

From addition to multiplication – extract from Reimagine Church

As I read the book of Acts I see a most remarkable development in both the exponential growth of the church and the language that is used to describe the process.

We start in Acts 2 following the day of Pentecost and Peter's first sermon where 3000 were added to the number of believers, Acts 2:41

'Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.'

The word in the Greek for added is the word 'prostithemi'. It carries the sense of laying one thing along side another, and so adding to the original.

This same word is found several more times in the Acts story. It occurs again at the end of the same chapter

'the Lord was adding daily to their number those who were being saved' v47

We see the same word 'prostithemi' in Acts 5:14

'Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number.'

Addition was the norm for the first 5 chapters in Acts. But then in the next chapter we see an interesting development. As the church grows there are two key words that change as the story moves into chapter 6. Firstly 'persons' in Ch 2 and 'men and women' in Ch 5, change to 'disciples', (mathetes in the Greek) in Ch 6. Secondly, instead of them growing by addition, 'prostithemi', they are now growing by multiplication, the Greek word 'plethyno' also in Ch 6.

A plethora of followers:

'Now in those days, when the number of the disciples (mathetes) was multiplying (plethyno)...' Acts 6:1a NKJV

This is a completely different idea and dynamic. In many bible versions it is simply translated as 'increase'. But the King James in Ch 6:1 is much more clearly translated as 'multiplying'. Clearly there is something about the (missionary) disciple that has the potential not just to add a few more men and women, but to multiply themselves. This is key to understanding the possibilities of discipleship and the potential of '**disciples who make disciples**'. The same word is used of the rapidly increasing number of disciples in Jerusalem in Ch 6:7

The same work 'plethyno' is used in the well known passage in 2 Cor 9:10 NASB

*'Now He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and **multiply** your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness'*

The idea of multiplication is built into the practice of seed sowing. You sow 10 seeds and reap 100's of seeds.

But the language of multiplication doesn't stop there, it continues over the coming chapters. We start with multiplying disciples, then we move on to multiplying churches. Acts 9:31 NKJV

A church that multiplies:

*'Then the **churches** throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and were edified. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, they were **multiplied** (plethyno).'*

When disciples multiply so do churches. It's been said that if we make disciples, Jesus will build his church. And I believe that. I'd add that **if we multiply disciples, Jesus will multiply his church**. Where there are mature expressions of disciple-making movements in Africa and Asia, this phenomenon is very evident. For more information take a look at Steve Addison's book 'Movements that change the world', and 'Miraculous movements' by Jerry Trousedale

We have yet to see this scale of multiplication in western culture. But the potential of the church is the same in every part of the world.

Remember that in the NT the basic unit of church life was the Greco-Roman household, the 'oikos'. These extended family units were the natural expressions of church for the first 300 years of church history. So when we think of church, think home based extended families on mission. Units of say 15-50 people. If we think of multiplying churches we tend to default to thinking buildings, Sunday services, professional leaders, and full-on programmes. Not so in the book of Acts. These households were the primary place of discipleship, mission and multiplication. How could that change our view of church planting or church multiplication?

The best example in the book of Acts is in Ch 19 where Paul establishes the church at Ephesus. This beachhead of apostolic movement leads to the rapid training and deployment of disciples to plant churches all across Asia, what is modern day Western Turkey. It is likely that this two year period is when the church at Colossae and the seven churches of Revelation were all planted.

Once we have the multiplication of disciples and churches then a new dynamic kicks in in the book of Acts, and this is potentially the most exciting. In Acts 12 the apostle James is beheaded in prison, and it looks like Peter will be next. The church we are told in v5 started to 'pray for him fervently'. One wonders what lack of prayer may have occurred beforehand. Maybe the praying hadn't been up to much till the church saw what happened to James. Whatever the reason they started praying up a storm. They prayed fervently, earnestly, and zealously for Peter.

'So Peter was kept in prison, but fervent and persistent prayer for him was being made to God by the church.' Acts 21:5 AMP

The result we know was a miraculous escape for Peter, facilitated by an angel. Peter walks out of prison and turns up at Mary's house, John Mark's

mum. The servant, Rhoda who answers the door is amazed that Peter could be standing outside and instead of opening the gate to the compound, runs back to tell the others who can't believe it's Peter (So much for their faith in prayer!).

Anyway, after joyful reunions, Herod orders the execution of the prison guards. We subsequently read that Herod is consumed by worms and dies for allowing the people worship him. The chapter concludes with these words in Acts 12:24 NASB

*'But the **word of the Lord** continued to grow and to be **multiplied** (plethyno).'*

A viral gospel:

In my words **'the gospel went viral'**. It was like the movement reached a tipping point. It became unstoppable. It was naturally and spontaneously multiplying and spreading across the known world.

It's this potential of multiplying disciples, churches and the gospel that gives me courage to dream of a reality that the vision statement of Kairos Connexion expresses.... **seeing our nation transformed by the gospel through a movement of missionary disciples**

In the next chapter Paul and Barnabus start their first missionary journey from Antioch, and by the end of Paul's life, he is able to say to the believers in Rome, in Romans 15:19b

'So from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum (modern Albania), I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ.'

True movement had begun. And it continued to expand exponentially for the next 250 years. **If we want movement we have to understand multiplication.**

We must go on the journey from 'prostithemi' to 'plethyno'. From addition to multiplication. If I'm honest I know that I and many other church leaders would be happy just to have a bit of addition (avoiding the dreaded subtraction or worse still, division), but whilst that may make us feel better in the short term, it will not get us to where we want to go. It will not release a movement of missionary disciples who can transform our nation with the gospel. But more of that later.

This kind of multiplication is happening in many parts of the world. In Western culture not so much, but there are early signs of hope where church leaders have taken the bull by the horns and refused to settle for safe, comfortable, consumer-based, centralised attractional churches. Where the leader is committed to helping members become missionaries, and missionaries to become multipliers