

The Story of Movements and the Spread of the Gospel

BY **STEVE ADDISON**

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Luke begins the book of Acts by telling us that what Jesus began to do and teach, he now continues to do through his disciples empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Luke's story of the early church is the story of the dynamic Word of the gospel that grows, spreads, and multiplies resulting in new disciples and new churches. We get to the end of Acts and yet the story doesn't end. Paul is under house arrest awaiting trial; meanwhile the unstoppable Word continues to spread throughout the world. Luke's meaning is clear: the story continues through his readers who have the Word, the Spirit and the mandate to make disciples and plant churches.

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Throughout church history we see this pattern continue: the Word going out through ordinary people, disciples and churches multiplying. While the Roman Empire was collapsing, God was calling a young man named Patrick. He lived in Roman Britain but was kidnapped and sold into slavery by Irish raiders. Alone and desperate he cried out to God who rescued him. He went on to form the Celtic missionary movement that was responsible for evangelizing and planting approximately 700 churches throughout Ireland first and then much of Europe over the next several centuries.

Two hundred years after the Reformation, Protestants still had no plan or strategy to take the gospel to the ends of the earth. That was until God used a young Austrian nobleman to transform a bickering band of religious refugees. In 1722 Count Nikolaus Zinzendorf opened his estate to persecuted religious dissenters. Through his Christ-like leadership and the power of the Holy Spirit, they were transformed into the first Protestant missionary movement, known as the Moravians.





Leonard Dober and David Nitschmann were the first missionaries sent out by the Moravians. They became the founders of the Christian movement among the slaves of the West Indies. For the next 50 years the Moravians worked alone, before any other Christian missionary arrived. By then the Moravians had baptized 13,000 converts and planted churches on the islands of St. Thomas, St. Croix, Jamaica, Antigua, Barbados, and St. Kitts.

Within twenty years Moravian missionaries were in the Arctic among the Inuit, in southern Africa, among the Native Americans of North America, and in Suriname, Ceylon, China, India, and Persia. In the next 150 years, over 2,000 Moravians volunteered to serve overseas. They went to the most remote, unfavorable, and neglected areas. This was something new in the expansion of Christianity: an entire Christian community—families as well as singles—devoted to world missions.

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When the American War of Independence broke out in 1776, most English Methodist ministers returned home. They left behind six hundred members and a young English missionary named Francis Asbury who was a disciple of John Wesley.

Asbury had left school before he turned twelve to become a blacksmith's apprentice. His grasp of Wesley's example, methods and teaching enabled him to adapt them to a new mission field while remaining true to the principles.

Methodism not only survived the Revolutionary War, it swept the land. Methodism under Asbury outstripped the strongest and most established denominations. In 1775 Methodists were only 2.5% of total church membership in America. By 1850 their share had risen to 34%. This was at a time when Methodist requirements for membership were far stricter than the other denominations.

Methodism was a movement. They believed the gospel was a dynamic force out in the world bringing salvation. They believed that God was powerfully and personally present in the life of every disciple, including African Americans and women, not just the clergy. They also believed it was their duty and priority to reach lost people and to plant churches across the nation.

American Methodism benefited greatly from the pioneering work of John Wesley and the English Methodists. Freed from the constraints of traditional English society, Asbury discovered that the Methodist movement was even more at home in a world of opportunity and freedom.

As the movement spread through the labors of young itinerants, Methodism maintained its cohesiveness through a well-defined system of community. Methodists remained connected with each other through a rhythm of class meetings, love feasts, quarterly meetings and camp meetings. By 1811 there were 400-500 camp meetings held annually, with a total attendance of over one million.

When Asbury died in 1816 there were 200,000 Methodists. By 1850 there were one million Methodists led by 4,000 itinerants and 8,000 local preachers. The only organization more extensive was the U.S. government.

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Eventually Methodism lost its passion and settled down to enjoy its achievements. In the process it gave birth to the Holiness movement. William Seymour was a holiness preacher with a desperate desire to know the power of God. He was the son of former slaves, a janitor and blind in one eye. God chose this unlikely man to spark a movement that began in 1906 in a disused Methodist building on Azusa Street.

The emotionally charged meetings ran all day and into the night. The meetings had no central coordination, and Seymour rarely preached. He taught the people to cry out to God for sanctification, the fullness of the Holy Spirit, and divine healing.

Immediately, missionaries fanned out from Azusa Street to the world. Within two years they had brought Pentecostalism to parts of Asia, South America, the Middle East, and Africa. They were poor, untrained, and unprepared. Many died on the field. Their sacrifices were rewarded; the Pentecostal/charismatic and related movements became the fastest growing and most globally diverse expression of worldwide Christianity.

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Jesus founded a missionary movement with a mandate to take the gospel and multiply disciples and churches everywhere. History is replete with examples of movements just like in the book of Acts; I have named only a few. Three essential elements are necessary for Jesus movements: His dynamic Word, the power of the Holy Spirit and disciples who obey what Jesus has commanded. 

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