

Movements and Institutions

By Pastor Alan Utting



'Movements are born in passion; institutions are built to preserve that passion.'

Anonymous

I was recently speaking with a close, godly friend who shared that he would like to take a sabbatical from church attendance. His comment is not uncommon. A growing number of believers in the Western world are dropping out of regular church life, feeling that it has become irrelevant and disconnected from everyday reality. As a result, in some countries, the established church is seeing a noticeable decline in numbers. However, the issue does not always lie within the church itself. Sometimes, the problem stems from the individual believer. In other cases, the challenge lies in a lack of understanding between the concepts of 'Movements' and 'Institutions'. This misunderstanding can lead to disillusionment when the dynamic and passionate beginnings of a movement become formalised and over structured over time, losing vitality that once attracted people in the first place.

'Then he said to me (the Lord), 'Prophecy to these bones and say to them, 'Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD! This is what the Sovereign LORD says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the LORD"' (Ezekiel 37: 4-6).

Movements

1. In the reading from Ezekiel, it was the 'breath of the Holy Spirit' that brought life and caused the dry bones to live. The Hebrew word for 'Spirit' can also be translated as 'breath', highlighting the life-giving power of God's Spirit.
2. Throughout history, many strong movements have emerged, some Christian, others not, ranging from life-giving to harmful and destructive. One of the greatest and most enduring movements over the past 2,000 years is the Christian Church, which began with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, as recorded in Acts 2:1-4. So rapidly did it spread that by the 4th century AD, the Roman Empire had been Christianised. Movements are born through vision, passion, and the unwavering commitment of a group of dedicated individuals. The most effective Christian movements walk in the footsteps of Jesus preaching the gospel, healing the sick, and casting out demons, as seen in Luke 4:18 and Mark 16:17-20. Opposition from others often serve to ignite and spread the flame even further.
3. In many parts of the world today such as Africa, South America, and East Asia Christian movements are growing with remarkable influence. In contrast, many churches in the Western world, particularly within major denominations, are experiencing decline. While these churches often have godly and faithful people within them, they frequently lack the refreshing outpourings of the Holy Spirit that bring life and create vibrant, Spirit-filled communities.
4. We must acknowledge that there are many effective church movements today that genuinely reflect the spirit and purpose of the New Testament church, even though their format and style may differ from those of more traditional, mainline

churches. However, history shows that over time, often over decades or centuries many of these movements tend to decline into ineffectiveness, unless they experience a fresh move of the Holy Spirit.

Institutions (structures)

1. Institutions, on the other hand, have the potential to provide essential structure to movements, helping them become more sustainable and effective over the long term. They serve much like the bone structure in the human body. In a similar way, structure enables a movement to grow and endure. (See Ezekiel 37 for the imagery of bones being brought to life.)
2. The early church gradually developed institutional structure through the intentional appointment of leadership roles. As Ephesians 4:11–12 states, ‘So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up.’ In Acts 6, deacons meaning servants, were appointed to care for the practical needs of the people. Later, the Apostle Paul continued this pattern by planting churches and appointing elders to govern and shepherd the congregations.
3. The danger with institutions, however, is that they can become dry and overly formal, lacking the life and vitality of the Holy Spirit. When this happens, churches may continue to function outwardly, but inwardly they become lifeless and spiritually stagnant. This loss of spiritual vitality is often one of the reasons why many sincere believers eventually disengage from church life.
4. John Wesley and others understood the importance of building effective structures to sustain their movements. Wherever Wesley travelled, he appointed leaders and established home groups that met twice a week. These gatherings provided encouragement, accountability, and spiritual growth for the members. In contrast, George Whitefield, who ministered during the same period in America, once described his own work as a ‘rope of sand’. Unlike Wesley, Whitefield did not implement the same level of structure, and as a result, many of his converts struggled to remain steadfast in their faith.
5. What is the answer? It’s a complex issue with no easy solution. However, here are a few important observations. Begin by humbly confessing your need before God through prayer and fasting. Seek a fresh touch of the Holy Spirit by repenting of known sin and cultivating a renewed passion for the lost. At the same time, guard against developing a judgmental attitude toward others. In some situations, it may even be appropriate for an established church institution to close its doors for a season, only to re-emerge later in a more relevant and life-giving form. Ask God for wisdom in discerning how to create new ‘wineskins’ that can hold the fresh life of the Spirit. This may involve a radical change just around the corner.

Resources

Steve Addison, *Movements That Change The World*