters of the apostles are a window into the teaching they provided we can glean a few things:

Each apostle had a unique style and vocabulary: compare the letters of Paul with those of John, or Peter or James. Each unique, each reflecting their personality and experience.

The teaching was also uniquely contextual. While some scholars use Paul’s varied vocabulary to try to suggest he could not have written all the letters we attribute to him, the facts seem to suggest that he employed vocabulary from the contexts of the people to whom he wrote in order to address the issues they were facing.

While there was a variety of issues unique to different settings, such as we see when we compare Corinth with Colossae, at the same time there were certain issues which kept arising. Almost every letter of Paul, for example, continues to address the things we might have assumed to have been settled in Acts 15 (circumcision, sexual purity, food offered to idols).

To summarize, to understand something of what it may mean to apply best practices for movements today, it is good to remember that when we speak of apostolic teaching, we are speaking of how the Spirit used the distinct personalities of each apostle, inspired contextual application, and guidance as persistent issues continued to require fresh, and repeated, attention.

Devoted to Fellowship

Koinonia is the term used in Acts 2. One place that we are given a deeper look into how one apostle, at least, understood this term is in the letter to the Philippians. There Paul outlines four dimensions of *koinonia* as he experienced it with the people of Philippi:

Koinonia in the gospel (Phil. 1:5-6): That is, a sharing or fellowship in the advance and also ongoing understanding of the good news and its implications.



Koinonia in the Spirit (Phil. 2:1-4): The connection here is to how such fellowship affects and deepens relationships in the community.

Koinonia in the sufferings of Jesus (Phil. 3:10): In fact, Paul has the whole sweep of the life and death and resurrection of Jesus in view in Philippians 3. His passionate longing to know Jesus more, and to actually share in that life, frame one of the most powerful descriptions of the spiritual life we have in the Scriptures.

Finally, *koinonia* in giving and receiving (Phil. 4:15ff): Paul expects to both give and receive. This is a beautiful picture of the mutuality of apostolic fellowship.

Best practices in movements? Devotion to the apostles' fellowship presses us into the growth of the gospel, deeper relationships, deeper experience of union with Jesus and a mutuality of what we have to give to and what we need to receive from others.

Devoted to the Breaking of Bread

An early reference to communion? Or merely a description of how early believers ate together and shared hospitality?

If 1 Corinthians 11 is any indicator, it was both. That chapter portrays a community that ate together weekly, and also portrays meals that were both *meals* and also *memorials* of the Meal.

The fact that Paul had to warn the people about saving food for latecomers, and also to warn them against drinking too much of the wine shows us there was an actual meal.

The fact that Paul connects all that to the Meal Jesus shared with His followers shows us that within the meal, came the Meal.

For best practices in movements, among many implications we might draw, there is a simple one: the forms and rituals we use to express what we learn in the Scriptures are adaptable. What began as a Meal in a meal, became a ritual Meal without a meal in most of our Christian churches, but need not remain as such as new movements emerge.

Devoted to Prayer

This again could mean prayer together or individually as believers, in more extemporaneous forms. Or it could mean the actual Jewish prayers

(the Greek text is plural and may suggest the latter). Be that as it may, we know from any reading of the new Testament that prayer played a vital part in every aspect of the movement. Paul's letters, Jesus' example and teaching and the narratives in Acts all point to this.

Many studies of movements have pointed to the role of intercessory prayer as a best practice, and I do not want to minimize that! However, in addition to that I want us to be reminded of the broad and deep emphasis on prayer in all its facets in the pages of the Scripture. Not the least of these is the prayer life that seeks after and longs for a deeper connection to Jesus.

Devoted to Being in the Temple

Why mention this? The glib answer would be because I am citing examples of the word "devoted," and it is right there in Acts 2. But there is more to it.

Keep in mind that Jesus has just died. Keep in mind that among those who pushed for and celebrated Jesus' death were those who were responsible for the Temple rituals and worship. Keep in mind that being devoted to being in the Temple put the early believers right in the context of those who were opposed to Jesus. Keep in mind that Jesus' death meant the fulfillment of the sacrificial system (though this can hardly have come to the realization of these followers yet).

And yet, there they were. In the Temple. In the center of all of that. And devoted to it.

Best practices? Healthy movements will also be right there, in the center of it, even taking part, faithful to Jesus but in the ebb and flow of the life of the people they are from.

Summary

This edition is devoted to understanding movements more deeply. In addition to the other encouraging and helpful contributions you will enjoy here, I want to remind us to consider these "devotions" as well: apostolic teaching, fellowship, breaking bread, prayer and being in the "Temple," in the middle of it all. 