



THE RIVERBANKS OF A MOVEMENT

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In the last issue, we looked at the importance of setting the DNA for a kingdom movement within minutes and hours of a new disciple's commitment to Christ. That brings up one of the greatest fears about Church-Planting Movements (CPMs): That heresy and immorality will emerge in the movement. Scripture makes it clear that problems will emerge in any ministry (e.g. Matt. 13:24-30, 36-43).

The problems that develop in CPMs (heresy, immorality, or any other problem) are probably no greater than any other ministry context *by proportion*, but they appear greater since there are so many new believers, baptisms, discipleship groups, churches and leaders. In fact, in my observations, the problems may even be fewer in proportion due to the regular mentoring discipleship occurring generation by generation.

All ministries have problems. This was a primary factor in Paul writing his churches addressing heresy, immorality and a host of other sins.

One characteristic of CPMs is that they are out of your personal control but stay within the control of the King. A basic premise of CPMs is to exercise proper influence to shape the movement, but not usurp the role of the Spirit to control and be the Teacher of the movement.

Giving up control, however, does not mean giving up influence. At the outset of discipleship in a movement, there are clear riverbanks (values) to set up that enable the raging rivers of CPM to stay within the banks of orthodoxy and morality. We need not fear heresy and immorality IF we have a plan for dealing with them. If we do not, we should fear them greatly.

THE RIVERBANKS OF A MOVEMENT: OBEDIENCE TO THE WORD ALONE AS AUTHORITY

Ultimately, you cannot control a CPM, or any other movement of God, as long as you want it to continue to grow as a movement of God. What you can do is nudge and shape it, and put parameters in place that enable you to call back believers and churches when they inevitably get off-track. These are the banks of the channels through which the movement will flow. The banks keep it in the channel of orthodoxy, orthopraxy and holiness.

The alternative is restrictive control of a movement, similar to the old brittle wineskins of Matthew 9:14-17. Jesus condemned the heavy burden of the rituals the Jewish leaders had imposed on the people of God; they were inflexible and slavish. In these wineskins, orthodoxy and morality are controlled through rules and our personal oversight, and eventually suppress kingdom growth.

In CPMs, what is essential is that you give emerging believers, churches and leaders a way to hear God speak in his Word (authority), a value to obey whatever he says (obedience) including a willingness to self-correct the movement no matter the consequences. Scriptural authority and obedience are the twin riverbanks to keep the movement biblical.

AUTHORITY: AUTHORITY OF GOD'S WORD ALONE

The Reformers' value of *Sola Scriptura* has been upheld by believers for hundreds of years. Yet, in practice, it is easy to move away from *Sola Scriptura* by creating competing functional authorities for new believers and churches. Theoretically, we say: "Scripture is their final authority." Practically, it is easy for the missionary, statements of faith, church traditions or "words from the Lord" to functionally usurp Scripture as the final authority.

Handing Bibles to new believers and telling them to study them does not make Scripture their final authority. Rather, you must instill a value that God's Word is their final authority. In CPMs or new church starts, you set the DNA for almost all of the new believers' understanding and practice. From day one you must demonstrate that it is Scripture that is authoritative for all of life.

Eventually, the movement may spread beyond your direct influence. What authority will they follow when questions or disputes arise? If you set them up to value the Word PLUS your opinion, what will happen when another teacher comes in (orthodox or false teacher) whose opinions contradict yours? How will you call them back when they get off track?

If you have not given them a value that Scripture is the final authority, you have no way to call them back when they err. It's your opinion versus anyone else's. If you have set up your word as an authority, then you are setting up the movement for failure.

A BIBLICAL PRECEDENT: 1 CORINTHIANS 5

Even Paul, an Apostle of Christ, resisted setting up his opinion as

the authority. Instead, he referred his churches back to the Scripture. From the beginning, heresy and immorality infiltrated the churches that Paul established. There was no way to avoid it. But Paul built into the churches a way to address it. One example is found in 1 Corinthians 5.

"It is actually reported that there is immorality among you, and immorality of such a kind as does not exist even among the Gentiles, that someone has his father's wife." (1 Cor 1:5, NASB)

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Such a sin would lead us to discount the orthodoxy of a movement. Paul, as a realist however, recognized that the enemy would sow tares. He didn't let this shake his faith in moving forward.

The answer to the situation was to remove this offending person from their midst until he repented (1 Cor 5:5). At this point, Paul could have used his authority as the spiritual father. The problem is that Paul would not always be there to answer each situation in the future. In addition it would set

up the movement for divisiveness: his opinion against another person's opinion (e.g. 2 Cor 11:3-6)

Instead Paul pointed them to God's Word.

Remove the wicked man among yourselves. (1 Cor 5:11, NASB)

Paul referred to Deuteronomy 22 as the guide for this decision:

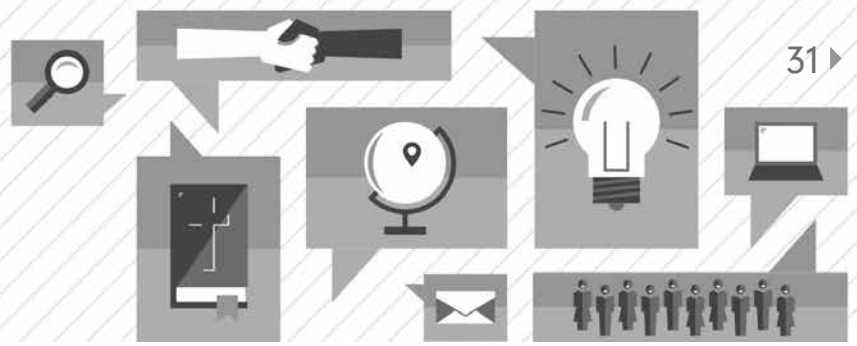
If a man is found lying with a married woman, then both of them shall die, the man who lay with the woman, and the woman; thus you shall purge the evil from Israel.... A man shall not take his father's wife so that he will not uncover his father's skirt. (Deut 22:22,30 NASB)

How do you develop this value of Scripture alone as final authority? One of the best ways is to minimize directly answering important questions (your opinions) but rather refer the believers to the appropriate Scripture in which to meditate for a decision.

In healthy movements the default answer is: "What does the Bible say?" By repeatedly defaulting to this, the believers quickly realize that they must value the Bible as the final authority, not you the teacher, church planter or missionary.

To do this, healthy movements develop a simple method for believers to use to learn how to read or listen to the Bible and interpret it accurately. As disciples approach the Word with open hearts and a healthy hermeneutic, they will progressively grow in Biblical understanding becoming self-feeders.

This does not mean that you never answer questions. But as you resist the temptation to answer their questions and give the group of believers a healthy method for interpreting Scripture, you will realize that the body of Christ has amazing ability to come up with biblical



answers from the leadership of the Spirit. The self-correcting power of the body is amazing (Matt 18:20).

OBEDIENCE: VALUE TO OBEY WHATEVER THE WORD SAYS

To make sure the movement stays within biblical riverbanks you must secondly build in a value to obey whatever the Word says.

In the 1 Corinthians 5 situation, Paul guided the Corinthians to obedience:

“For to this end also I wrote, so that I might put you to the test, whether you are obedient in all things.”
(2 Cor 2:9, NASB)

What a difficult step for them to take, yet they obeyed. Loving obedience was their basic value as followers of Jesus.

Only obedience-based discipleship will keep the CPM in the banks of orthodoxy and holiness. In CPMs, you frequently ask people to be obedient to the Scripture they study each week. Then you lovingly hold them accountable, and vice versa, for obedience in the next meeting. This reinforces obedience. Without it, disciples quickly develop a value to be a hearer of the Word, not a doer.

The enemy is working actively to deceive and create problems. But if obedience is the value, you have a way to call errant believers back. This is what happened in 1 Corinthians 5.

Obedience necessarily includes the discipline of the group to see the

issue through. Like the Corinthians, disciples must believe it better to obey the Word and suffer any

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consequences for correction than to continue in sin.

A CASE STUDY: WIFE-BEATERS

Several of us planned to spend one week training twelve local leaders that represented eighty Ina churches in a budding CPM in East Asia.

One basic ground-rule was: Try *not* to answer their questions, but rather ask, ‘What does the Bible say?’ This is so much easier in theory than in practice!

One afternoon, my pastor friend spent an hour teaching from Ephesians 5: Husbands love your wives. The application appeared to be crystal clear.

After his teaching, I asked if there were any questions. One 62-year old man in the back nervously raised his hand. “I would like to know if this means we have to stop beating our wives!?”

My pastor friend and I were appalled. How could he possibly dream there was room for wife-beating after such a clear teaching from the Word?

Back to our ground-rule: “What does the Bible say?” It was at this point that our faith in the power of the Holy Spirit was put to the test.

We carefully shared with the whole group:

If we pray, the Holy Spirit will be our Teacher. If we go to his Word, he will give us a clear answer about beating wives.

First, I want you to stop as a group and cry out to the Holy Spirit: “Holy Spirit, be our Teacher! We want to rely on you! We need you to give us understanding!”

Together, in unison, we bowed our heads and cried out that prayer to God several times. When we were through praying, I said to the group:

With the Holy Spirit as your Teacher, open your Bibles to Ephesians 5. Together read it and ask God to help you answer this

question. When you have come to agreement, let us know.

The twelve huddled together and began talking rapidly in the Ina dialect, which the rest of us could not understand. Meanwhile, we huddled together in prayer. We cried out to God: “Lord, please let them get this right! We don’t need a movement of wife-beaters!” We had to trust that the Spirit of God in the group could overcome the confusion or objections of one or two people.

Meanwhile the commotion in the Ina group rose and fell and rose and fell. One person would get up and air an idea, then the others would admonish him. Then another would voice an opinion and some would agree. Finally, after an interminable wait, one of the leaders stood up solemnly and pronounced, with import worthy of the Council of Chalcedon, their decision:

“After studying the Scripture, we have decided—to *STOP* beating our wives!”

We were incredibly relieved, but I thought: “What took so long?!”

A day or two later one of the twelve, an Ina man who was a close friend of mine, explained privately to me their discussion.

“We have a saying in the Ina language: ‘To be a real man, every day you must hit your wife.’”

Immediately I realized the gravity of the 62-year-old man’s question and the reason the answer took so long. His real question was not, “Do we have to stop beating our wives?” Rather, after a startling discovery of the holy standard of God’s ways and

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the clash with their own culture, the real question was:

Can I be a follower of Jesus and still

be a real man in my culture?

Would we have stepped in if they arrived at a non-biblical answer? Of course. But if we had short-circuited the process by immediately giving them the answer, we would have missed God’s deeper lesson for them.

That day, and in many other scenarios like it later, God’s Word was reinforced as the final authority, not culture or any Bible teacher. A group of young believers trusted the Spirit to guide them in truth, and then heeded the admonition to obey whatever answer he gave them. The group took a collective deep breath and exercised the discipline to re-define manhood in their society despite the ridicule they would receive.

Pursue kingdom movements in your area. But don’t pray for rain to flood the land with rivers until you have determined to erect banks to guide the channels of the waters! Set this DNA within minutes and hours of the first breakthrough. 

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