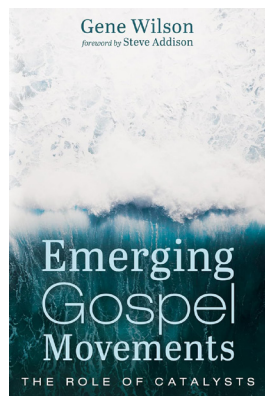


Emerging Gospel Movements: The Role of Catalysts

By Gene Wilson. Wipf & Stock. 2021.
174 pages.

Reviewed by Dave Coles

Dave Coles is an encourager and resourcer of church-planting movements among unreached groups, serving with [Beyond](#). He served among Muslims in Southeast Asia for 24 years, and has published dozens of articles and books related to movements and reaching the unreached. These can be seen at davecoles.freemin.org.



Gene Wilson served as Director of Church Planting for ReachGlobal, the international arm of the Evangelical Free Church of America. He is now a global catalyst working alongside church leaders on five continents. He has traveled to almost 50 countries. Drawing on his extensive experience, he offers, in *Emerging Gospel Movements*, an informative overview of the Lord's work in our day – raising up movement leaders all over the world and bringing good news to previously unreached groups. As the book's subtitle, *The Role of Catalysts*, implies, he gives special focus to the role of catalysts as facilitators, building on Tom Steffen's (2011) description of our time as the "Facilitator Era of Missions."

Wilson defines a movement catalyst as, "someone who comes alongside leaders to develop them and help them multiply healthy disciples, leaders,

and churches. They come alongside in a facilitative role. They are not the decision-makers but developers” (61).

Wilson offers clear definitions of other terms as well, stating that,

In this book, movement describes the collective advance of fellowships of Christ-followers that multiply over several generations. These churches, propelled by the Holy Spirit and the Word, reproduce geographically, numerically, and generationally, forming regional constellations of cooperating churches that, in turn, cross new frontiers, and transform entire societies. (31)

The book focuses on three types of Church-Planting Movements: People Movements to Christ (PMC), Disciple-Making Movements (DMM); and Training for Trainers (T4T), giving special attention to the role of catalysts who facilitate and help advance church multiplication in those movements. While People Movements to Christ are often considered a historically earlier and distinct phenomenon from Church-Planting Movements, Wilson includes these in his research, as well as some more traditional types of churches, based on five benchmarks listed below. The text is richly illustrated with examples and stories from around the globe, making the book an enjoyable read, even while conveying substantial content.

He documents thoroughly his claim that, “Gospel movements are not a uniquely modern phenomenon, they form the backdrop of Luke’s narrative in Acts and can be found in many periods of church history” (32). This provides helpful biblical and historical context for current movement phenomena and our perspective on those phenomena.

Five common questions about movements are mentioned and thoroughly answered.

- Why gospel movements?
- Are they just the latest missional fad?

- What do these movements have in common?
- How do they get started?
- What is exceptional about the initial disciples and churches? (11).

Acknowledging that most kingdom workers are not experiencing a full-blown movement, the book provides tools to help readers assess a movement, and what might be needed to move forward. This involves examining the life process of movements, especially emergence factors.

As already mentioned, the book does not limit its purview to rapidly multiplying house churches. It also considers more traditional types of churches that are multiplying because disciples and leaders are reproducing. Five benchmarks qualified a gospel movement for in-depth research in this book. Wilson says,

These movements have

- grown numerically at a faster pace than the birth rate of the country they are in;
 - grown qualitatively as evidenced by disciple and leader development;
 - served their communities and seen lives transformed around them;
 - reproduced churches across three generations or more;
 - and sent missionaries cross-culturally to unreached people groups.
- (12)

Helpful Counsel for Practitioners

In his description of the important role catalysts play in the launching of gospel movements, Wilson offers a helpful word of caution.

Catalytic ministry is not for everyone. It involves phasing in and out of relationships, challenging travel, constant learning, navigating expectations, avoiding dependency, and adapting to others, rather than having them adjust to you. Catalysts must be willing and able to relinquish

control, step back from center stage, and allow local workers to take the lead (22).

I appreciate Wilson's clarity on these points. I've seen cross-cultural workers experience years of frustration because they lack one or more of these qualities, yet keep attempting to catalyze a movement, when they could more fruitfully use their gifts in a different role.

He also notes that "although gospel movements share a common core, they have diverse emergence patterns" (39). He identifies this common core from the Book of Acts, describing

grassroots movements, meaning that the forces and resources that shape them are locally generated, rather than imported from other places.... Disciples make other disciples, leaders mentor new leaders, and churches reproduce as a result. This multiplicative DNA, at the heart of gospel movements, constitutes the primary dividing line between them and other types of movements and associations. (39)

He also notes diverse emergence patterns in Acts:

- Spontaneous cellular reproduction—early Jerusalem (Acts 2–7)
- Dispersion through migration—later Jerusalem (Acts 8–12)
- Saturation through itinerant proclamation—Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:13–14:28)
- Pioneer work followed by local multiplication—Thessalonica (Acts 17; 1 Thess 1–2)
- Intentional disciple making and church planting by training workers—Corinth and Ephesus (Acts 18–20). (39, 40)

He suggests, "This diversity should be a word of caution to those who, having seen a movement launched in one context, conclude that all movements should use the same methods and tactics" (40). We must

confess that some trainers and trainings in recent years have given the impression that their model is the only one capable of catalyzing a movement. Meanwhile, research of modern movements has unearthed significant Spirit-led diversity. Wilson reflects this in his choice to include in his own research, the three models: People Movements to Christ, Disciple-Making Movements, and Training for Trainers. Diversity can also be seen, even among practitioners applying the same DMM model in distinct social and religious contexts, as illustrated in the recent book *Cabbages in the Desert: How God Transformed a Devout Muslim and Catalyzed Disciple Making Movements among Unreached Peoples*, by Aila Tasse (2024).

Chapter five presents six primary leading indicators of spiritual vitality that contribute to movement emergence and growth. On one hand, he cautions in the following chapter that, “Gospel movements, like all living things, go through stages of growth. They are born, develop, and eventually decline. At any given point, they are either growing or regressing, unable to remain stagnant for long” (109). At the same time, he asserts a potential to stave off decline for generations,

Today, healthy movements, characterized by the six leading indicators of spiritual vitality,¹ stay the course for generations and launch other movements by sending out missionaries to the unreached. The journey from birth to decay is not an inescapable sentence or a uniform progression. (110)

He mentions distinct (but generic) stages in the life and growth of movements, “Evangelists and church planters help birth churches. Waterers or developers help them mature. Others are skilled at helping stagnant ones experience a new season of fruitfulness” (119). His consideration of these different stages leads to the helpful suggestion

1 “Prayerful dependence, Spirit empowerment, Willingness to sacrifice and suffer, Abundant gospel sowing, Biblical integrity, and Kingdom-minded cooperation” (94).

that, “Understanding these stages may ... avoid unnecessary conflict about what types of Christian workers are most strategic and worthy of support” (119). The early stage of pioneer efforts in a new location calls for workers with cross-cultural sensitivity, evangelistic ability, and catalytic gifting. The stage of local multiplication calls for workers with ability to identify and raise up local leaders, and release control. The stage of generational multiplication and geographic spread calls for those with gifting in mentoring leaders and some administrative skills. We can’t assume that one person, or one kind of worker, will have all the gifts and skills needed to effectively catalyze and launch a movement. I’ve seen many cases in which a field worker didn’t really possess the skills needed to accomplish the role expected of them. Nuanced and insightful counsel, such as Wilson offers, can help practitioners diminish unnecessary guilt, poor ministry fit, and much frustration.

For both practitioners and theoreticians, Wilson notes that most of these movements are happening in the Majority (i.e., non-Western) World, and suggests, “some deeply entrenched traditions and tightly held values would have to change for more gospel movements to occur in the Western world” (143).² He then lists three examples, the complexity of church life in the West (143), reliance on professional ministry (144), and a consumer mentality (145).

I would also mention a few things that would have to change, based on my own interaction with movement leaders and a comparison of their contexts with Western settings. First, Western individualism would have to yield to appreciation for the collective (group-oriented) outlook found in biblical cultures and most UPG cultures. The way Western Christians approach evangelism generally involves aiming to win an individual and then bring them to an existing church. This, to my knowledge, has never

2 He footnotes this statement with a reference to *The Kingdom Unleashed: How Jesus’ 1st-Century Kingdom Values Are Transforming Thousands of Cultures and Awakening His Church*, by Jerry Trousdale and Glenn Sunshine (2018). I heartily agree with this recommendation.

started a movement. We need to focus on seeing open individuals as door-openers to a group of people with whom they commonly relate. This pattern of reaching groups is the norm in the book of Acts and in most movements today.

Second, numerous movement leaders identify prayer and fasting as foundational to a movement (Johnson 2022; Tasse 2022). When I hear Westerners present this truth, the fasting somehow often disappears, with mention made only of prayer.³ I suspect the avoidance of fasting reflects a deeply but silently held Western value of Christian life being a relatively comfortable life. A third, deeply-entrenched tradition that would need to be released is the “normal” church-going pattern in the West, consisting mainly of passive attendance at a Sunday service, with some volunteering for internally-focused church-related ministries (similar to Wilson’s description of “consumer mentality”). Disciples in movements, by contrast, actively study Scripture looking for Spirit-led truths to obey, including regular sharing of God’s truth with those outside of Christ. While more could be said on this topic (likely some by most readers of this review), these items adequately illustrate Wilson’s vital point, with potential application for Westerners.

In summary, *Emerging Gospel Movements* provides substantial insights for those wanting to understand or analyze movements, as well as practical insights and recommendations for practitioners. Abundant footnotes and an extensive bibliography undergird the narrative, providing pointers to sources for further reading on many of the topics covered in the book. I highly recommend this book to anyone who has interest of any sort in gospel movements taking place, by God’s grace, in our time.

3 One welcome exception is Chris Galanos in “Kingdom Movement Strategies in North American Megachurches” (2021, 16).

Table of Contents

Preface

Introduction

1. The Facilitator Era of Missions
2. Gospel Movements in the New Testament and Today
3. Movement Leaders and Catalysts
4. Why Gospel Movements?
5. Emergence Factors
6. Movement Maturation Process
7. Pathway to Movement Growth
8. Profile of a Catalyst
9. Movement Mindset
10. Support Structures for Healthy Movements
11. Where Do We Go from Here?

Conclusion

Appendix. Three Types of Church-Planting Movements: DMM, T4T, and PMC

Bibliography

- Galanos, Chris. 2021. "Kingdom Movement Strategies in North American Megachurches." *Mission Frontiers*, January 1, 2021. <https://www.missionfrontiers.org/issue/article/kingdom-movement-strategies-in-north-american-megachurches>
- Johnson, Shodankeh. 2022. "Key Prayer Points for Movements." *Mission Frontiers*, March 1, 2022. <https://www.missionfrontiers.org/issue/article/key-prayer-points-for-movements1>

Steffan, Tom. 2011. *The Facilitator Era: Beyond Pioneer Church Multiplication*. Wipf and Stock.

Tasse, Aila. 2022. "Gaining Church-Planting Momentum During COVID-19." *Mission Frontiers*, May 1, 2022. <https://www.missionfrontiers.org/issue/article/gaining-church-planting-momentum-during-covid-19>

_____. 2024. *Cabbages in the Desert: How God Transformed a Devout Muslim and Catalyzed Disciple Making Movements among Unreached Peoples*. BEYOND.

Trousdale, Jerry, and Glenn Sunshine. 2018. *The Kingdom Unleashed: How Jesus' 1st-Century Kingdom Values Are Transforming Thousands of Cultures and Awakening His Church*. DMM Library.