EPHESIOLOGY

A Study of the Ephesian Movement

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Ephesiology: A Study of the Ephesian Movement
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Published by William Carey Publishing
10 W. Dry Creek Cir
Littleton, CO 80120 | www.missionbooks.org

William Carey Publishing is a ministry of Frontier Ventures
Pasadena, CA 91104 | www.frontierventures.org

Mike Riester, cover and interior design
Rory Clark, Indexing
Andrew Sloan, copyeditor
Melissa Hicks, managing editor

ISBNs: 978-1-64508-276-7 (paperback),
978-1-64508-278-1 (mobi),
978-1-64508-279-8 (epub)

Printed Worldwide

24 23 22 21 20 1 2 3 4 5

Library of Congress data on file with publisher.

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CHAPTER 1

Introducing Ephesiology

I met Juan in the jungle of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta Mountains on the northeastern coast of Colombia. The snowcapped mountains are the highest elevation along the Caribbean Sea. Somewhere around thirteen thousand Kogi live in twenty-nine communities spread out along that range. They are a traditional animistic people who do not want to have contact with those they call "younger brother."

Juan grew up in one of the Kogi communities, and when he was a boy he met two missionaries who shared the gospel with him. This had a transformational impact on Juan's life, and everyone in the community recognized it. Later Juan attended a school in Bogota, where he decided to become a pastor so that he could take the gospel back to his people. After completing his education, he returned to the mountain. People noticed the difference Jesus made in his life. Slowly others began to desire the peace of Christ Juan experienced, and eventually sixty Kogi converted to Christianity.

Not long after these conversions, community leaders began to feel threatened by this new group. The lifestyle they had observed among the predominately Catholic Colombians who called themselves Christians brought deep fear that their traditions would be impacted. They began to persecute the new Kogi believers and finally gave them an ultimatum: either renounce their faith or be killed! Juan and the other Christians fled their homes. They left everything—fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters, and all their earthly possessions—to start a new community whose hope is to reach back to their people with the gospel.

Over the years since their exile, they have dubbed *The Jesus Film* into the Kogi language, committed their language to writing,

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translated the New Testament, and are presently working on translating the Old Testament. Their vision is to see an indigenous movement in the jungles of Colombia proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ. Their dream began with a cost. No doubt it will cost more. But it is a cost that we all need to assess if we desire to be a part of a movement of God like we see in the New Testament. Perhaps there is no better New Testament movement to study than the one that began in Ephesus in AD 51.

Ephesiology: A Study of the Ephesian Movement

If you are looking for a commentary on Ephesians, you have picked up the wrong book. This book is about the fantastic work of the Holy Spirit that resulted in all of the Roman province of Asia hearing the gospel.[1] Like commentaries, however, I offer plenty of interpretation of Paul's letter bearing the title "Ephesians," as well as other texts associated with the city. This is not a biblical theology of missions, either, although we will see timeless principles that ensured the movement would become indigenous. Rather, the book is a missiological theology of the Bible.

You might wonder about the distinction between a biblical theology and a missiological theology. The former makes missions a subset of biblical theology, something that is one among many different biblical theologies—of the church, of leadership, of God, etc. The latter puts missions at the core of the Bible. Missions is the Bible's purpose, as missions seeks God's glorification by the proclamation of his will to every people, nation, tribe, and tongue. As the South African missiologist David Bosch said, "God's very nature is missionary" (1991, 390), so we should clearly see his missionary activity through the disciples and what they wrote.

Unlike commentaries and biblical theologies, my interest is in the missiologically theocentric movement that began in the great city of Ephesus and lasted for the next generation. How did the movement start? What did its adherents believe? Who were its leaders? How did it multiply? What sustained its growth? Those are the questions I hope to answer in this book, appropriately titled *Ephesiology: A Study of the Ephesian Movement.*

1. The Roman province of Asia extended from the eastern coast of the Aegean Sea to the border of Galatia in central Asia. Asia is generally used in reference to the Anatolian peninsula of modern-day Turkey.

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I am also interested in what happened in the movement that led many to embrace false teaching and return to pagan practices. Much of my academic career focused on researching religious movements in Western society (Cooper 2010). The one common denominator in most of these movements is that they are made up of disillusioned Christians who decided to walk away from their faith in pursuit of another. Why does this happen? It is not uncommon for sure. Paul knew many who walked away from the faith. In fact, he would write to Timothy that everyone in Asia had left him (2 Tim 1:15).

I am interested in how to prevent people from walking away from the faith. This topic cannot be left to the theological gymnastics of our modern interpretations about the doctrines of election and predestination, which are often misunderstood in Paul's writings. Neither can it rely on the altruistic acts of social justice in hopes that one can prove the merit of Christianity.

My goal, ultimately, is for us to come away with a deeper appreciation for God's mission in the world through church planting movements (CPMs). A few years ago we could only count a handful of CPMs. Today we are tracking more than 708![2] One CPM organization alone has seen God work through a reported planting of an average of 815 house churches each week and the baptism of one thousand new believers every day.

The same kind of fantastic events that we see in the book of Acts between AD 33 and 63 and in the city of Ephesus between AD 51 and 96 are still happening all around the world: imprisonments, riots, and beatings, as well as visions, miracles, and martyrdom. On the backs of many brothers and sisters in Christ are borne the scars of suffering for the Lord and the fruit of thousands coming to Christ every day. It is not their theology or acts of justice that bring people to Christ. It is their faithful dedication to fulfilling God's will to his praise and glory.

2. The Global Alliance for Church Multiplication reports there are 2,912 reports of active CPM engagement and 708 stage 5 CPMs that have grown to four-plus generations. The result is more than 69 million believers and 4.5 million churches with approximately 96,000 believers in each stage 5 CPM. The average church size is 15 (see https://vimeo.com/325214876 for the video report). As of the January/February 2020 issue of Missions Frontiers, there are a reported 1,035 known kingdom movements (see http://www.missionfrontiers.org). There is a lack of precision in these reports due to the dynamic nature of movements.

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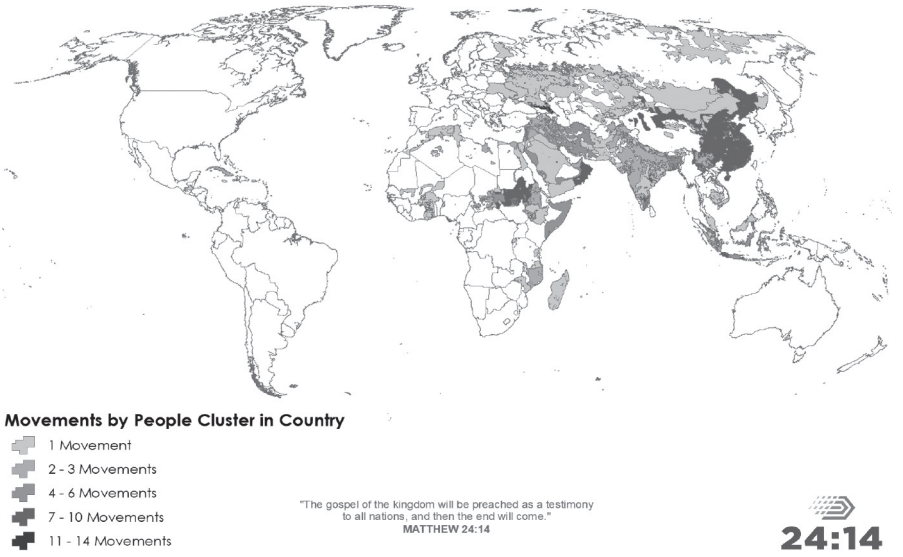


FIGURE 1: CHURCH PLANTING MOVEMENTS AROUND THE WORLD (COURTESY OF 24:14)

I have the awesome privilege of traveling around a good part of the globe. I have been introduced to the most committed Christians I have ever met. I have sat with many of our brothers and sisters to hear their stories, some of which are told in this text. Those stories are at times tragic, even fatal, but all of them honor God, who is in pursuit of people.

I often wonder what we are missing in the West. I am not advocating for persecution or praying for the church in the West to experience affliction. Instead, I am encouraging a missiologically theocentric movement that will joyfully risk everything for the glory of God and the advancement of the gospel. This is what we see in the church of Ephesus. This is the example of Juan and the courageous Kogi Christians. These are not counter-cultural movements. Rather, they are movements that appropriately engage their cultures with the good news. They are not extravagant, but they are costly.

The Life Cycle of a Movement

Some argue that CPMs are simply the latest craze. On the contrary, I will argue that CPMs were Spirit-empowered movements in the first century and that God is still at work in similar ways in the twenty-first century. The term *CPM* is certainly anachronistic, but that is not new. We tend to put new labels on old principles to package them for the modern consumer of the latest ministry fads. To some degree, I came to CPM as a skeptic. In some ways, I am still a skeptic when I hear CPM used as a strategy since it is more likely the result of disciples

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multiplying. Like you, perhaps, I have heard amazing stories of movements, whether after the fall of communism in 1989 or the mass conversion of Dalits in 2002. These short-lived "movements" were similar to others we see in history and in our day.

"Movement" is a repeatedly used term these days. We have the civil rights movement and women's liberation movement that live on today in new movements like #MeToo and Black Lives Matter, and probably in a hundred similar "movements." The reality is that many of these so-called movements are a flash in a pan. The Time's Up movement is one of many examples. After initial outrage instigated by the Harvey Weinstein sexual assault allegations, criticism of its leaders quickly stymied any further momentum. "Occupy" is another example of a movement that began with great energy, as hundreds gathered to occupy Wall Street, Chicago, and Washington, but we hardly hear anything about the "movement" today.

The movement we thought we started in post-communist Romania essentially died a slow death as the country discovered the materialistic pleasures of the West. I wish I could blame the failure entirely on these pleasures, but the uncomfortable fact is that we applied a Western institutional method and essentially squelched what the Holy Spirit was doing. Where appropriate, I will unpack this experience more as we look at the New Testament movement.

Movements have a so-called life cycle.[3] Nearly five decades ago Herbert Blumer (1969) outlined this life cycle in four stages. First, a movement commonly emerges out of concerns that initially grab the attention of a few but then become widespread. In the beginning, the participants are not necessarily well organized and might not be clear on their ultimate objectives, but they are passionate about a cause. Second, as the movement grows and matures in its identity, its adherents become increasingly organized and solidified around a strategy. Third, the movement's staff are trained and a formal organization begins to enact the strategy. Finally, the movement begins to decline, most often seen in terms of its struggle to mobilize others to its cause.

Decline, however, does not necessarily mean that the movement fades from society, although that can certainly happen. Instead, several outcomes are possible (Miller 1999). One outcome could be that opponents of the movement attempt to divert pressure away from the movement by rewarding its leaders, thereby creating hypocrisy at worst and compromise at best as the leaders become distracted. Repression and persecution can also dissuade movement leaders from continuing. Government pressure or violence against a movement can test the leaders' resolve. A movement might decline due to the successful

3. In chapter 10 I'll suggest that causes have a life cycle while movements have a rhythm.

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