

## SPIRITUAL FORMATION AS KINGDOM ORIENTATION

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The following essay is more “pastoral” than “theological.” It is a way of understanding spiritual formation that emerges from the two central realities of Jesus’ message and mission as I understand them: God’s Kingdom and God’s people. It is written in straightforward language with very few appeals to scholarly texts or books about spiritual formation. I seek to integrate both biblical/theological observations with practical implications and address steps forward in the process of spiritual formation.

The first part of the essay rehearses the centrality of the *kingdom* in the message of Jesus. This leads to a discussion of the relationship between the Messianic/royal mission of Jesus and the formation of the *ekklēsia* as a Spiritual family. The second main part of the essay offers a perspective on the *goal* of spiritual formation: orienting people to life in God’s Kingdom through experiential knowledge of God, his agenda, his people and his ways. The final part of this essay is a brief consideration of how Acts 2:42 provides a glimpse of the earliest disciples’ *strategy* for “spiritually forming” those who entered the Kingdom through faith in the gospel. It may also point a way forward for some of us as we consider how we might best continue the work of making disciples in our generation.

### SPIRITUAL FORMATION IN A GOSPEL CONTEXT: KINGDOM, FAMILY, MISSION

The synoptic gospels illustrate the central message of Jesus by narrating introductory scenes in which the good news of God’s kingdom is proclaimed (Mk. 1:14–15; Mt. 4:12–17; Lk. 4:14–44). That kingdom announcement is explained, and its implications demonstrated, using the various stories and speeches recorded in these accounts. And, although these three authors have unique points of interest and emphasis along the way, they are united in their conviction that Jesus’ announcement of the nearness of God’s kingdom is the lens through which his words and deeds must be perceived and understood.

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John, too, is committed to illustrating Jesus' focus on the kingdom of God. Although he does not record an inaugural speech in which Jesus clearly outlines his message, he does describe a critical scene near the beginning of his gospel in which the priority of the kingdom in Jesus' own mind is revealed. Most readers remember Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus in John 3 for its emphasis on being born again/from above, or the role of the Spirit in this process. What is often neglected, however, is that being born again is not presented an end in itself here—it is a means to an end. According to Jesus, the purpose of being reborn is to “see” or “enter the kingdom of God” (Jn. 3:3, 5). This goal is made possible by means of Spiritual rebirth but is not to be equated with it. As in the synoptic gospels, the kingdom is Jesus' central concern.

Jesus' message is certainly a foundational element in the Gospels. But Jesus was not just a public speaker. His objective was not simply to persuade people that his teachings were accurate in order to reform the doctrinal convictions of Israel. If that were the case, Jesus would have spent his time primarily among the educated, making arguments designed to open the eyes of Israel's rabbis to their theological blindness. It is true that there were times of public proclamation—in synagogues, in the temple courts, on hillsides, and seashores. It is also true that there were times of private explanation for those who had left everything in response to his gospel (Mk. 4:34). So, it is right for those who lead God's people to embrace this role of educating, provoking, proclaiming, and unveiling the mystery of the kingdom in a deliberate and thorough manner.

However, some of us who lead seem to miss another component of Jesus' public ministry that occupies just as much, if not more, of his attention throughout the gospel stories: Jesus was building a spiritual family. Jesus did not just come to fulfill the prophecies God gave to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in matters concerning his dying for sins and rising for righteousness and life. He also came to fulfill the promises related to the building of a people that go all the way back through God's promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:2 (“I will make you a great nation”), to his original design for Adam and Eve at the creation of the human race in Genesis 1:28 (“be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth”). This required that Jesus not only speak the truth about the kingdom, but that he provide his disciples with a vision of the kingdom in operation among them and through them. He needed to provide them with language to describe and explain the truth, but also a *way* in the world that would demonstrate how the truth translated to the lives of those who came to believe it. Jesus was generating a social movement designed to reveal and establish a culture among those who entered the kingdom, one that would reflect the character, will, and work of God.

Several passages in the Gospels help us see this element of Jesus' work more clearly. One is found early on in Mark's gospel at a time when both enemies (3:6) and natural family members (3:21) object to and react against Jesus' message and its implications. In the midst of all this hostility and

misunderstanding, Jesus is found “calling to him those whom he desired.” These people are contrasted with those who oppose him and cannot see his identity and mission clearly. And, while he does call these men to “preach and have authority to cast out demons,” we should not neglect the *first* thing the twelve are invited into: “that they might *be with him*” (Mk. 3:14-15). Jesus requires not just their apprehension of his message; he requires their *presence*.

The closing section of Mark 3 confirms that Jesus understood the formation of this group of disciples through the lens of family. Jesus’ mother and brothers approached the house in Capernaum that served as his base of operations (Mk. 2:1; 3:20). Jesus is told that they have arrived and are looking for him. His response is both culturally offensive and perfectly logical, given his mission to fulfill God’s intentions for Israel: “looking about at those who sat around them, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother’” (3:34-35). This reference clarifies Jesus’ perspective on his mission. He understood himself to be generating a great spiritual family that he sought to develop and release into the earth to fulfill God’s covenant purposes.

Another passage that brings this goal of Jesus’ life and work to the forefront is found in Matthew 16:13-20. This scene represents a key turning point in the life of Jesus, where he embraces his identity as the Messiah and reveals to his disciples his intention to suffer death on a cross. We also find an additional component of Jesus’ intention. When Simon Peter identifies him as the Messiah, “the Son of the living God,” Jesus first affirms the divine origin of this perception: “flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven” (16:17). Peter’s insight into the identity of Jesus is revelatory. God is working in Peter to open his eyes to the truth. Now, Jesus continues to reveal the implications of what Peter has confessed: “You are Peter and on this rock I will build my *ekklēsia*” (16:18).

Jesus’ *ekklēsia* is his “congregation” or “assembly.” The term is used in the Septuagint (Greek translation of the Old Testament) and in other Greek literature of the time to refer to a gathering of people—whether it is an assembly of citizens of a Greek city-state or the entire congregation of Israel. It is significant that Jesus connects the revelation of his identity with his mission to build his *ekklēsia*. The first implication of Jesus’ identity as Messiah/King in Matthew 16 is the unveiling of his burden to establish a human community that would defy and defeat Satan by learning his ways.<sup>2</sup> Jesus came to build a society of people who reveal the existence of, and give physical expression to, the nature and mission of the kingdom of God.

One more passage will illumine this overarching purpose of Jesus. It is one of the most beloved statements of the mission of God’s people

<sup>2</sup> The words “binding” and “loosing” in Matthew 16:19 probably reflect Rabbinic language for determining the legality/right-ness of peoples’ actions and behaviors. This is a way of projecting the future role of Peter in establishing the culture of Jesus’ people.

recorded in Scripture: the ‘great commission’ in Matthew 28:16–20. Here we find the core elements of Jesus’ life and message. The words “all authority” remind the disciples of Jesus’ message about the kingdom, and that power and right to rule all things now belong to him. Nothing lies outside of his authority. A direct result of this universal sovereignty is the responsibility of the disciples to extend the reach of his kingdom into all nations. The time for addressing only the “lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Mt. 15:24) has come to an end. Now the reign of God in Jesus is to be released among all the peoples of the earth, fulfilling the initial vision that God gave Adam and Eve to fill the earth, and the promise God gave Abram that “all the families of the earth would be blessed” through his descendants (Gen. 12:3).

The way that authority was to be manifest was through the process of making disciples of all the nations. The command signifies that their mission reaches beyond proclamation into what we might call “formation.” They are not just being sent to speak. They are being commissioned to generate a social reality: disciples. These are people who, like the eleven, have entered the kingdom and are now called to embody and validate the claims and implications of this kingdom among the nations. Like Jesus, the eleven are to ignite and shepherd a social movement. They are to give birth to spiritual families in villages, cities, and regions of the earth that will testify to the central confession that Jesus is Messiah, King, Lord. The preaching isn’t enough; it may be the starting point, but it is not the end product. The product is the people. The goal is the gathered ones, those called forth from among the families of nations to form one new family recognized by its One Father, loyal to His One Son, and unified in the One Spirit.

Immersion/baptism, then, is not solely a “public symbol” of one’s private convictions—whether they be repentance from sin and dead works, or faith in Jesus as Messiah/King. It is not only a personal seal of one’s covenant with God, like circumcision. It is not only a means of experiencing grace by which the individual realizes her/his true spiritual identity and is empowered to walk in newness of life. As true as these things may be, it is critical to see Jesus’ command here in context of his purpose in Matthew 16 to build a people. Baptism constitutes the means by which people are integrated into God’s *ekklesia*/family and by which they come, together, to bear his name. God is revealed here as “Father” and “Son,” along with the Spirit. In a sense, God himself *is* a family who generates the archetypal vision for human community. When people enter the kingdom, they come to know God as he is—a perfect, triune being whose unity is not contradicted by his diversity. God is the grid for family. Baptism is the means by which people identify with God’s family, because they emerge from the water not only bearing his name, but also bearing the special and high calling of demonstrating God’s nature and purpose, *by conducting themselves as a spiritual family* among the nations of the earth.

This explains the final instruction of Jesus in the passage: “teaching them to observe everything—whatever things I have instructed you” (28:20). It’s very important here not to truncate Jesus’ command, as if the only thing he said was “teaching them...everything—whatever things I have instructed you.” That would give his disciples the notion that their mission was fundamentally concerned with conveying information or communicating theological content. But, that is far from Jesus’ intention here. Rather, he is appealing to the eleven that they “teach them *to observe* everything.” What he means by “observe” is grounded in his own mission with his disciples—not simply to memorize and understand...but to put into practice (see Mt. 7:24) the instructions they were given, based not only on his teaching but also his example.

Jesus called the disciples to be with him. He was not only interested in communicating information; he was providing a vision of what it looked like to live in God’s kingdom, to operate under God’s authority and to fulfill God’s purposes as a human being. Jesus was not just interested in his disciples “knowing things;” he was interested in them *doing things in a manner that was consistent with the presence of the kingdom, and its overarching objectives in creation and history*. So, when he tells his disciples to “teach them to observe,” he is inviting them to imitate him...to reproduce not only his kingdom proclamation, but also his method of integrating people into God’s family and orienting them to the kingdom so that every component of their lives can become a reflection of *the ultimate reality of heaven’s rule*.

Jesus’ mission was to announce the arrival of God’s kingdom and establish a people who would function as the people of that kingdom. His gospel was a proclamation that God’s rule was accessible, and that people could enter into a relationship with Him, and others, that would manifest the joy, love, power and life of that kingdom. He sought to form a human community that would demonstrate the values, convictions, vision and practices that are consistent with God’s rule—a *culture* that is shared by a *people* in order to provide evidence of his ascension to his throne in the heavens (Acts 2:30).

The agenda Jesus gave to his disciples prior to his ascension was to continue this same mission, only without the ethnic and geographical restrictions under which he himself operated. They were to carry the gospel of God’s rule in Jesus to all the families of the earth. As they were doing this, they were to integrate those who believed the message into the now multiethnic family whose God had made promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They were to train them in the ways of the Master by instructing them and modeling for them the way God intended for them to live—whether that was in Jerusalem, Athens, or Rome—until Jesus himself returned to them at the close of the age. They were to generate and shepherd a new *social reality* over which Jesus reigned, and through which their testimony about his reign could be observed and validated. This new people would serve as a lasting testimony to God’s covenant faithfulness and integrity.

THE AIM OF SPIRITUAL FORMATION:  
KINGDOM ORIENTATION

At its core, the responsibility of making disciples involves helping people enter the kingdom of God and then guiding them through a process that will orient them to the King himself, his agenda, his people, and his ways. The goal is that individuals become whole, functional and fruitful citizens of this kingdom, and that along with the rest of the King's people, they contribute to a demonstration of the identity and mission of Jesus on the earth.

Orienting people to the King himself requires an approach that guides people in the development of a vibrant relationship with him, while at the same time helping them to understand this relationship in the context of God's eternal purpose for creation and history (Eph. 3:11). Entering the kingdom is only possible through a specific kind of relationship with Jesus (one that acknowledges him as King/Lord), and progress in the kingdom is going to be marked by the ongoing development of that relationship. (This is one implication of Jesus' command to disciples, "follow me.") This means that people need to grow in their understanding of Jesus' identity and mission. It also means that people need to develop in their capacity to relate to Jesus experientially as those who are members of the family that he is forming under his Father's wise leadership.

Learning more about Jesus' identity and mission requires that we listen to the voice of God through the Scriptures. Disciples come to understand Jesus more through reading, studying and meditating on the testimony of the Bible—both old and new covenants. This awakens their hearts to the plan of God, and shows them his character, objectives and ways. Learning about the Lord in this way provides them with insight into who God is, how he has revealed himself definitively and reliably, and a grid for why their relationship with God is necessary and satisfying. Mature saints and leaders, then, should begin by laying solid foundations for a life of scriptural study and then giving younger saints tools to continue their studies as they grow. Encouraging saints to take initiative in this area will come with many rewards as people come to see the personal and communal benefits of drinking deeply from the well of biblical revelation.

In addition to learning *about* God in this way, disciples need to learn to know him experientially for themselves. This is certainly a more subjective kind of undertaking.<sup>3</sup> However, it is for that reason no less significant. After all, we serve a living King, whose resurrection, ascension, and endowment of the Spirit to his people make him accessible to us now, and always—even to the end of the age. It is necessary for disciples to learn to experience the

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<sup>3</sup> The reading and interpretation of the Scriptures is certainly not an objective process, though I think it is somewhat *less subjective* than someone's personal interactions with the Lord. I think over time, the perceived quality of someone's personal relationship with God can be validated or invalidated based on the degree to which it is consistent with the identity and mission of Jesus as revealed in the Scriptures.

presence of Jesus in their lives. They need to learn to discern his voice, the convictions he wishes to shape in their hearts and minds, the sense of his joy and approval when they obey, the sense of his loving rebuke and discipline when they disobey, and over all, the powerful and energetic working of his Spirit carrying them deeper still into his heart and mind.

In this light, prayer and adoration should become a standard practice by which the experiential knowledge of the Lord is developed. The cultivation of personal intimacy with God was something Jesus himself practiced (Lk. 5:14), and something he urged his own followers to practice (Mt. 6:1-6). It is also something highlighted in Acts as a component of the lives of key apostles like Peter (10:9) and Paul (16:9; 18:9-10). But, personal, secret prayer is by no means the exclusive context in which the experiential dimension with the Lord is to be pursued. Indeed, prayer with others is far more commonly narrated in the Gospels and Acts, and perhaps just as valuable for the growth of young believers. It is valuable because not only can they learn from the prayers of the saints, but they can also sharpen their discernment through observation and participation in the Spirit with their older spiritual siblings. They can give and receive in a way that both encourages and trains their spiritual “senses” to recognize the moving of the Spirit through the body of Christ.

On the part of the shepherd(s), a different kind of guidance than training disciples to read and understand Scripture is needed here, because here we are dealing with matters that are not only personal, but also potentially dependent upon how the Holy Spirit has gifted individuals to become aware of and respond to his voice. This can be tricky, because there is no guarantee that the young disciple will find a parallel in his/her experience in the more mature disciple who is guiding him/her. Hopefully, wisdom will assist in this process, and those who are helping guide new believers will realize that there are experiences in the Lord that can be true of the young disciple that may not have been true for them.

Young disciples may also benefit from reading autobiographies or biographies of other saints to glean from their lives and relationships with God. This can provide other “mentors” outside of his or her immediate community of faith and broaden the spiritual imagination to include other avenues of connecting with the Lord.

Orienting believers to Jesus is the foundational reality that should define “spiritual formation.” There is no discipleship without Jesus, and in Jesus, the believer ultimately finds everything she or he needs to flourish in the kingdom. Of course, what the believer finds in Jesus will also be the entire community of faith, which will contribute to the orientation process in unique and critical ways. But, the church can never replace Jesus, himself. In him “are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col. 2:3).

In addition to being oriented to the King’s identity and personality, disciples need to become aware of his agenda—not only for themselves as individuals, but for his people, for the world, for all creation and history.

As we saw above, Jesus had a profound and clear sense of mission and how his disciples were both a partial fulfillment of it and the people he was developing in order to extend and ultimately complete that mission. For disciples, this mission is their reason for being. It is what brings purpose, order, and vision to their lives. Without a keen sense of this overarching plan, disciples can be confused, misguided, ineffective, and unfruitful. They can feel like someone lost in a country without a map or a guide. With this plan deeply embedded within them, however, disciples are equipped to interpret their experiences and circumstances in a way that helps them navigate the present age with wisdom and grace.

The process of orienting people to God's agenda depends in large part upon their knowledge of the Scriptures. Here is where we find both the larger elements of God's eternal purpose (Eph. 3:11), specific instructions that have been given to believers in the past, and as a result, an invitation to consider the implications of these things for our own lives in any moment of time. Tracking the big-picture concerns of God's purpose over time is a valuable way for believers to read Scripture and discover both the consistency of the Lord's intentions, and the specific or unique objectives he has provided for his people in different eras. God's story provides the context for any individual believer's story. It provides people with a proper landscape in which they can find themselves, as well as lens through which they can truly see and appreciate the meaning of their lives, and the contributions their lives are making to the unfolding of God's plan.

The Scriptures will also locate them within a community that helps to shape their sense of identity and mission. As we saw above, this community is a partial demonstration of God's ultimate purpose. And, in any generation, people's participation in this community will affect both their understanding of God's purpose, as well as their ability to contribute to it. Church as Christ conceives it, and as the apostles describe it, is the spiritual family without which it is impossible to perceive our identity or fulfill our purpose accurately. This becomes most clear in passages like 1 Corinthians 12, where Paul writes about the nature of the church using the analogy of a human body. Here parts are both interdependent and uniquely designed. There is no way for the body to function without the contribution of all its parts. And there is no way for an individual part to function properly without an organic and life-giving connection to the rest of the body. God's people are meant both to shape our sense of God's mission and also help us discover the unique ways we may contribute to that mission.

Finally, much like knowing Jesus himself, coming to a deeper understanding of his agenda will also depend on an experiential knowledge of the Lord. In fact, this should be one of the things we take away from our increasing study of the Scriptures. God reveals himself to people. He speaks to them and tells them who they are and what they are to do. This information comes through personal encounter with God, prophetic speech, and even through physical contact from other believers (laying on of hands).



People can discover a profound sense of their calling, their Spiritual gifts/endowments, their direction and purpose, through direct connection with God. Dreams, visions, audible voices, internal “knowing,” and prophecy are just some ways that people make these discoveries in Scripture. Alerting disciples to these very real and potentially life-changing avenues of divine communication can help to shape an open heart, and a courageous attitude, as they remain alert to the many creative ways that God may want to speak to them about their own destiny and contribution to his plan. In addition, disciples should be trained in the way of wisdom, which allows them to evaluate their life experiences through the lens of God’s truth. This will help them develop a treasure trove of insight and understanding as they continue to walk according to the truth of the gospel.

A third responsibility in disciple-making is to orient believers to God’s people. On one level, this means helping disciples to understand what the church or *ekklēsia* is, and what it represents in God’s overarching plan. But, on another level, this means literally to orient them to other believers as spiritual siblings who are being formed together with them into a family and dwelling place for the Lord. The conceptual theological vision of the church must be combined with a practical expression, or disciples will either fail to grasp God’s design for his people or fail to develop relationally in order to implement that design in concrete ways.

As it was for Jesus, the *ekklēsia* is of primary concern to disciples. This is because, in the end, God’s goal is to create, nourish and perfect for himself a people on the earth who bear his image, host his presence, and do his will. This is both the beginning and end of the biblical drama (Gen. 1 and Rev. 21–22). People are at the center of God’s interests. And, the Scriptures describe God’s tenacious commitment to be in relationship with a specific people in order to fulfill his intentions through them.

God’s way of defining the kind of relationship he wants with a people is through covenant. This is a unilateral, definitive way of shaping people’s understanding of God’s expectations for them, and what they can expect from God. Disciples need to see how God’s covenant people were formed initially from the descendants of Abraham in order to create a society that was marked by his presence, his justice, his wisdom and his loving concern for all the people of the earth. They need to see the story of Israel as both an expression of God’s vision for His people, and as a preparatory step toward the fulfillment of that vision through Jesus, and subsequently the church. And they need to see the story of the church as the new covenant culmination of God’s plan for human community—one which awaits its final chapter through the proclamation of the gospel to all nations, the ingathering of the fullness of the Gentiles, the salvation of Israel and ultimately, the resurrection of the dead. This *ekklēsia* is destined to become the brilliant and final goal of God’s creative work—a family, a dwelling place, and a bride for Jesus Christ himself. Seeing this vision in broad strokes will

help disciples cultivate a deep love and profound devotion to the *ekklēsia* as God's treasured possession and their true spiritual family.

In addition to learning the place of the *ekklēsia* in God's master plan, disciples must learn to develop vital relationships with the King's people in their own time and place. The church is not just an idea or a placeholder in God's big picture; it is a collection of human beings to which the disciple belongs. These people are meant both to shape the disciple and to be shaped by him/her. Cultivating healthy and life-giving relationships is a process that people may not be equipped for prior to their immersion into the body of Christ. The family and social background of individual believers tends to play a huge role in their capacity to understand what such relationships look like, and how they are built and maintained. Without attention to these interpersonal realities, expecting disciples to fulfill the vision of kingdom community contained within the Scriptures will be a frustrating and nearly impossible task. As a result, shepherds and leaders need to commit themselves to modeling such relationships with disciples to provide them with a practical expression of the values and instructions conveyed within the apostolic writings.

God's intention is to develop people into a concrete expression of family (a household, per Gal. 6:10 or 1 Tim. 3:5). As we saw above, Jesus envisioned this very thing when he called his disciples to "be with him" above everything else (Mk. 3:14). Disciples need time with other believers. Shepherds and leaders need to make time for disciples in order to show them healthy relationships. God's people need to provide a warm and accessible "home" for new believers, being ready to commit chunks of time to invest in them, not just to teach them about the Bible or Christian doctrine, but to relate to them as people and form the kinds of bonds that are appropriate for people who have become an eternal family with them.

The urgency of this need at the present time is significant. The brokenness of many family structures in our specific era of history is a serious obstacle to disciples understanding the fatherhood of God, the brother/sisterhood of the saints, and the quality of family life that the Lord seeks among us. It is crucial for shepherds and leaders to open their homes, their lives, and their hearts to the flock. Being hospitable is a foundational qualification for elders/overseers, and part of the reason for this is to demonstrate the quality of family relationships that should characterize not only the individual's "blood family," but God's own spiritual family (1 Tim. 3:2-5; Tit. 1:8). Young disciples need genuine relational intimacy with God's people just as much as they need Bible knowledge and doctrinal instruction. Investing in relational intimacy is time-intensive, but it will yield the return of a strong family unit that understands how to "build itself up in love" (Eph. 4:16).

A final area of orientation for disciples is to God's ways. In a sense, disciples are certainly being oriented to God's ways through the three previous areas of emphasis (God, his will and his people). What I am

primarily concerned about here is something that we might refer to as the *culture* of God's kingdom. Believers need to orient their lives around the values, priorities, characteristics, and commitments of God's people. In any generation, these things will stand in stark contrast to the culture generated by the world system. Disciples will need to learn the difference between the kingdom's culture and that of those who are not living their lives in submission to the King. God's people constitute a society of their own. This society is grounded in God's character and power and functions in such a way as to provide evidence for the reign of Jesus before the eyes of an unbelieving world. Training believers to develop a way in the world that corresponds to the vision of heaven for them and God's people as a whole is therefore a high priority.

Learning God's ways is essential for the individual disciple to please the Lord, and to execute his/her personal assignments in the kingdom. Developing personal character, healthy habits, eternally-relevant values, and a strategy for determining and keeping commitments are core components of an ethic that corresponds to the image of Jesus. Training believers to recognize areas in their lives that will require repentance and realignment to God's pattern for them is necessary. Turning away from works of the flesh and learning to demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit is a foundational component of maturity in the Lord. Learning how to resist temptation, renew one's mind, and "put on the new self" in any kind of situation should be a focus of developing people in Christ (Eph. 4:24). The best way to help disciples develop in this area will likely be a combination of instruction and practical demonstration. This means that not only should the shepherds/leaders expect to *teach* believers about who they are in Christ, but that they should be ready to invite disciples into their lives to *demonstrate* how that new identity looks in a variety of situations.

It is also very important to help disciples see how their new kingdom identity needs to be expressed in the multiple social contexts of which *they* are a part. How do God's ways affect them in the workplace? How ought God's ways to be manifest in their marriage or family life? How are God's ways relevant to their friendships and memberships in other social contexts? How do God's ways help them map out a pattern of faithfulness among unbelieving and believing people alike? Each individual disciple is invited into the commission to be a "witness" to their world of the resurrected King who now has his/her love, loyalty, and devotion (Acts 1:8). This sense of mission should be communicated early on to disciples, though without mandating the specific manner in which that witness should be executed. That must ultimately be a responsibility for the Holy Spirit.

In a broader sense, disciples also need to learn about God's ways for his people as a whole. They need to discover who the saints are and what God has called them to do together in the context of their neighborhood, city, region, and world. This sense of corporate solidarity is the counterpart to the disciple's focus on individual moral development. God's ways are

never worked out in a vacuum; they encompass a person's life, geographical location, and historical period. The sweeping nature of God's plan demands that disciples discover together what suits God's purpose for their generation (Acts 13:36). Shepherds and leaders should be dedicated to helping younger disciples connect these dots, so they can become increasingly aware of the implications of their membership in God's people for their time and place. As the *ekklesia* grows in its capacity to understand and express the culture of the kingdom, it can learn to play its part in advancing the cause of the gospel in the socio-cultural-political spheres it inhabits.

#### ACTS 2:42 AS A STRATEGY FOR KINGDOM ORIENTATION

A final concern of this article is to consider the way in which the earliest followers of Jesus set out to fulfill Jesus' command to make disciples. Although the book of Acts does not provide us with anything close to a complete record of all that the earliest churches thought, believed and put into practice, it does offer a glimpse of the way one such community responded to the Lord's "Great Commission." After experiencing the promised outpouring of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost, we are told that the believers, now numbering over 3,000, "were devoting themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the fellowship, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers" (Acts 2:42). Is it possible to perceive in this description a way of orienting people to the kingdom of God as a spiritual family on mission?

It is important to consider the fact that the believers are described as "devoting themselves" to these four things. The word here can mean something like "being busily engaged with" or even "persevering in" something.<sup>4</sup> This reflects a conscious choice and an ongoing commitment. It reveals that these were areas of specific dedication that emerged as a result of what these people had experienced and what Peter (with the eleven) had communicated up to this point. They pursued these things as an expression of the new reality in which they found themselves, and in fulfillment of the instructions of Jesus (1:1-8) and Peter (2:14-40) through the Holy Spirit. In other words, this is not a mere "observation" by Luke; rather, it serves as a description of an apostolic strategy for the fulfillment of Jesus' mission for his people.

The first thing they were busily engaged with was the teaching of the apostles. What was this teaching? Simply put, it was the gospel of the kingdom. It was the substance of what Jesus had communicated to them during the period in which they followed him and learned from him. But, it was also the very focus of what Jesus communicated with them after his

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<sup>4</sup> BDAG, 881, §2.

resurrection from the dead (Acts 1:3).<sup>5</sup> It was the focal point of their lives, and the determining factor for their new understanding of their identity and mission. The kingdom is the heart of Peter's proclamation in Acts 2, as he proves through Scripture and experience that Jesus is both Messiah/King as a result of his resurrection (as David's promised heir, per Ps. 16; Acts 2:24–32) and universal Sovereign/Lord by virtue of his ascension (per Ps. 110; Acts 2:33–35). And, all of this was verified by his outpouring of the Spirit upon the disciples on Pentecost. The teaching of the apostles, then, was their proclamation of this kingdom gospel, through the lens of the Scriptures (Lk. 24:44–49), the experience of Jesus' death, resurrection, ascension, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. It must ultimately have led to their ongoing unfolding of the implications of this good news for the people who now came to see themselves as citizens of this kingdom. This instruction likely would have covered the areas of interest we discussed above: God, his agenda, the identity and mission of his people, and his ways.

Something that should also be considered here is the *manner in which* they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching. As we read Luke's narrative, we notice that in Jerusalem, the apostles preached this gospel in public, outdoor spaces (Acts 2), semi-private though accessible locations like Solomon's Portico (Acts 5:12), and more intimate places like people's houses (5:42). It seems that "teaching" was not something confined to a specific location, like a synagogue. Rather, the apostles made use of whatever environments were available to them, or which they were led by the Spirit to inhabit, in order to convey the gospel and its implications. This pattern seems also to have been embraced by the apostle Paul. Throughout the second half of Acts, we find him proclaiming the gospel in synagogues (e.g. Acts 13:14ff.), in public places in cities (e.g. Acts 14:8–18), in marketplaces (Acts 17:17), in a place of prayer by a river (Acts 16:13), in a place of public philosophical debate (Acts 17:19), in a public tribunal (Acts 18:12), in the lecture hall/school of Tyrannus (Acts 19:9), in an upper room (Acts 20:8), on the steps of the Temple (Acts 22:40), before the Sanhedrin (Acts 23), before magistrates (Acts 24; 25), and in people's households (Acts 16:32ff.; 18:7; 20:21), not to mention Paul's own quarters in Rome (Acts 28:16ff.).

It is very likely that in pursuing this flexible and spontaneous approach to proclaiming the kingdom, the apostles were simply following the example of their Master and King. Jesus' own habit of using whatever context in which he found himself to articulate the truth of the kingdom is clearly outlined in the Gospels. The apostles followed suit, and the people persisted in this teaching, presumably accessing it however and whenever it was available to them.

I think this flexibility is quite important for us to recapture. Though I am sure there are exceptions, it seems to me that for "professional clergy,"

<sup>5</sup> Craig Keener says, "because the apostles' teaching provided the historic link to Jesus's ministry (1:21–22), it is essential for Luke in emphasizing the continuity between the mission of Jesus and his church" (*Acts: An Exegetical Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012], 1001).

there is a strong temptation to locate “apostolic teaching” within the confines of a church building, or even more narrowly, the Sunday morning service. The assumption that this, and other, official-type settings are the most conducive to instructing people is something that is not only challenged by Scripture but can also be challenged by our own life experience. Teachable moments abound—and not only in the lives of children, but in the lives of adults who have a multitude of opportunities to grow throughout the rhythm of the work week. We should be ready and willing to help people access the kingdom gospel in diverse and informal contexts—whether that be at the kitchen table, at a local park, or at a hospital bedside. Apostolic teaching is also something that we should be ready to deliver using the technological tools we have at our disposal. I am not ashamed to admit that in our large, urban context, where traffic, weather and other obstacles can prevent people from gathering physically, FaceTime and online platforms have often served us well as we continue to educate and train disciples. Preaching in an organized gathering of saints on Sunday is a beautiful thing. But, developing a community of people who are ‘busily engaged’ with the apostles’ teaching is going to require much more of us than this.

The second thing the believers were busily engaged with was “the fellowship.” The term employed by Luke in this verse is significant. It means much more than believers simply exchanging friendly greetings or being in the same place with one another instead of hanging out with unbelieving friends. The word here being translated fellowship is *koinōnia*. Another way of defining this term is “a close association involving mutual interests.”<sup>6</sup> The implication here is that the disciples were busily engaged with the *ekklēsia* itself—that is, with one another. The term is used in the ancient world to describe the sharing of goods and resources. It also refers to the idea of participation together in the same activities or responsibilities, as we see in Acts 2:44-47.

As we have seen above, the arrival of the kingdom generates a people. And those people earnestly devoted themselves to one another in ways that expressed solidarity, partnership and mutual care. This is a foundational strategy to learn about God’s agenda, his people and his ways in the context of interdependent community life. Indeed, some might even call this way of life “familial”—that is, characteristic of the way members’ families would care for, provide for and serve one another. Without using the term “family,” New Testament scholar Darrell Bock comments, “Luke points to fellowship to underscore the personal interactive character of relationships in the early church at all levels... There is a real sense of connection to, between, and for each other.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, the *ekklēsia* participated in a common life together much like a family.

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<sup>6</sup> BDAG, 438, §1.

<sup>7</sup> Darrell Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary of the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 150.

I think we are all familiar with ways of supporting others in our congregations in times of great need and urgency. Meals for new moms, comforting people during times of loss, and contributing to celebrations of weddings, graduations, and the like are all expressions of solidarity and support. It is necessary, however, to make sure that we do not restrict “participation” to something reserved for such punctuation marks at the end of long sentences, as it were. Instead, we need to help people to be proactive about learning how to partner with one another for kingdom advancement in response to the Spirit’s voice. We as leaders need to provide both the vision and the “green light” for disciples to actively engage one another, their neighbors, communities and cities together. We need to model, and encourage, families to eat together for no other reason than to build relationships, share one another’s needs and dreams, and learn to trust and pray for one another. We need to encourage people to tap into the Spirit’s gifts and presence to open their homes for meals with neighbors, to team up to host block parties, or to organize massive outreaches on Halloween for kids and parents wandering the streets. The kingdom is capable of dignifying every member and mobilizing every member for eternally fruitful work.

The third thing these believers devoted themselves to was “the breaking of the bread.” Some scholars believe this to be a reference to the ritual or sacrament of the Eucharist/Communion. Others simply see it as a reference to the habit these believers developed of eating their regular meals together. The latter would have certainly been the case, even if the former was also true, since as far as we know, the bread and the cup Jesus introduced at the “Last Supper” continued to be shared as a part of a “Lord’s Meal” during the rest of the New Testament period (see 1 Cor. 11:17–34 and Jd. 12). The sharing of meals in one another’s homes is reiterated in Acts 2:46, and so it is very likely that at a minimum, what Luke is showing us is that the disciples were busily engaged with hosting and attending meals in one another’s homes.

If we are curious as to how meals became such a center of the life of the disciples, we need look no further than the mission strategy of their Master himself. The number of times Jesus is described as attending, going to or coming from meals in the Gospels is eye opening. He engaged “sinners” and Pharisees at meals. He instructed disciples at meals. He cultivated intimacy with his friends at meals. He was welcomed into homes, and he welcomed others into his home. Indeed, as Luke 7:34 says, “the Son of Man came eating and drinking!” Even after the resurrection, it’s possible that some of his instructions came in the context of meals.<sup>8</sup> It seems, then, that the disciples picked up where Jesus left off, committing themselves to a way of life organized around the table. Why would this be?

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<sup>8</sup> One way of translating the language in Acts 1:4 is “while *eating* with them, he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem...”

The table is a powerful indicator of intimacy, friendship, and welcome. Meals in the New Testament period were avenues used to cultivate relationship and to demonstrate unity and harmony. New Testament scholar Craig Keener notes, “a host who shared a meal with guests was thought to have formed a bond of relationship that never should be taken lightly.”<sup>9</sup> Jesus used meals to reveal and extend the grace of God to people no one believed deserved it. He used meals to open his own heart to his friends and to demonstrate the kind of vulnerability that true loyalty requires. He used meals to enact his own kingdom proclamation by welcoming a ragtag group of mismatched people and increasingly forming them into a family unit. As Tim Chester puts it, “the meals of Jesus... represent a new world, a new kingdom, a new outlook. But, they give that reality substance. Jesus’ meals are not just symbols; they’re also application... They represent the meaning of the mission, but they more than represent it: they embody and enact” it.<sup>10</sup> Meals form family. Meals build intimacy. Meals extend mission. Meals proclaim and demonstrate God’s new kingdom family, and provide a point of orientation in everyday life for this kind of manifestation.

By being busily engaged with meals in one another’s homes, the disciples were repeatedly enacting the new kingdom realities proclaimed in the gospel. They were building relationships, providing for one another, rehearsing the Lord’s death and resurrection (whenever the meals included those special moments with the bread and the cup), and extending the reach of the kingdom into new physical spaces.

Practically speaking, the sharing of meals may be the practice that has made the most significant long-term effect on the nature of the community in which I serve. It is not always easy. Sometimes, it is downright messy and even frustrating. But, over the long haul, eating together is such a rich and sanctifying discipline. Most of the church gatherings I participate in begin or end with meals. Our Lord’s Suppers (when we share in the bread and the cup) are actually suppers, in which people look each other in the eyes, as well as remember the sacrifice of the King that has brought them to the same table. Hospitality and generosity are shocking to many people in my city, who are used to a fast-paced, utilitarian approach to meals and the table in general. Some people we have met in our city never even ate with their families, and are profoundly stirred by the *time* we take just to enjoy our food and one another. For those of us who lack patience, devoting an hour to a meal at the beginning of a gathering will challenge us. We are convinced that the time would be better spent doing more “spiritual” things. But, this is where our theology fails us. From the perspective of the Scriptures, these meals *are profoundly spiritual*. They are covenant meals in which we feast under the shadow of the Lord’s wings. They are manifestations of the kingdom family into which we are baptized, and in

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<sup>9</sup> Keener, *Acts*, 1005.

<sup>10</sup> Tim Chester, *A Meal with Jesus* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011), 14.



which we must now grow. The table is a microcosm of the kingdom, and we neglect it to our peril. Here we recognize the body of Christ—both in terms of his sacrifice and in terms of his people (see 1 Cor. 11). And, here we continue to be conformed, as the body of Christ, more and more into his beautiful image.

Finally, according to Acts 2:42, the believers were busily engaged with “the prayers.” Acts describes a diversity of contexts and purposes for prayer. Believers participate in more “organized” gatherings for prayer at the temple (3:1). They gathered in private locations to pray like upper rooms and individual houses (1:14; 4:31; 12:12). They prayed on rooftops privately (10:9), in prison cells in pairs (16:25), and in small groups of leaders (13:1–3). Sometimes they prayed for specific things (signs, wonders and bold proclamation of the gospel in 4:29ff.), but sometimes they simply pray and minister to the Lord (13:1–3). Presumably, they continued to apply Jesus’ teaching of private, personal prayer combined with more public, united times of prayer (see Matt. 6).

Prayer is a foundational way to know and experience God. It is also a key to accomplishing the will of God, according to the instructions of Jesus in Matthew 6:9–13. Private and united prayer combine to orient the disciple to the Lord, his agenda and his people. Moreover, when God responds to his people in prayer, he further illumines these things for them, which develops the disciples’ understanding of his ways.

How desperately we need a fresh vision of and devotion to prayer! Trying to make progress in the kingdom apart from prayer is like trying to plant seeds on stainless steel. Prayer is the fundamental work of the kingdom, and it is the engine that makes every other thing we do in obedience to the Lord work. Church leaders should be setting the pace—both in terms of private devotion and public participation—providing an example to God’s flock of the value and joy of deepening our communion with the Lord. It is again necessary for us to make very sure that we do not restrict our prayers to the “official services” of the church. I think it is safe to say praying in church services is the expected role of spiritual leaders. For that very reason, our dedication to prayer must not stop there. We must be consistently turning to prayer throughout the day. It should be the default setting for our reactions to bad news and good news alike. It should be the serious and constant business of those following in the footsteps of Jesus. In the same way, we ought to be helping disciples to develop in prayer by praying with them, giving them resources to understand prayer better and encouraging them to join their voices to ours when we pray together. How much sweeter is it for our brothers and sisters to hear about answers to prayer for which they, themselves have contended on their knees! Let it not be strange to end conversations with prayer, to end meals and evenings of sweet fellowship with prayer, nor to offer thanks and praise together for the many precious drops of mercy that fall on us as we inhabit kingdom spaces throughout the day.

The process of spiritual formation can be understood through the lens of orienting disciples to the reality and implications of the kingdom of God in the context of spiritual family. This is accomplished by helping them grow in their knowledge and experience of God, his agenda, his people and his ways. Acts 2:42 illustrates four foundational areas of ongoing devotion that characterized the earliest disciples' strategy for accomplishing this kind of kingdom orientation. It may be worthwhile for early twenty-first century American churches to revisit these commitments in consideration of our own responsibility to make disciples of all nations in a new generation.