

The Marks of the Apostolic – A Mild Critique of Some Fivefold Thinking

In recent years there has been a resurgence in thinking about the so-called “fivefold” “ascension gifts” shape to ministry. It has been furthered by the likes of Alan Hirsch and Mike Breen. It draws on Ephesians 4:11-12 in which Paul refers to five gifts from Christ, “the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service...”



In general, despite a growing tendency to reduce it to some sort of personality inventory, fivefold thinking is helpful. I have, for instance, used it as a starting point to unpack what it means to be prophetic.

Here, however, I want to focus on the *apostolic*.

There's a lot to commend in typical fivefold thinking about the apostolic. It will usually draw on the root word of “apostle” and the associated verb “apostello” which means simply “to send” with the nuance (in context) of being sent with purpose: i.e. appointed to go and do something. Hence the disciples who were the direct recipients of Jesus' Great Commission are, rightly, “big-A” Apostles. And so is Paul, who received his appointment directly from the risen Christ later as one “untimely born” (1 Cor 15:8).

This can appropriately be applied to aspects of ministry today. There is something about the apostolic, for instance, that pertains to *movement*. The apostolic stimulates movement and seeks to lead a community into places where it needs to go

but hasn't. Just as the original Apostles took the gospel into Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth, so the contemporary apostolic desires to *extend* the Kingdom of God in some way. In any new venture – church plant, missionary movement, activist community – you will likely find the apostolic at work, hearing the call of some “Macedonian Man” and heading out to answer (Acts 16:9-10).

The apostolic, therefore, is often associated with words like “entrepreneurial” or “visionary.” Mike Breen, answering a blog post question, says, for instance, “*Apostles can't help but start new things.*” A site that expounds Breen's lifeshapes, describes an apostle as a “Vision-keeper for the extension of the church's mission, an entrepreneur/starter... bring strategic skills, risk taking, get things off the ground (church planting?).”

There is some truth to this. But it is also where **I want to push back.**

The apostolic is NOT *primarily* entrepreneurial. In my experience, it's the evangelists who often have the crazy new ideas. Some of them even work!

The apostolic IS *primarily parental*. The original Apostles didn't just break new ground, or go into new territory, they *took the church with them, and birthed and grew whatever was begun.* They bring the body of Christ on the journey, and they hold and cover whatever is formed.

Entrepreneurs can often be the worst at bringing people with them. To be sure, none of us are as friendly as the pastors, but belligerence is not the mark of the apostolic. Neither is a “vision and dump” mentality that says “well, I've started it, now you carry it.” I've even heard excuses made for toxic leadership, “It's OK, some people have had trouble responding to the apostolic in him.” A corrective is needed.

Healthy apostles don't behave like that. They don't behave

like bosses pursuing a vision despite the collateral damage. Yes, they are deliberate, *determined* even. And the movement *is*, often, outward, ground-breaking, map-making, and pioneering. But they take a “family” with them, and they form a household on the way, wherever they have gone. Because that is the point!

I thought it would be useful, therefore, to list some of the characteristics of the apostolic that I see in the pages of Scripture. It’s not an exhaustive list, and I’d love to receive other suggestions.

These are marks of the apostle that I see in Scripture:

The Apostolic Way is PARENTAL.

Paul writes the following to the Corinthians:

*I am not writing this to shame you, but to warn you, **as my dear children**. Even though you have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus **I became your father through the gospel**. Therefore I urge you to imitate me. For this reason I am sending to you Timothy, **my son**, whom I love, who is faithful in the Lord. He will remind you of my way of life in Christ Jesus, which agrees with what I teach everywhere in every church. 1 Corinthians 4:14-17*

The language Paul uses of a father with his children or, (in the case of Timothy), his son, is obvious. His heart isn’t just to direct or dictate, but to *impart*, through relationship. The gospel is something to be modelled and embodied, and therefore imitated, not simply pursued as a function or task. This marks apostolic ministry.

Paul makes it even more explicit when he applies a maternal image to his ministry, as he writes to the Thessalonians:

As apostles of Christ we could have been a burden to you, but

we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children. We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us. (1 Thessalonians 2:7-8)

This is why churches and church structures that revolve around programs and pragmatics have a sense of lifelessness to them – a stagnancy even in their busyness and sense of “success”; they have stepped away from the apostolic *sharing of life* to sterile functionalism.

The most apostolic people I know bring movement to the church, not just by *leading* the church, but by *carrying* it. They weep and laugh with it. They are broken by it, delighted by it. They hold it in some place primal, and there they carry it to the Lord and Father of us all. They imitate him, and are therefore worthy of imitation.

This does, however, lead to the second mark:

The Apostolic Way is PAINFUL.

The cost of parenthood is significant. There is great joy and fruitfulness in it, but also great pain. Any parent can tell you that. God, our Father, reveals the truest sense of this. The Apostle John alludes to this constantly:

*“...to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become **children of God** – children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but **born of God.**” (John 1:12-13)*

“...for God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3:16)

And Paul, writing to the Romans, having spoken of the Holy

Spirit as the Spirit of Adoption, by which we cry out “Abba, Father” then speaks of suffering as something of a family trait:

“Now if we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed.” (Romans 8:17-19)

The apostle’s “imitation” of the Father will lead the apostle, and any church that can rightly be called “apostolic,” on a path of suffering. This is not a defeatist trajectory, rather it is the “mind of Christ” – the *kenotic* (self-emptying) way that Paul speaks of in Philippians 2:1-11. No wonder, when Paul wants to speak of his apostolic power and authority, he sees the madness of leaning on his own strength and learning (2 Corinthians 11:21). Rather, “if I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness” (11:30) so that “Christ’s power may rest on me.” (12:9).

Too often, we look up to a triumphalist form of church leadership. We look to persons who have been successful, who have achieved some empowerment of our organisation, and in them we place our trust. We are not far from accolading the so-called “super-apostles” that had bewitched the Corinthian church. In what I think is the **defining description of apostleship**, in 1 Corinthians 4, Paul pushes back at those who delight in being winners in the Christian world:

*Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! You have become kings – and that without us! How I wish that you really had become kings so that we might be kings with you! For it seems to me that **God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like men condemned to***

*die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to men. We are fools for Christ, but you are so wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are honoured, we are dishonoured! To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless. We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; when we are slandered, we answer kindly. **Up to this moment we have become the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world.** (1 Corinthians 4:8-13)*

I have learned to look for this “scum and refuse” moment in apostolic movements. If it is not there, I am wary. For instance, the apostolic qualification of a contemporary movement like Soul Survivor doesn’t lie in its many achievements (although I surely delight in them!), but in its foundation in the Wasteland.

The most apostolic people I know weep for, and because of, the church. In this sense they share in the sufferings of Christ, and lead the people on the same self-emptying path. Their tears take them to the heart of God. They cry themselves to sleep at night, and know the grace of God new in the morning. That is what makes a movement, and it can’t be generated by any entrepreneurial technique.

Which reveals a final mark of the apostolic:

The Apostolic Way is Compelled, not Controlled.

In some ways, this is just a natural consequence of the “sentness” of the apostolic. A pioneer cannot predict the path ahead. A pioneer cannot take a controlled path around obstacles and difficulties. By definition a pioneer is not following a map, they are *making* the map!

An apostle goes out with the family of God, not with a plan of *control* (“This is what we are going to do.”) but with a plan

of *purpose* ("This is why we are going.") And then they have to roll with whatever comes along. So often it is not what they planned; it is almost beyond them, in a direction where they must rely on the Holy Spirit. They are only strong because they are weak.

Paul's plans for the evangelisation of all of the province of Asia were halted. Instead he and his companions are compelled by the Holy Spirit and find themselves bringing the gospel to Europe (Acts 16:6-10). And throughout Acts, we find a similar sense of Paul being out of control: he is imprisoned, driven by storms, compelled to escape violence. Even what seems like an attempt to free himself from prison by asserting his Roman citizenship only leads to further captivity... but still many opportunities for the gospel. So often, it seems, apostolic movement is more rightly characterised by "a wing and a prayer" than clever, entrepreneurial, goals.

The Apostle Peter, as he is (re)commissioned by Jesus at the end of John's gospel, has a foreshadowing of the manner of his death. Jesus tells him "when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go" (John 21:18). John tells us that, most specifically, this statement indicates the kind of death that Peter would have. But it also colours the sense of Jesus' very next words: "Follow me."

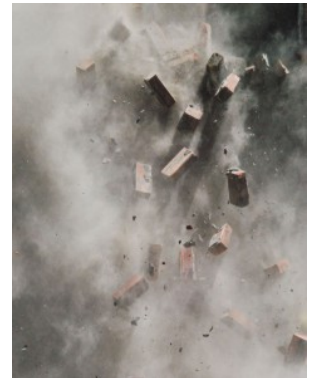
So often, the apostle finds themselves "being led where you do not want to go." Their plans go out the window, and they learn to return to the Father's heart. There, in the midst of uncertainty, they follow the Spirit of Jesus, who only ever does what he sees the Father doing.

Paul, in his chains, brings the gospel even to members of Caesar's household (Philippians 4:22). Peter, even in his death, glorifies God (John 21:19). It is not the path they may have chosen, but it is the path chosen for them. The apostle leads the apostolic church in embracing the weakness (and

therefore the power) of this way.

An Attempt to Grasp Emptiness

(Originally a facebook post, in response to a blog post from Mike Breen).



Is there a Lifeshape for kenosis*?

“Emptiness” is fundamental to Christian spirituality. But it’s a slippery thing to grasp. It’s not figurative (or actual) self-flagellation. It’s an emptiness that comes when you’re in a place where you can’t just lead, you must also carry, and you realise that such a thing is beyond you. Your own fumes of strength are quickly burned away and you find yourself feeling something of the pain of God for his people, as well as a strengthening and a protection that is now utterly and totally and clearly from him alone.

You see it in the drama of Paul’s life whose apostolic burden had him “become like the rubbish of the world, the dregs of all things, to this very day” (1 Cor 4:13) and who even at the end of his fighting the good fight, described himself as being “poured out like a drink offering” (2 Tim 4:6). No wonder he taught the Philippians that song in 2:5-11!

To avoid pain and risk, is to avoid this emptying out. To fall into his arms in the midst of (seeming) failure,

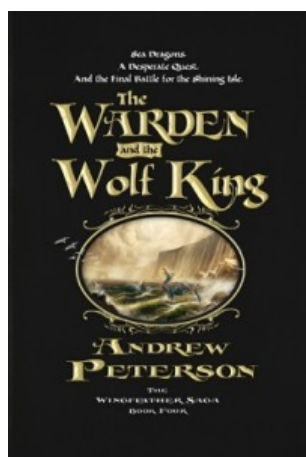
disappointment, frustration, and ennui is the spiritual task. You can tell when a leader has passed through that fire... and when they haven't. And sometimes, when you get to the end of a season of rest and recovery, you long for it again, because in that dynamic emptiness you breathe His vigour and His life.

* *kenosis*, from the Greek κενόω (kenōō), meaning "to empty"

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Review: 30 Second Book Reviews

Some books I've read while I've been off-air, in 30 seconds each:



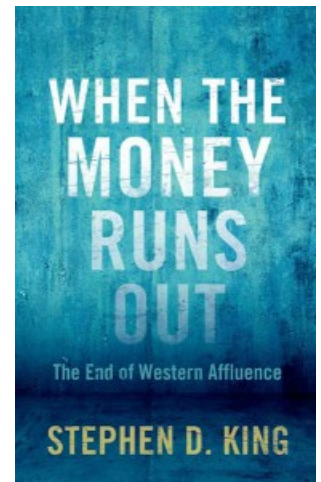
The Warden & The Wolf King (Andrew Peterson).

The last book in the absolutely fabulous Wingfeather Saga. A tale full of adventure through both fantastical lands and through the valleys and mountains of personal identity and purpose. Humour, suspense, and deep deep characters. Challenge and redemption, courage and reliance, solitude and compassion, separation and belonging.

When the Money Runs Out (Stephen D. King).

Subtitled “The End of Western Affluence.”

This book is by an economist, and one with UK point of view no less. A tough read for the lay-person with only a cursory understanding of macro-economics. This book lays out the problems associated with the Global Financial Crisis, and the further problems laid out by the attempts to solve it. Places the GFC in history and compares it with other greater economic crises of the 20th Century and, indeed, throughout much of Western history. In the end King resolves things down to one consideration: the Western World has bought into the lie that our wealth will always increase; in a flattened global economy this by no means certain, and the assumption that it is will make things worse.

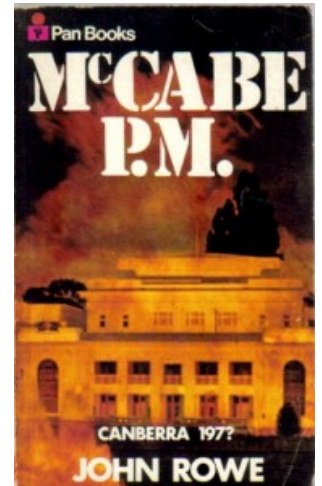


Mike Breen and the 3DM Team

Building a Discipling Culture (Mike Breen and the 3DM Team).

A good follow-up read from *Launching Missional Communities* this book gives a brief outline of the philosophy that undergirds MC's, namely that of holistic, intentional discipleship. Like *Launching MC's* this is a very practical book. In particular, it is the definitive articulation of the LifeShapes tools – mnemonical aids that help discipling relationships be necessarily broad and necessarily deep. For the theologically precise there are a number of “ouch” moments but they are generally superficial or excusable. I continue to find 3dm material resonating with my spiritual and ecclesiological DNA: as if someone has taken what we have experienced and learned over the last decade and a half and actually articulated it. A useful, helpful, fruitful read.

McCabe P.M. (John Rowe). How often do you get to read a 1970's Australian political thriller? I even had to buy this book off and ebay and read a copy that was printed on to paper! A friend had mentioned the plot line and it intrigued me – a Liberal politician suddenly becomes Prime Minister in the early 1970's (pre-Whitlam), three months out from a general election. Over those three months a sequence of seemingly-benign occurrences accelerate into a conclusion in which martial law is declared and consideration is being made of bombing Western Australia. It's a "do you really think this couldn't happen here?" story which transcends it's contemporary issues (e.g. militant Aboriginal activism) and style (e.g. sexual revolution pulp fiction). The only disconnection is a bewildering idealism on both sides of its politics – perhaps the only thing keeping us from descending into similar holes in 2014 is the utter cynicism of our political classes.



Center Church (Timothy Keller). A surprisingly disappointing book to read. Maybe that's a bit unfair: this book is self-confessedly not designed to bring scintillating new ideas to the task of growing the church. Consequently it contains a lot of wisdom. And it is perfectly titled – it's all about the "center" and finding the balance: e.g. between church that is separated from society and church that is syncretised; between church that focuses on evangelism, and church that nurtures the existing; about church that holds to the old, and church that finds new forms of expression etc. etc. Good stuff, but I don't find myself often going through a book and finding myself internally saying "well, duh!" But it's still well-written, and did prick my conscience and my passion in places. At the very least it's a solid reminder that the hard yards and joys of

being church is found in the practice, not in the theory.

Currently reading: N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*; Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged*; and wading through Moreland and Craig's, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*.

Review: Launching Missional Communities: A Field Guide

I've finally read this book. Those who know me will wonder why. After all for many years I was the leader of a church plant that had the hallmarks of the "Missional Community" brand. But at that time I hadn't heard of the movement, although it was there amidst that heady mix of the 00's which sparked up buzzwords like Fresh Expressions, Emergent, Emerging, Reformission, and had voices that sounded like Graham Cray, Rob Bell, Mark Driscoll, John Piper, Brian McLaren, and a bunch of others who tapped the Gen X energy as it came of age: as we set our sights, gritted our teeth, and pushed on with our vocation, irrespective of whether the baton had been passed on or not.



And we learned some things. My wife and I certainly did. Although we never got to writing them down. We were (are?) too busy recovering.

But someone else did write them down. And they wrapped them up in a phrase called "Missional Communities" and blew away some of the chaff, and distilled the principles. And this

handy little practical book is an excellent summation of it all.

The authors (Mike Breen & Alex Absalom) are clearly trying to avoid our natural tendency to fad-ism. This is the danger of “Missional Communities” – that it becomes a program that is a hit in a few places, helpful in others, and fades quickly away everywhere. Normally the only way to avoid this is steer away from the “how” and stick to articulating the principles. But this is a “field guide” – they have to do both without collapsing the organic heart into some form of methodology. They do a good, but imperfect, job at this.

They do a very good job at articulating some of the **principles** of missional communities. This is the stuff that stirs my heart.

- The term “Missional Community” encapsulates “mid-sized communities, led by laity, [which] are ‘lightweight and low maintenance’, and most often gather formally and informally numerous times a month in the groups’ missional context.” (p18, see also p 124). More importantly, it is this form of organic community that is most readily effective at growing the kingdom, particularly in the Western World. It is *small enough care, large enough to dare*.
- MC’s are organic and seek to tap into a “welling up” of a mutual passion. But they remain deliberate, and holistically led. They do this within and through a culture of *discipleship*. This is the muscles of church leadership that is often ignored in favour of the administrative “bones” – leaving heavy carcasses that cannot move. The “huddle” model of discipleship (I hate the term, but like the concept) incorporates both horizontal (peer) and vertical forms of discipleship. The culture of “low control, high accountability” is *essential*, particularly in church systems which have become dominated by the line-management corporate-space

idols of the last century. Even the corporate sector is moving away from this, and the church remains stuck.

The authors quote from a Harvard Business Review article:

'We have found that contrary to what many CEOs assume, leadership is not really about delegating tasks and monitoring results; it is about imbuing the entire workforce with a sense of responsibility for the business.' They [the HBR authors] call this mutualism, whereby staff are measured against qualitative values such as trust, responsibility, and innovation. (p 55)

- MC's both express and encourage a cultural shift from static programs to dynamic mission. Programs, demographics, models, professionalism, and decision-making processes remain important. But such things become self-referential and stultifying. Enlivening happens, rather, in transitioning processes, discernment, on-the-ground context awareness, passion and discipleship (see p26). Such enlivening is naturally holistic and therefore naturally breaks down the secular/sacred divide and other curses of the Western church.
- MC's do not replace the "wider" church but are a natural structure within it, and a deliberative structure that can be embraced. It embraces a "space" (p 42ff) that has, historically, been absent from the church – that of the size of an "extended family." The church has operated in the "public space," and since the advent of small group ministry, the "personal space" – it thus expresses "corporate" and "individual." But it has ignored the "social space" – what Breen and Absalom call the *oikos* (household – p33) space – the "community" space which naturally connotes a longing for "belonging" in the Western world.
- The *outward* movement of MC's relies on discernment and discipleship before it relies on strategy and management. Absalom and Breen make reference to

“Persons of Peace” (p 38) as the hub of their mission dynamic. This relies on the Holy Spirit to bring about the natural connection points where the gospel will find traction. MC leaders are discipled as they are encouraged to exercise this discernment. It is naturally “organic” and:

the church grows best through natural organic relationships, rather than through institutional structures. The invigorating part of the Person of Peace strategy is that it stops mission being yet another thing to cram into our busy lives. (p 39)

There are many chunks of wisdom throughout the book. Many of these articulate some of the things that have been unearthed in my own practical experience. e.g. The “out” of mission builds community and grows the church – “There is nothing like shared battle stories (and battle scars!) to enhance a community’s sense of togetherness, so the very action of going out in mission strengthens the group’s life with one another” (p 32). The practicalities articulated in the latter are the same – how to exercise a teaching ministry in such a context, the role of children at the missional front, venues for meeting, smaller groups within the larger group, the manner of exercising pastoral and practical care: these are questions that we have had to wrestle with over the years and have arrived at similar conclusions.

While many of the points in the book were articulations that expressed something I already knew (even if I hadn’t articulated it yet), I was still extended. The chapter on “spaces” (p42) has some good things to explore for teasing through what the role of the “Sunday” church is and how the organic messiness of MC’s can still be made coherent and coordinated. Breen and Absalom talk about “minster” models and I particularly appreciate the recognition of the celebratory (worship) and commissioning/apostolic role of the

centre.

There are parts of the book that don't resonate with me. I am not convinced by their launch strategy of pilot MC followed by "launch Sunday" and the implied wholesale of converting an entire church to participation in MC's. Perhaps the quote from Machiavelli (p 78) warned me off! For me their launch strategy cuts across the "welling up" "organic" nature that is the life of the whole thing. I think it would be better to start with discipleship – that is, begin by discipling the leaders of "MC" size groups that already exist, or of leaders that have a passion for an outward mission that has some legs, and encourage, train and release them. This "infection" method of cultural change is in my experience much more effective, reduces unnecessary risk of disillusionment, and avoids the fad-ism.

Similarly, the "Growing your MC" section (p109) seems to speak more to the tools of the trade than to the heart of the matter. The variation of the Engel's scale that is employed leans more towards those on the fringe (and the People of Peace) being treated as targets in themselves, rather than objects of genuine love. Like other tools (e.g. Bolt's *Mission-Minded*) there is no natural space for worship and communal adoration and runs the risk of making the mission of the Missional Community overly-utilitarian in nature.

The whole thing still excites me though. This vision of how the church can be still gets a "Yes and Amen" from my slightly less youthful lungs. And the various forms of ecclesial inertia that frustrate this vision now sadden me more than frustrate me. The long goodbye of the non-missional church is almost upon us. We will grieve and bury our parents, and help to launch our children. And Christ will be known in our season.