



Kingdom Kernels

The Lens of Kingdom Movements in Scripture

An Overview of a Biblical Exegesis
of Church Planting Movements

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Are Church-Planting Movements (CPMs) or Disciple-Making Movements (DMM) a concept based in Scripture? Doubters feel CPM practitioners read the Bible with CPM-colored lenses. But, could it be the opposite—that our generation’s lenses no longer see the movements inherent in the New Testament?

All of us have a set of lenses (or a bias) we use when interpreting Scripture. Those lenses are shaped in part by our contemporary situation and theological framework. How do we clear the smudges from our glasses?

Movement vs. Non-Movement Lenses

If we live in a non-movement environment—one in which conversions and church planting are occasional and incremental—do we not tend to interpret the Scriptures from that perspective?

On the other hand, how would a believer in the days following Pentecost (Acts 2) have interpreted

the New Testament? What about disciples in the explosive Wesleyan movement—or Baptists when their churches on the American frontier grew from 60 to 457 churches in 20 years? I believe they would have read their Bibles very differently.

In the last 32 years I have successively led a rural church with few baptisms, a new urban church with many more, and then a CPM in an unreached people group. Now I work with movements around the world. Like taking an eye-exam—as the Master Optician changes out lenses asking “better or worse?”—my perspective on the Scripture is getting clearer.

It is actually hard to read the New Testament without seeing movements of God. Yet decades of non-movement life have conditioned us to do just that. It is time to remove the lenses of our non-movement ...experiences and read it afresh.

After the 70 disciples returned from a victorious mission establishing the

A THIRTY YEAR NUMERICAL RECORD OF MOVEMENTS

30 AD (Dates are approximate)

• 120 disciples meeting (1:15) but over 500 existent (1 Cor 15); 3,000 become disciples (2:41); More disciples made daily (2:47); more believe (5000) (4:4)

30 - 31 AD

• More than ever believers added – multitudes (5:14); Disciples increasing in number (6:1)

32 AD

• Number of disciples multiplied and including many priests (6:7); Average believers preach the word in many places (8:4)

33 AD

• Samaria believes – many are baptized (8:5ff); Spreads to many Samaritan villages (8:25); Gospel spreads to Ethiopian eunuch (8:26ff)

35 AD

• Conversion of chief persecutor (Saul) and preaching of gospel to Damascus (Acts 9); Believers / churches through all Judea, Galilee and Samaria and are multiplying (9:31)

40AD

• All the residents of Lyda and Sharon turn to Lord (9:35); All Joppa hears about miracle and many believe (9:42); Gospel spreads to Caesarea Gentile community (Cornelius) and many persons become disciples (10:27); (33-45 AD) – Gospel spreads to Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch (11:19).

45 AD

• Gentile Antioch church established; great number believe (11:19-21); great many disciples added (11:24-26)

kingdom in many places, Jesus declared:

I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and the understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. (Luke 10:21, ESV)

These disciples, fresh from the harvest, saw the mystery of the kingdom in ways the religious leaders did not. Their lenses were clearing. Can we emulate their childlike faith? How would they read the Scriptures that follow?

From beginning to end the New Testament describes, assumes and expects movements of God to start in every locale.

Old Testament: Prophecy of an Eternal Growing Kingdom

Isaiah foretold that there would be no end of the increase of the Messiah’s government because the zeal of the Lord would do it (Is. 9:7). Daniel spoke of a new kingdom to remain forever, that would shatter all other kingdoms (Dan. 2:44). Jesus explained that this gate-shattering kingdom was to be a spiritual one, not an earthly one (Jn 18:36).

Gospels: Kingdom Come

Jesus began and ended his teaching ministry with the concept of the kingdom (see Mark 1:15 and Acts 1:3) and spoke of it over 100 times. He taught that the appropriate response was to repent and believe (Mk. 1:15) and to follow and fish (Mk. 1:17). The King calls all to joyfully submit to his rule and to help others do the same.

The gospels launch this kingdom revolution in which every believer becomes a priest. Jesus taught his disciples to beseech their heavenly Father to cause his kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven (Matt. 6:9-10). Expectations are created that God wants to answer that prayer in every context.

Jesus underscores that expectation when he sends out his disciples (12, then 70) on two missions, declaring them to expect a plentiful harvest (Mt. 9:38 & Lk. 10:2). Even in places one would not expect a harvest (Samaria), Jesus told his disciples to expect it immediately (Jn. 4:35).

As the kingdom began to grow in the gospels and increased exponentially in Acts it became a movement sweeping thousands into discipleship. Since disciples making

disciples was at its core and many new churches formed in their wake (meeting in home after home), we give these movements descriptive terms: kingdom movements, Church-Planting Movements or Disciple-Making Movements. They were movements of God because they were driven by the Spirit in the hearts of believers, not carefully orchestrated by human plans.

Gospels: Parables of Growth

Jesus described this kingdom growth through parables. Fifteen of the 21 kingdom parables address the growth of the kingdom, with seven of those depicting it as exponential growth.

Though our generation often discounts numerical interpretations, the context of the parables gives clues as to the type of growth. In Luke 4:14-8:3 Jesus demonstrates to his disciples how to spread this kingdom through preaching the gospel and working many miracles. In Luke 8 he teaches them through the parables to expect four responses to the proclaimed Word, including the fourth soil that will bear fruit 30, 60 and 100 times. Then in Luke 9 he sends out the twelve and in Luke 10 the 70 disciples to proclaim

46 AD

• Word of God increases and multiplies in church established thus far (12:24)

47-48 AD

Paul’s First Journey
• Word spreading through whole region (Phrygia) (13:49); Great number believe in Iconium (14:1); Many disciples in Derbe (14:21) (Both cities are of Galatia); Churches and elders established in each place (14:23)

50-52 AD

Paul’s Second Journey
• Churches from first trip continue to increase in number of disciples daily (16:5); Two households believe in Philippi (16:15-34); Great many Thessalonians believe (17:4). Opponents say they have turned world upside down (17:6); Many

Bereans believe (17:12); Some (a few) believe in Athens (17:34); Many Corinthians believe (18:8, 10)

52-55 AD

Paul’s Third Journey
• All disciples in Galatia and Phrygia strengthened (18:23); Word of the Lord spreads to all residents of the province of Asia (19:10, 17) and continues to increase in Ephesus (the capital) (19:20)

57 AD

• Many thousands of disciples among the Jews in Jerusalem (21:20) (many of the original disciples left Jerusalem in 8:4). Paul accused of stirring up riots throughout the world (24:5); The Christian movement cannot escape notice (26:26)

59 AD

• Many healed throughout island of Malta (28:9); Jewish leaders in Rome know the Christian “sect” is spoken against everywhere; some believe (28:22, 24); Gospel is proclaimed from house arrest “without hindrance” – last word of Acts (28:31)

the kingdom and find responsive households. The parables created expectation in the disciples of what should ensue.

The parables make much more sense when interpreted with a “movement lens” rather than a “non-movement lens.” Disciples in the middle of modern-day CPMs easily catch the meaning of the parables. They are living them out.

Gospels: The Discipleship Movement of Jesus

Jesus modeled to his disciples how to build the kingdom by making disciples who could make disciples. In three years the number of Jesus’ disciples grew from 12 to 70 (or 82 – Lk 10:1 “70 others”) then to a core of 120 in an upper room (Acts 1:15) out of a total of 500 that he appeared to (1 Cor. 15:6). In three years Jesus raised up at least 500 disciples in addition to the thousands who hung on his words from place to place.

If you developed 500 disciples in three years, not counting the thousands who attended your meetings, what would you call that—a Disciple-Making Movement? And this was before the disciples had the indwelling of the Spirit.

Acts: Kingdom Growth

Acts is the kingdom growth of the gospel accounts on Spirit-empowered steroids. Pentecost was a game-changer in that regard. Luke describes how kingdom movements had become normal (and viral) over a 30-year span. Kingdom movements were not a passing phenomenon.

If we come to the Acts record laying aside our presuppositions, we are amazed at how fast, through whom and how far the kingdom can spread.

Twenty of the 28 chapters have numerical indicators (study the timeline at the bottom of pages 31-32). Stop and consider what your band of 500 disciples in AD 30 would feel like in AD 35. The gospel had spread to thousands of new disciples and many new churches had started throughout all of Judea, Galilee and Samaria (9:31). What would your band of disciples call this—a church-planting or disciple-making movement?

Then consider this Jerusalem church 27 years after beginning. With most believers having fled the city earlier (8:4) there are still many thousands of new disciples (21:20). The movement is still multiplying.

Paul’s journeys over the span of only ten years defy expectations of how far and rapidly the kingdom can grow—six to eight Roman provinces penetrated with multiplying disciples and churches. Any missionary with such results in 2-3 terms would categorize this as a movement of God.

Within 30 years the eastern half of the Roman Empire is filled with kingdom witness. Acts perpetuates the expectation of kingdom movements taught and modeled by Jesus.

When the numbers are as large as the thousands given in Acts and the places for these disciples to meet are small (often meeting in homes – 2:46; probably the norm once they were kicked out of the temple), then how do you interpret what is happening? Disciples are making disciples. These disciples are forming new groups and churches wherever they can – homes, public spaces, etc. When disciples are making disciples and starting churches in new homes along the way, what do you call that—a Church-Planting Movement?

Examine the timeframe of Acts (especially the first five years) and ask the questions: “How rapidly does the Spirit make disciples who in turn make disciples? How quickly are new churches formed? How quickly were leaders developed?” Fruitful CPM practitioner, Nathan Shank, says, “Whoever said we set the pace? If we take credit for the pace, then we are taking credit for the growth.” If growth is God’s responsibility (1 Cor. 3:6-7), then surely pace is also.

Epistles: Discipling a Movement

At first glance, kingdom movements feel very distant in the Epistles. But put the epistles in the context of the Acts movements and it makes sense how they fit into the discussion. The Acts chronology is the context of the epistles—the context in which we should interpret them.

Putting the epistles in the chronology of the movements they address, it seems likely that they assume the Great Commission is at the heart of the disciples. The new disciples have been obeying the Great Commission and the movements are growing. The epistles generally focus on providing theological and discipleship structure to these movements. The epistles show Paul taking the newly-forming churches of Acts 13-14 and solidifying their health by appointing leaders (14:21-23) or leaving Titus in Crete to develop on-going leadership, structure and discipleship in the new churches (Titus 1:5ff).

Even so, movement growth is acknowledged in the epistles. In the early letters (1 and 2 Thessalonians), written just months after visiting Thessalonica, Paul praises the

disciples for their work of faith, serving as examples to believers throughout the provinces of Macedonia and Achaia (1 Thes. 1:3, 6-7). The word of the Lord has “sounded forth” from them not only in those two provinces but “everywhere” (1 Thes. 1:8). A few months later their faith continues to “grow abundantly” (2 Thes. 1:3) and they continue to resolve to work in faith (2 Thes. 1:11). Paul then asks them to pray that the word of the Lord will speed ahead of him in his work (2 Thes. 3:1). Some of these references can undoubtedly point to spiritual growth, but numerical growth seems implied from the context as well.

Shortly after planting the work in Corinth, Paul exhorts the saints to abound in the “work of the Lord” (1 Cor. 15:58). Only months later, 2 Corinthians is addressed to all the believers throughout “the whole of Achaia [Province]” (2 Cor. 1:1). The work in Corinth is not isolated to one church but has spread to a whole province. These two letters exude an atmosphere of believers exercising their gifts in groups small enough to make a difference (1 Cor. 11-14). The Corinthian church apparently started in the house of Titus Justus (Acts 18:7) and spread from there to other homes.

The likelihood of this is bolstered by Paul’s references in several epistles to churches as meeting in homes: Rom. 16:5 (Rome), 1 Cor. 16:19 (Ephesus), and two churches in homes in Colossae – Col. 4:15 and Philemon 1:2. Therefore, as late as Paul’s Roman imprisonment—30 years into the Christian movement—the growing movements appear to be based in homes—a highly reproducible model.

Whether it is in Jerusalem with many thousands (both after Pentecost and again thirty years later in Acts 21:20) or in any of the movements in the missionary journeys in which multitudes believe, it helps to extrapolate out what thousands meeting in homes means. Whether after Pentecost or in Acts 21, these thousands in Jerusalem had to fit into homes. Suppose there are 5,000 believers and a home can hold 25 adults, a simple extrapolation would indicate 200 groups meeting.

Telescope this out into the many other cities in which “multitudes” or a “great many” believed. The same phenomenon of believers winning others and then meeting in homes is multiplied many times over as the normal pattern. Whether you identify each home meeting as a “church” or as a small-group meeting of the larger church in the city, the situation is very much like what we describe as CPMs.

In Titus, written shortly after Paul and Titus catalyzed church plants in several towns, Paul exhorts Titus to help the budding movement to become solidified with healthy leadership (1:5). This appears to be an example of an epistle written to help bring order to the explosion of the kingdom in each locale.

Paul exhorts Timothy to disciple faithful men who can teach others (2 Tim. 2:2). The pattern he gives to Timothy, late in his ministry, echoes the message of the Great Commission when the Lord taught his disciples to teach new disciples to obey all he commanded (including the Great Commission). Thus, Paul’s theme from one of his first epistles (1 Thes.) to one of his last (1 Tim.) speaks to the multiplication of disciples.

Revelation: Triumph of the Kingdom

The message of the gospels is the establishing of the kingdom of God. Acts marks its progress over thirty years. The epistles provide discipleship instructions in that context. Revelation provides the end of the story in similar terms—the triumph of the kingdom of God over all opposition:

“The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever.”
(Rev. 11:15, ESV)

Chapters two and three demonstrate the difficulty the enemy has had in thwarting God’s work in seven churches. These churches and disciples, set in the Asia Province movement (likely birthed in Acts 19), show remarkable resilience 40 years later even though they have problems.

Just as Acts 21:20 records the continued growth of the kingdom movement in Jerusalem 30 years after it began (around 60 AD), so also Revelation gives another multi-decade marker. The Ephesian church at the center of an amazing movement in the province of Asia is still, 40 years later, working hard in the kingdom (Rev. 2:2), though they need a course correction in their efforts. These markers (Acts 21:20 and Rev. 2:2) demonstrate that movements need not be short-lived if they receive godly coaching and leadership.

Overall Revelation ends the New Testament with a picture of multitudes of saints around the throne that no one can count (Rev. 7:9). What was launched on the seashores of Galilee became a movement of God taking the world by



storm. From beginning to end, what is described in the NT is a movement of disciples and churches spreading to all the nations of the earth in numbers that are uncountable.

Revelation marks the triumph of the kingdom, as a multitude no one can count from every nation and tribe is represented before the throne (7:9, 19:1, 6) and nations stream to the new city (21:24-26).

This is the picture that the Spirit wants to leave in the minds of believers at the end of the canon. First or Second Century disciples reading these New Testament books would have expected that movements were the normal and expected way of the kingdom of God.

Acknowledging multitudes no one can count does not preclude the truth of passages such as Matthew 7:13-14, which acknowledges that the gate to salvation is narrow and few find it. A belief in CPM-like movements does not imply that the majority of a people

group will believe. Yet, if even a small percentage of a large population group believes, multitudes result.

Suppose that XYZ people group of 1.5 million people receives the gospel. New believers are discipled to 1) follow Jesus wholeheartedly, and 2) fish for men. As they win others, they disciple with the same expectation. In the span of a few years, a movement emerges in a place where no churches existed earlier.

- If only 10% believe, the result is 150,000 disciples. If the average church size is 30 (excluding kids), 5,000 churches are the result.
- If only 5% believe, there are 75,000 disciples and 2,500 churches.
- If only 1% believe, there are 15,000 disciples and 500 churches.
- If only 0.5% believe, there are 7,500 disciples and 250 churches.

What would we call any of those four scenarios? When our work in Asia approached the 0.5% range it

was being called a Church-Planting Movement. Inherent within its DNA was the momentum for the kingdom to spread throughout the people group and to neighboring tribes.

When even a small percentage of a people group becomes ignited in their faith, like the mustard seed it becomes a movement. The result that Revelation paints is that these individual movements (like Rev. 2 and 3) have become a global movement consisting of uncountable multitudes.

Core of the Great Commission

This Gospels-to-Revelation overview illustrates the disciples' commitment to the core of the Great Commission—the mission Jesus left to his church. Over the course of thirty years from the giving of the Commission to the close of Acts, average disciples are faithfully obeying the command of the Lord to make disciples and teaching them to obey the same things. Forty

years after the close of Acts, the movement has still grown amidst great opposition. The Great Commission was a command the Lord gave His disciples and served as a lens to interpret what they would read in the New Testament.

When I read my Bible, I know I have a set of lenses. I keep trying to read just my lenses so that they are as true and clear as possible. But when I read my Bible, I cannot help but see kingdom movements throughout.

Two common approaches to what we hear about kingdom movements exist. One is to question what is being reported, to discount it, and perhaps even to brand it as contrary to Scripture and what is expected. This view can be summed up as: expecting less to be happening than we know about. This set of lenses can lead us to assume that movements are not in Scripture and that CPM practitioners read too much into the text.

The second approach is to expect that what we hear about (new disciples, new churches, miracles, etc.) is just part of what God is really doing. This viewpoint can be summed up as: expecting more to be happening than we know about. This set of lenses can lead us to see much in Scripture that teaches and describes CPM-like movements. The danger is that we see a CPM behind every text.

These two viewpoints can serve as extremes on a scale. Where should we fall on that scale? The Apostle John gives us a glimpse into his perspective at the end of his Gospel:

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are

written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. (John 20:30-31, ESV)

Now there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written. (John 21:25, ESV)

The sheer preponderance of Scripture texts related to growth and movements should serve as a barometer for interpretation. The question does not have to be “do they advocate movements like CPMs?” A fair reading of these texts (read them as a child might) should at the very least allow the reader to say, “They may be interpreted this way and support for movements is plausible.”

Believers in movements at various times in our history (e.g. the several great awakenings) have felt their movements clearly described in the New Testament. And they faced much opposition from those outside the movement.

One day a lady criticized D. L. Moody for his methods of evangelism in attempting to win people to the Lord. Moody’s reply was, “I agree with you. I don’t like the way I do it either. Tell me, how do you do it?” The lady replied, “I don’t do it.” Moody retorted, “Then I like my way of doing it better than your way of not doing it.”

Moody expected great harvests and found support for them in Scripture. Today we look back on such men with admiration, but at the time they were much maligned.

Jesus rebutted the criticism leveled at both himself and John the Baptist by saying, “Wisdom is justified by her

deeds,” (Matt. 11:19, ESV) or, “Wisdom is justified by all her children (Luke 7:35, ESV). Jesus told them to look at the fruit of their work to see if it proved the wisdom of their teaching and ministries.

God is undoubtedly moving around the world in Church-Planting and Disciple-Making Movements. The godly men and women he is using to catalyze these movements rely deeply upon the Word of God to guide their efforts. They live in reliance upon the Spirit to bring in a plentiful harvest. They find it easier to believe in movements of God rather than not as they read the Scripture.

This overview flies over Scripture at 30,000 feet to help us gain a perspective on movements in Scripture. On each CPM principle (e.g. finding God-prepared people or reproducing discipleship) it is possible to look to the text for in-depth exegesis to guide us in that principle.

Are these things not given to us for our encouragement?

For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. (Rom. 15:3, ESV)

Just as the Old Testament served as an encouragement to the New Testament saints, so may the New Testament serve as an equal encouragement to us. What should you expect God to do in bringing the increase to your faithful service?

Let us all seek to clear our lenses and become like little children again as we look at the Word. 