

# THE SECRET TO CHURCH MULTIPLICATION MOVEMENTS

## by Neil Cole

I have given my entire adult life to trying to discover the secret to starting spontaneous church multiplication movements. It has literally been an obsessive curiosity that has become a life calling. Unhappy with anything less, I have abandoned much in its pursuit.

One of the things I figured out through many failures along the way is that the potent DNA of a movement is not found in books, seminars or with elite scholars or specially gifted personalities. The true ingredient necessary for a movement is not just in China, India and certain third world countries. No, the potent mix necessary to release a real spontaneous multiplication movement of God's Kingdom is found in the most obvious but least expected place of all. All along, the secret has been under our nose...literally!

The ingredient most necessary to start a spontaneous movement of God's expanding Kingdom is found in the heart of every follower of Christ. It is inside of you. It is inside of me. It has been in us all along, every one of us who follows Christ and is indwelt by His Spirit. The "mystery" is "Christ in you," which is the true "hope of glory" (Col. 1:27). We have refused to see the potent seed within us and have actually prevented it from spreading without even realizing it. That's an amazing thought when you let it sink in.

My friend Alan Hirsch likes to use the following example to make the point. If all the Christians in the world were suddenly killed off or abducted by aliens, and only one little Christian girl was left behind, all that is necessary to repopulate the planet with the Kingdom of God is found in her. The power of the kingdom of God is in Christ present within us. It is that simple and yet that profound. We mess things up by making it all complex. I am not discounting that certain people have gifts that are valuable in starting movements; in fact I am working on a book on that very subject. But in every case, it is Christ who builds His church and if He is in each of us, then the seed of a massive and spontaneous expansion of His Kingdom is within us all. It is Christ who gives those very gifts to His church (Eph 4:9-11). We must never lose sight of this.

Inherent in the kingdom of God itself is the impulse of a movement. It does not need to be manipulated or added to for a movement to happen, but simply released to be what it was made to be. We must get our confidence back in the Kingdom itself rather than in our strategies and mechanisms. How many times did Jesus shake His head and comment with a sigh of disappointment, "Oh ye of little strategy?" It is not more strategy, but more faith in the King and His reign that we need.

If that is true, then there is a simple idea that I think we need to grasp if we want to turn things around. If the movement of Christ's Kingdom is already present in each of us, then it is not so much that we need to figure out how to make it happen, as it is stop doing whatever is preventing it from happening. In other words it isn't that we lack models, funding, strategy, leadership or doctrine. It is that we are investing too much in the things that are choking the movement rather than simply releasing what Christ has already put in us.

Could it be that we are actually holding back a real movement while all the time searching for one? I have come to believe this is true, and it is killing us slowly. In fact, it will sound strange when you read this, but, I believe stopping the mission of expanding God's kingdom with multiplication movements is actually harder work than the mission is itself. I also believe that the mission is much less expensive than all our efforts that end up preventing it from happening in the first place. We could save money and effort and see much more effective results if we made a shift to a new way of seeing the mission accomplished.

Imagine a man is pushing a heavy car up hill while near the top. He wants to see it roll far and fast, so with all his might he pushes it up. As he fights against the weight and gravity, he struggles under the load, but he is determined to start this movement. In fact, all he has to do is step out of the way and it will do all he wants and more. He is, in fact, the one preventing what he wants from happening. Every square pound of pressure he invests in this exercise prevents him from accomplishing his goal. He doesn't need to do more work to make it happen, in fact, he needs less, much less. Ironically, the harder he works the further he actually gets from his goal. That pictures for me how the church is preventing the kingdom from being the

movement it is intended to be. We are often like the man pushing the car not realizing that we are already near the top. God has already placed us at the top of the hill, poised to release a movement, but we are investing all our might trying to make it happen as if we were at the bottom, when all we really have to do is step out of the way and let nature do what it is designed to do.

I believe that a profound reason why movements occur more easily in places and times of severe persecution is that because the church is prevented from doing things that hold back the Kingdom—such as hiring professionals, buying and maintaining facilities, creating programs and writing curriculum—rapid and spontaneous movements can emerge. Stripped of any other resource or object of devotion and faith, in a persecuted church Christ becomes more real, and the Gospel is all the people have left, and a movement results. All the movement inhibitors and impediments are removed and the church is free to move unchecked and with great power. Can we see this in the non-persecuted Western world as well? Of course we can.

We can learn much by comparing the results of the communist revolution in Russia with that in China. Both were bloody revolutions that attempted militarily to snuff out all opposition, close down all churches, remove all missionaries and incarcerate all of the church leaders. The church found in Russia prior to the revolution was centered on cathedrals led by priests and was distant from the everyday lives of the people. When communism seized the church and all her assets the people had nothing to turn to spiritually and there was no movement. In China, leaders such as Watchman Nee, had already made strives to empower ordinary Christians with the Gospel and let indigenous churches form in homes and places of business. As a result, when the revolution occurred the true church was still intact even after her buildings and leaders were taken away. In fact, the Cultural Revolution of Mao Tse-Tung sought to eliminate all religion from society in China but instead mobilized the church and it grew from about 2 million Christians in 1949 to over 60 million. It is estimated today that there may be upwards of 80 million Christians in China.

Why did the church thrive in China and not in Russia? The foundation of empowering the common Christian in China set the stage for what happened there. The Little Flock movement and others were already in place so that when the heat of persecution hit the church she exploded with growth. There was no such preparation prior to the Soviet Union's rise to power in Russia.

### **A Basic Lesson in Math**

I am no mathematician. My High School math teacher would chuckle at the thought that I would have anything good to contribute to a conversation about mathematics. But maybe it takes a simple-minded, mathematically challenged individual to help us to see the obvious.

Basic math is made up of four different processes involving numbers: addition, subtraction, multiplication and division. In the sequence of positive numbers addition and multiplication gain in numerical sum, while subtraction and division reduce. When it comes to the Kingdom of God we want to increase, not decrease, so addition and multiplication are more preferable.

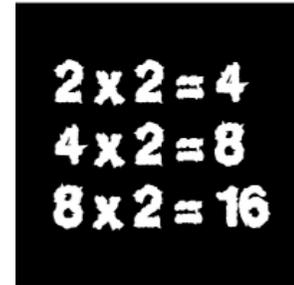
Multiplication is a popular topic in missions and church today. Unfortunately, when you look more closely, much of what people call multiplying is really just addition. When a church adds a small group, it is often called multiplying. When another worship service is added on Sunday morning, it is often called church multiplication, but it is merely addition. Adding a venue for worship in your church or a satellite campus is not multiplying a church, it is merely adding. I am not against addition, but let's not call addition multiplication.

The thing about basic math is it is a world of absolutes; there is one right answer and an infinite number of wrong answers to every equation. But if the processes are mixed up, the solutions are way off. In Christendom today we have poor math skills, and our bottom line is wrong in the end because of it.

Imagine what would happen in life if you got the two processes mixed up in other areas of life. What would happen if NASA engineers added when they should have multiplied? What if Wall Street mixed

things up and multiplied when they should have only added? The results would be problematic at best, disastrous at worst. So why do we confuse the two when it comes to something as important as reaching the world for Christ?

Even if you add an additional church to your denomination, you are still not multiplying, at least not yet.  $2 + 2 = 4$  and  $2 \times 2 = 4$  as well. In the early stage of multiplication, addition plays a part. The difference starts to happen with succeeding generations. If you merely add another 2 to 4, the sum is 6. But if you multiply by 2 you get to eight, then sixteen, and now you know you are multiplying.



### **The Momentum of Multiplication**

Addition is good, but multiplication is better. Addition produces incremental growth, but multiplication produces exponential growth. Paul gets to the heart of multiplication in his second letter to Timothy when he says, “The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.” (2 Tim. 2:2) This is the key verse in the Bible about what it means to multiply disciples. There are four generations in the verse: Paul, Timothy, “faithful men” and “others also.” Of late, I have taken to commending people not to use the multiplication language before the fourth generation. Until we get to “others also” we have not succeeded in multiplication. It is possible for a strong leader to attract other leaders who, because they are leaders, will have followers. You can have three “generations” of influence without really multiplying. But in order to get to the fourth generation of disciples, leaders, or churches everyone must be giving everything away to the next generation. Then we are multiplying. This is truly the test of a movement in my own understanding.

Multiplication begins slower than addition. In fact, you cannot have a multiplication movement that is not rapid. That doesn’t mean it begins rapidly; in fact multiplication starts slowly. But it gains velocity at an exponential rate as it goes—that is, its velocity increases with each generation. Like that proverbial car (mentioned earlier) starting to roll from the top of a steep hill, it builds in momentum as it goes. Each foot it passes in descent increases the speed and momentum, which becomes increasingly harder to slow or stop.

To illustrate this dynamic, Christian Schwarz and Christoph Schalk, in their *Implementation Guide to Natural Church Development*, give the following example: "Imagine a water lily growing on a pond with a surface of 14,000 square feet. The leaf of this species of water lily has a surface of 15.5 square inches. At the beginning of the year the water lily has exactly one leaf. After one week there are two leaves. A week later, four. After sixteen weeks half of the water surface is covered with leaves." The authors then ask, "How long will it take until the second half of the pond will also be covered? Another sixteen weeks? No. It will take just a single week and the pond will be completely covered."

### **The Seduction of Addition**

Multiplication may slower than addition in the initial stages, but in the long run, it is the only way to fulfill the Great Commission in our generation. The population of the world is rapidly multiplying. If all we do is add disciples and churches we will not even scratch the surface of what we have been commanded to do. Nor can we simply add multiplication to our current addition strategies, because each one has completely different requirements. We must stop adding if we want to start multiplying. Could it be that our commitment to strategies that cannot multiply is in fact what is keeping us from seeing a movement here in the West?

Because addition is faster in the beginning and multiplication takes time, often we are content with growth through addition. We are easily seduced by the more immediate success and instant gratification of addition instead of waiting for the momentum that can build with multiplying. As I said in my book, *Search & Rescue*, “Don’t be content with addition! Stop applauding the pathetic success we see in addition and start longing again for the incredible power of multiplication.”

In our current context, however, the success promised by addition is hard to turn down. It is so rare to have a church ministry grow at all that one that grows fast with addition is very desirable. The glamour of potentially being labeled “the fastest growing church” is hard to turn a way from. It is difficult for leaders to turn away from the crowds and invest in the few, but that is exactly what Jesus did Himself.

Jesus knew the power of multiplication, and He was willing to wait for it. He rejected the pressure of the crowds and chose instead to spend His life with the few that would multiply. We need leaders who are willing to do the same.