

"Tokyo 2020, and the History of Movements"

BY KEVIN HIGGINS

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In this edition of *Mission Frontiers* we include a look at the upcoming Tokyo 2020 event, and we are looking at the history of movements. I want to say a few words about each here.

Tokyo 2020

In 2010, a number of events celebrated and reflected upon the 1910 Edinburgh conference. The one most focused on what we refer to as frontier missiology was held in Tokyo that year. In a next edition we will be publishing an entire group of articles looking at Tokyo 2010. The articles will be written by those who presented papers in 2010, and each will be looking at how we see things ten years later. Stay tuned!

In *this* edition of *MF* David Bogosian and Obed Alvarez look ahead at the soon coming Tokyo 2020 event, which is also seeking to build from what began in 2010. Obed and David describe the call for a new reformation, and use the event of Luther's posting of "theses" as an inspiration for the global church to gather and do the same, with representative leadership describing what needs to change.

This is a commendable enterprise, and we should all pray for its success. At the same time, I sense a gap. Since 2010 one of the dramatic realities in the progress of mission has been the phenomenal growth of movements to Jesus that are largely outside the realms of the churches being represented in Tokyo.

By saying this I am not only referring to so-called insider movements, but also to the growth of all sorts of movements that have expanded the Body of Christ but not generally within (or known to) better known church structures. Which leaves me wondering what sort of theses

the leaders of these movements might post on a 2020 Wittenberg door?

Speaking of movements, that is the main topic of this edition of *MF*...

Drinking from the Headwaters: the History of Movements

As an *MF* reader you are aware of how central the topic of movements has become for us in Frontier Ventures, and in a growing number of organizations engaged in the frontiers of mission. As I have noted before, we are in the midst of a "movement movement."

Typically, our articles have focused on description and reporting. This edition focuses more on the historical perspective, and one thing that emerges is that movements are not a new fad or a recent trend. So, one hope in compiling the articles you have here is to make the point that, while there has been an increase in our awareness of movements, they are not new.

Another point is to suggest that we are in a season in which we are witnessing what very likely is an increase in the number of movements as compared to at least the general flow of mission history. I want to exercise some caution here, as there is much we simply do not know about the past, and our current language and definitions related to movements provide us with lenses for looking at history, but these are lenses our predecessors were not using, and thus there may well have been movements we do not know about at all, or the dynamics of which were not described in ways we recognize easily.

So, this edition seeks to paint at least a partial picture. Movements are not new. And indeed, one way to understand and read the New Testament is as a combination of case studies of the earliest movements to Jesus: the headwaters for all subsequent movements.



The New Testament is certainly more than that, of course. It is a source of doctrine and spiritual life and principles and ecclesiology and much, much more. But it is also, in addition, the collection of the true narratives (Gospels and Acts) and the behind the scenes, inner workings (epistles) of the earliest Jesus movements.

Reading the New Testament that way, as the first history of movements, what are a few things we can glean?

Authentic Movements are a Work of the Spirit

The combined narrative we have been given in Luke and Acts is filled with references to the work of the Spirit. Before the birth of Jesus, in the birth of Jesus, throughout the life and ministry of Jesus, and then beyond the ascension of Jesus: the Holy Spirit was the prime mover in the movements we see in the text. This statement could be misunderstood in at least two ways:

First, my words might be taken to mean there is nothing we need to do, or nothing we need to learn about practical realities or even practices that might foster movements, or might hinder them. I am not saying that at all. There is a crucial place for learning from other movements, whether those are contemporary to us, or historical, or (even more important in my view), biblical. We can and should learn and glean and apply what we learn and glean.

Second, my words might be taken to mean that I am saying everything that seems to be growing like a movement is a result of the Spirit at work. I don't think anything is ever quite that neat and clean! The New Testament record of movements is already an antidote to the idea that anything that seems like a movement must be free of warts and foibles, as well as sin and brokenness. We see in Luke and Acts and even more clearly in the letters that the same movements I have said are empowered by the Spirit are also riddled with human sin, error, and foolishness.

A look at 1 Corinthians provides perhaps the most dramatic picture of the paradox I am pointing to, namely that movements are a work of the Spirit and yet also can be rife with folly and sin, and false teaching.

Readers will almost certainly be in mind of the profound level of brokenness in Corinth and of Paul's passionate attempts to correct and heal. But, even so, even in this rubble of sin and error we know as the "church in Corinth," Paul opens his letter with the apparently contradictory affirmations of the Corinthians as sanctified, enriched in every way, and lacking in nothing. Paul expresses his

confidence that the Lord will continue to confirm them until the day of Jesus.

Movements are messy, and when we look under the hood they often need a lot of repair. Movements have certain dynamics and principles about which we can learn. But movements to Jesus are at the same time works of the Spirit of God. While we can and should learn how to better serve Him in the birthing, growth and ongoing development of movements, they are His work.

Authentic Movements Share Certain Common “DNA” Markers

Much of the discussion of movements has, understandably, focused on the quantitative elements: numbers of disciples or fellowships, generations of multiplication, timeframes within which things have taken place, etc. The Gospels and Acts also at times provide “numbers”: how many ate from the loaves and fish, how many disciples were sent in Luke 9, and then in Luke 10, how many were present in Jerusalem in Acts 2, or later in Acts as the movement grew, and even later when Paul returns and hears of “myriads” who follow Jesus among Torah loving Jews. But no one who is advocating or reporting about movements suggests that just those numerical markers provide the ultimate signs of health.

In our look at the history of movements, if we return to the New Testament as the headwaters, we see that far more attention is given to qualitative measures than to quantitative measures when it comes to describing what was happening, or correcting and encouraging and teaching the leaders and people involved.

I affirm the validity of looking at contemporary or historical or biblical examples of movements in order to draw principles and practices for our own ministry approaches and philosophies. The vast preponderance of biblical material addresses *qualitative* issues and there is very sparse material that could be defined as pragmatic “how to’s” for starting and growing movements.¹

¹ There are practical, pragmatic commands given in Jesus’ instructions to the 12 and the 70, and in Paul’s admonitions to Timothy or Titus. However, Jesus’ admonitions must be carefully applied as they were originally spoken for very specific contexts and purposes, and Paul’s primarily related to leaders and correction of errors, not the explicit growth or expansion of movements. This does not mean that important principles cannot be derived and applied: one popular example being to find a “person of peace.” This has been a fruitful principle, but there are also examples of movements beginning apart from this, and it is unlikely that it was originally given with the intent of being a universal commandment in its specific, original form.

I am not sure if he was the first to note this but an early observer of the New Testament movements was Roland Allen, and he noted the nearly complete absence of anything like exhortations to grow, evangelize, make disciples, plant churches, etc. in Paul’s epistles, much less anything like instructions for how to go about those things. Instead, what the epistles are full of are exhortations, teaching, examples, prayers, and deep truths that are intended to describe and continue to shape the fundamental identity and community life of the recipients. The epistles provide primarily qualitative “DNA” markers and pathways.

I am not implying that Paul did not have practices and principles in his mind or work. And certainly we can discover hints of those, as for example in Acts 14 near the end when Luke describes some of the functions of Paul’s work: evangelizing a city, making disciples, strengthening disciples, and appointing elders. Paul certainly developed ways of doing those things, and those who accompanied him on his journeys would have seen those and learned from those. But, although we can glean such practical wisdom from Acts and Paul’s letters it seems to me that describing detailed prescriptions for our actions does not appear to have been the primary interest of the Holy Spirit when inspiring what we have been given in the New Testament.

Conclusion

My prayer is that this edition of *MF* will bless you, and that it will find its way into the hands of women and men who will be able to glean practical wisdom from the history of movements. May you be able to apply it to your own contexts and ministries whether you serve in the frontiers or in the land and culture of your birth.

I also pray that as you learn from the rivers of movement history we have sought to assemble here, you will also be encouraged to keep following those rivers, like the intrepid explorers searching for headwaters of the Nile, back to the fountainhead of all movements, and there drink deeply from the scriptures which are able to build you up and equip you for every good work! 