

Some Sources of Inspiration

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Moses in the desert: Moses developed into one of the most influential leaders in history. He had no army, political base, social influence or financial resources, yet he freed an unruly tribe of people from captivity to the most powerful ruler on earth—Pharaoh of Egypt. He then molded them into a nation, giving them a land, a religious heritage, and a set of laws unequalled in moral excellence. None of this can be explained by human factors alone. It was the result of God's supernatural anointing upon him. During forty years of desert solitude Moses developed an intimacy with God that prepared him to effectively fulfill this calling.

David in the pasture: The book of Psalms, one of the most widely read and enduring collections of writings ever assembled, is dominated by the writings of David. Its "genius" has been unchallenged by 30 centuries of worshippers and scholars. The wisdom and insight contained on its pages were formed during years of solitude and contemplation in God's presence while attending sheep. As leader and king, David also excelled. Like Moses, his life combined intimacy with God formed in solitude, and strong leadership unexplainable except for the supernatural hand of God upon him.

Elijah in the desert: We have no record of anything he wrote. Like Moses, he was without any of the trappings of human power or influence. He too was a man of the desert. The first time we meet him in Scripture he announces that there will be neither dew nor rain except by his word. He was sent by God to challenge Ahab, the most evil king ever to reign in Israel, and his 400 priests of Baal. Elijah, virtually single-handedly, turned a rebellious Israel back to the God of their fathers. The anointing of God for great acts was the source of his power, born in intimacy with him, cultivated during years of solitude in the desert.

Jesus alone with his Father: Jesus is our first New Testament model of combining the contemplative and apostolic life-styles. Called an apostle in Hebrews 3, and having embraced a demanding ministry schedule, His life was characterized by repeated, intentional withdrawal—in the years before his public ministry began, before his confrontation with Satan, before he named the twelve, after he had ministered to the crowds, and hours before he faced the cross. His example is characterized by seasons of solitude in the presence of his Father, and the demands of pioneering ministry among the multitudes.

John the Beloved: The “disciple whom Jesus loved” fathered an apostolic tradition which stands in contrast to that which took its inspiration from Paul. “He who leans on Jesus’ breast hears the heart of God” it has been said of John. His life and writings speak to us of a man focused on intimacy with God before outward activity. Yet his influence passes powerfully through church history via Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, John’s disciple, who was burned at the stake for his faith; on through the “desert fathers and mothers”, next through the powerfully missional Celtic Church, and right up to our present time.

Paul in the desert: Having met Jesus on the road to Damascus, Paul moved into immediate action, preaching that Jesus was the Messiah. This first burst of energy was to be expected from someone with Paul’s make-up, yet we have no record of any lasting fruit from this initial, not-yet-mature expression of ministry. Time subsequently spent in contemplation in the Arabian desert was crucial to Paul’s maturing in Christ. There were something like ten years between the initial visitation (Acts 9) and his release into the mature phase of his apostolic ministry (Acts 13). In Paul, we see the flowing together of the contemplative and apostolic.

The Desert Fathers and Mothers: In the third and fourth centuries, Roman Christians, living in the increasingly disintegrating and hedonistic culture around them, discovered the redemptive nature of solitude to heal, protect and develop the soul. They began to retreat into the deserts of Egypt, Syria and Palestine, first pursuing a life of solitude as individuals, but later discovering the value of forming communities of contemplation. Their writings and the wisdom they contain are still inspiring and instructing Christians today. Their experience became a key initial influence in the development of monasticism.

Patrick: This apostle to the idolatrous Celtic peoples of Ireland in the fifth century is a startling example of God’s power resting upon an individual. His initiatives in spiritual battle against entrenched forces of darkness in the evangelization of Ireland resulted not only in the founding of churches but also the establishing of monasteries. The ancient hymn attributed to him, Patrick’s Breastplate, is a passionate expression of both intimacy with God and pioneering vision that has endured for sixteen centuries.

The Celtic Church: Allowed to develop for a couple of centuries before being brought under the influence of the church formed within the Roman culture, the Celtic Church was creative, spontaneous, community oriented and wonderfully apostolic. The abbot (head of the monastery—more apostolic in his role) carried responsibility for the oversight of churches that the bishop (head of the diocese—more pastoral and

administrative in his role) carried in the Roman system. My understanding is that the apostolic influence of the abbots contributed strongly to the missional passion and activities of the Celtic Church. Church history contains many examples of apostolic leaders functioning from a monastic base.

The Monastic Movement: Monastic legalism and extremism, especially in medieval times, represent a tragic departure from the ways and teachings of Jesus. But I understand the centuries-long pattern of monasticism as an expression of the New Testament apostolic structure found initially in Jesus and the twelve, and then the apostolic teams of Acts. I am impressed when we find the physical location of monastic buildings located adjacent to church buildings. This is important symbolism. Members of the monastic community were integrated into the local fellowship while also separated for their own calling.

The Moravians: A community of approximately six hundred people, located in a small village in a far-eastern corner of Germany, became the source of an apostolic movement of historic dimensions. The Moravians sent out more missionaries than all Protestants before them combined. A key component of their mission strategy was to establish communities (a form of “Protestant monasticism” or “new monasticism”) wherever they went as bases and springboards for evangelization and church planting work. They established a twenty-four-hour a day prayer watch that endured for one hundred years.