

## Many Small Victories: What's Really Happening in Movements

By Roger Charles

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A long dark line runs up the corner of my house; from a distance it looks like a power cable going up the wall. But a closer look reveals that the black line is a thick trail of ants, carrying food from the field up into a corner of my attic! Many Christians who have heard of church planting movements or disciple making movements misunderstand at a deep level what those movements really consist of. They read descriptive summaries, perhaps including large numbers of disciples and churches, and they envision something large, something powerful. When we hear of a church of 5,000 members, we think of a big auditorium on a big campus. But movements generally consist of clusters of house churches, with some lay elders overseeing a dozen or so home groups. They are much more like the trail of ants than a 220 volt power main. Although small, they are alive. And they are getting a job done.

In most movements to Christ around the world today, nothing really large ever happens in one place at one time. Movements involve ordinary people talking with other ordinary people – caring about what they care about, connecting with their group, and then connecting their group to God's word. Movements employ a handful of ministry patterns so simple that other regular people can easily imitate them, and persist in doing them even while suffering persecution.

When we read Joshua chapters 10 and 11, describing Joshua's many victories in the land of Canaan, we can easily get the impression of one total victory following directly on the heels of another. But Joshua 11:18 gives a quick peek behind the scenes to glimpse many years of a more complex reality: "Joshua waged war against all these kings for a long time." This wasn't a quick string of one-day battles; the Lord has briefly summarized a *long* process. And while most of the narrative describes Joshua as the prime actor leading Israel's battles, five verses specify the more diverse reality: "Joshua and all Israel with him..." (Josh 10:29a, 31a, 34a, 36a, 38a). The text does present a series of big wins, but a closer look reveals that those big wins consisted of many small victories, by all the families of all the tribes.

A disciple making movement doesn't become a movement because a famous preacher comes into town to speak to 500 people or 2,000 people. A movement grows when a couple of neighbors, who often hang out together anyway, gather to discuss a Bible passage together. And then another, and another. When friends make a habit of sharing their problems with one another, and discussing them in the light God's Holy Books, they gain some momentum in the right direction. They might meet for six months or a year before somebody outside the group gets interested enough to start a similar group. But what if a few of those little groups multiply in a year, and that happens in five, then ten, then 100 places? If in 100 places one group becomes two groups, which become four groups, that suddenly equals 400 groups. If each gathering averages just five attendees, 400 groups of five people equals 2,000 people: a significant total.

Movements consist of Jesus doing family-sized things with groups of friends in many places at once. And those family members care enough about a neighbor or another family member to do

the same simple thing again. Not many people can lead a group of 100, or even a group of 50. But if a process is very simple, anybody can do it. Everyone can talk to two or three friends. Simple things multiply easily. A person doesn't have to be a great leader to talk to a few relatives, or to start a couple of new groups among neighbors. Anybody could do that.

Anybody *is* doing that. Every week we hear about another neighborhood where somebody went in and said, "Do you want to have a group like ours?"

People say, "Sure. Can I join your group?"

"No, sorry, our group is already full. But I can help you start your own group, if you can pull some friends together." In that way they might start two or three new groups in a month, with no one pressuring anyone. People like to join something local and interesting.

### **How movements grow**

We need to understand how movements grow, both wider and deeper. The everyday growth just described takes a movement deeper within a particular group. As Donald McGovern observed, the gospel tends to spread best within a homogeneous group. People normally communicate with and trust people like themselves. But we have seen many modern movements grow beyond this communication barrier. While they spread most rapidly within specific segments of society, the message also jumps to spread widely among other distinct groups. We call that jump-over fruit, which happens most commonly in one of four ways: Gifted Men, Miracles, Marriage and Migration.

The Lord gives gifts to his people, as described in Ephesians 4:11-13. The first gift listed is that of apostle: a special gift for sharing the gospel in new areas and among different groups. Those with such gifting bridge the gap between the way their own group thinks and the way another group thinks. They overcome barriers of language, culture, ethnicity, and/or geography, to get something started and lay a foundation for others to continue the harvest.

Sometimes a miraculous event happens and many people suddenly come to faith. A crippled woman gets healed, a boy gets delivered from a demon, or an old man has a dream, and many lives are touched. Those stories easily get gossiped across neighborhoods and can stir up sudden interest in Jesus. Sometimes gifted people or special acts of God help a movement start in a new spot, then once the first fruit has taken root, it spreads like a vine and generation after generation of new fruit can grow.

However, jump-over fruit also happens in two ordinary ways, through marriage and through migration. When someone marries across the boundaries between "us" and "them," God may open a door for the gospel to slip through a cultural barrier. At other times, the gospel spreads through migration. A believer may find a new job in a new place. Or a sharp student from a backwoods region goes off to college, where Jesus awaits. Then he or she takes the news back home, and first fruits start growing in a new ethnic group.

All four of these common kinds of jump-over fruit are relatively small: one miracle, one woman's marriage, one workers' job change, one gifted person sharing one more time. But they model something others can copy. They replicate an easy meeting pattern, nudged along by the Holy Spirit through a small booklet of Bible verses or an app on a phone. The new circle of relationships presents an opportunity for the gospel to spread from "us" to "them." When a more mature disciple maintains a strong relationship with the person who has entered a new sphere of

influence, they can pray for that small circle and mentor them to multiple new circles in the new context. Even new believers can pass on the treasure from God's word: God's good answers to life's hard questions. Each small victory has potential to become a bigger victory.

In everyday life, most people in a huge movement don't think they're part of something huge. They just know they've entered a new way of life and have the privilege of sharing that life with a few others. They certainly don't see themselves as part of a big giant machine. They just share good stuff with a few friends: "Hey, can I tell you this great story I heard about one of the prophets?" Inside the movement, these small victories continue to happen. As long as the daily bread of biblical truth and life-on-life maturing continues, the battles with sin and Satan can be won, and the good news keeps spreading. The victories consist of growing new life in Christ even more than quantity of new disciples.

### **A different picture**

In some church models, success means hundreds or thousands of people gathering. People say, "That guy's such a great preacher, I'd drive all the way across town to hear him preach every week." By contrast, a small victory involves asking a friend, "What did you learn last week about Jesus?" or "Is there anything I can do for you this week?" A little love, a little truth, and a little faith grow day after day. These small victories consist of people studying God's word, considering its application for their lives, putting it into practice, and talking with others about it. Small victories like these happen every day throughout a movement.

People want to join other families that keep getting healthier, to become part of a team that keeps encouraging their neighbors. The kingdom of heaven means people follow the patterns of the King, living by the King's rules with the King's people and power. New disciples learn kingdom patterns by studying Scripture and watching "older brothers and sisters" in the kingdom.

These patterns in day-to-day life help assure that God's word stays at the center. Disciples listen to God's Spirit and concretely display real love for hurting people around them. When Jesus's disciples do these things again and again, they win small victories – in dozens, hundreds, and eventually thousands of neighborhoods. My neighbor walked into my home yesterday and shared about a movement he monitors where substantial societal change is happening. Transformed lives have always been the cutting edge of the church's witness. Outsiders notice the small victories and some of them want to join. This displays the priesthood of all believers in action: every member of God's kingdom can welcome new people to come and see the King.

Jesus offers a positive, healthy, abundant life, in the midst of a dark world. A movement doesn't happen because of good advertising, good branding, or big media campaigns. It happens because of the everyday life "advertisement" of believers' openness to interact with a few people and let them see the King at work in their lives. It happens through the work of God's Spirit –in both the joys and the sorrows of the disciples' lives.

### **A fresh perspective**

I've trained teams of experienced field workers, who have served for years hoping something big would happen, but most see very little. When I showed them how a group of simple housewives were starting groups, that started groups, that started more groups, it inspired hope. They realized "If we only need little victories like that to start a movement, maybe we could do this." Once they aimed to start something that other people could do on their own, things began to change.

After about a year of slow but steady growth, six or eight groups of five became more fruitful than in any previous year. And the year after that brought even more growth!

A paradigm shift occurs when college-trained pastors realize: “We can release housewives to do this. We can release carpenters and bricklayers to do this. We can have teenagers do this.” As long as they stay centered on God’s word and are looking outward to share with the lost, the movement grows. Many organizations in our country have now realized this and are experiencing slow but steady multiplication.

## **Conclusion**

Some chapters of Joshua describe great victories, actually summarizing many years’ worth of small victories. We can only imagine the thousands of regular guys who got up every morning to go do hand-to-hand combat once more. They faced countless small fights which, added all together, turned into something big.

We may find it convenient and exciting to share summaries of many new disciples coming to faith and many churches being planted in a movement. But those descriptions can mislead if we don’t clarify that the actual progress consists of many small and often hard-earned victories. The real progress happens through any number of ordinary disciples applying simple kingdom patterns that easily multiply. Jesus calls us to do small kingdom things, with mustard-seed-sized faith.

That kind of description can convey a more accurate, more believable, and more *doable*, narrative of God’s work in movements. The big picture is true and worth knowing, but we need to join and live out the adventure of many small victories.