

# The Role of Signs and Wonders in Movement Breakthrough

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## Abstract

This article focuses on the controversial topic of how signs and wonders contribute to the catalyzing of movements. In doing so it reports the findings from two studies, the first-ever empirical research into effective movement catalysts (Prinz 2016) and the first-ever empirical study of factors that either contribute to or inhibit the catalyzing of movements (Prinz, Lewis, and Goldhor 2021). In addition to two surveys with two samples totaling 338 pioneers across 39 countries, the research also included 45 in-depth interviews.

In this article, signs and wonders are compared with other factors that were found to contribute to the catalyzing of movements. It discusses the differences between the occurrence of signs and wonders in movements and in a control group, as well as the differences in the role of signs and wonders in the ministry of expatriate catalysts compared to near-culture and same-culture catalysts. After analyzing the study's results, this article offers a brief conclusion.

**Key Words:** catalyst, movement, signs and wonders

## Introduction

Movements are extraordinary phenomena! This article defines a movement as a rapid indigenous multiplication of disciples making disciples and churches planting churches in multiple streams within a people group to the fourth generation. Such movements are happening all around the world in our generation, a breakthrough that missionaries just a few decades ago would hardly have believed possible. Even in Muslim contexts, where deeply spiritual, highly gifted pioneers sometimes toiled for a lifetime and witnessed only minimal fruit from their labors, thousands are suddenly turning to Christ. (Trousdale 2012; Miller and Johnstone 2015)

What is more, many of these movements are characterized by signs and wonders. Two recent studies give us ample empirical data on which to draw as we investigate this controversial topic.

The first study examined empirically the traits and competencies of 31 catalysts of movements in the Muslim world (Prinz 2016; 2022). A subsequent study examined a much larger sample of 147 catalysts of movements representative of the largest mega-cultures of the world from across many different religious and geographical contexts in 38 different countries; the study also examined a control group of 160 non-catalysts (Prinz, Goldhor, and Lewis 2021; Prinz and Goldhor 2022). The 2021 study took the form of an online survey that included 95 wide-ranging questions, plus in-depth interviews with 45 of the participants.

## Impact of Signs and Wonders on Movement Breakthrough

In the online survey, catalysts were asked, "To what extent have signs and wonders accompanying proclamation contributed to the catalyzing of your movement?" For the non-catalysts the wording was modified slightly: "To what extent have signs and wonders accompanying proclamation contributed to your ministry fruitfulness?" Table 1 gives a summary of answers to this question.

	Not at all significant	Not very significant	Neutral	Somewhat significant	Very significant	Total
Catalysts	1	11	10	46	79	147
	1%	7%	7%	31%	54%	100%
Non-catalysts	5	14	22	56	63	160
	3%	9%	14%	35%	39%	100%

Interestingly, only one of the 147 catalysts who participated in the study responded that the impact of signs and wonders was not at all significant on movement breakthrough. At the other end of the scale, just over half reported the impact of signs and wonders as very significant. On the one hand, then, the element of the miraculous cannot be dismissed; on the other hand, it is not a universal prerequisite. For 15 percent of the catalysts, movements did in fact happen without signs and wonders playing a significant role. These catalysts rated signs and wonders as either “not at all significant,” “not very significant,” or “neutral,” meaning neither significant nor insignificant.

In the case of those who did not catalyze a movement, the percentages of those who rated the impact of signs and wonders as “not at all significant” or “not very significant” was only fractionally higher. Five of the 160 rated signs and wonders as “not at all significant” and 14 as “not very significant.”

A comparison of all the ratings given to signs and wonders as a contributing factor to ministry fruitfulness shows a statistically significant difference between effective catalysts (average rating = 4.30), and non-catalysts (= 3.99). This difference shows that, even if signs and wonders are not a prerequisite, they rate higher for catalysts than for non-catalyst as a contributing factor to movement breakthrough.

When comparing the impact of signs and wonders with other factors that contribute to the effective catalyzing of movements, of 11 contributing factors examined, signs and wonders are one of the less significant, with only four rating lower. Stated differently, catalysts assess six factors to be more significant. Conversions without human involvement rank at the very bottom of the list, with a rating as low as 2.65, and a margin of 1.11 compared to the second-least significant contributing factor. For a full discussion of the factors that contribute to movement breakthrough, see a companion article in *Global Missiology* (Prinz and Goldhor 2022).

### Examples of Signs and Wonders

Statistical analysis of numerical data can seem dry and impersonal, especially when dealing with a subject which by its very nature is both thrilling and soul-stirring. Therefore, in order to add the qualitative dimension, we want to share the actual experiences of the pioneers. What kind of signs and wonders did they witness? What was the impact on the people they were seeking to reach? How did these advance God’s kingdom?

The interviews provided ample scope for detailed accounts of miracles, from both the catalysts and the control group who had seen a variety of signs and wonders in their ministry. Interviewees were asked the following questions:

In your experience, how often have you seen God do supernatural things in your ministry among your people group, for example Jesus appearing to Muslims in dreams or visions, or divine healings, or Muslims coming to faith by reading the Bible without any human agent involved?

What would you say has been the impact of such supernatural interventions of God?

Could you give a few of the most impactful examples of such supernatural interventions of God?

In response, interviewees shared a wide range of examples. A pioneer from South Asia (quoted verbatim here) described supernatural acts of healing and deliverance as a normal part of his ministry:

Deliverance ministry and other answered prayers have a big impact in a village. Most villages are filled with evil spirits and in every village there are witch doctors. All families have issues—whether sickness, marital conflict, problems with the children, unemployment, or whatever. They tell us their problems and we pray for them. It's just a simple prayer that can affect these people: "Jesus will heal you." Spiritual warfare is one of our methods. There are hundreds of evil spirits. When we pray with those who have evil spirits, there is deliverance. We pray for the sick and demonized and invite people to gospel meetings. We tell them to bring along their friends and relatives. Because they have seen miracles, they bring along others too. We share the gospel. These are village people, with a simple faith in Jesus. We plant house churches which then develop into bigger churches.

From Southeast Asia came a similar report:

I think we went from about 200 to 1,500 house churches within a period of three years after we started to preach and teach on healing. Now we have a movement of people who—mostly the women—love to lay hands on the sick and anoint people with coconut oil.

We did a video interview of a lady who raised her husband from the dead. He had died from a snake bite in the rice fields because they had no anti-venom medicine. His wife says, 'I came out and found him dead. I remembered that training I got....' Her husband tells the story from his point of view: 'I was dead. My body died—I felt my spirit leaving my body—but the next thing I know my wife is shouting at me, shouting "Jesus" in my ear and I came back to life. That's how I got raised from the dead.'

The catalyst commented that he had never prayed over dead people himself, but he taught his disciples to do what Jesus wants them to do and they actually go out and do it. "We've had three people raised from the dead."

A pioneer from Latin America shared a one-time experience that had a huge ripple effect:

I was walking across the village and there was a drunk man who wanted to fight with me, to stop me going further. I prayed for him in the name of Jesus, and in the same moment the drunkenness disappeared. The next day a church started in his home. Today 95% of the

people of the town go to that church where this former drunk is the pastor. Nobody in that town had been a Christian before that. It is one of the biggest churches in that area. More than 100 people are now in the church, in a village with a population of about 300 people. Most of the villagers are Christian now.

From these and other such stories it is clear that, as in the Acts of the Apostles, miraculous events can lead to tremendous growth of the church when accompanied by a culturally appropriate presentation of the gospel message.

Not all supernatural events have to do with healing, as this South Asia catalyst's story shows:

I've been in a village where all the dogs from the village just came charging at me. A crowd of people—maybe 50-60 or 100 people—were standing there and they were wondering, 'What's going on here?' All the street dogs were about to bite and about to charge me—and I just took the authority. I looked at the dogs and I said, 'In Jesus' name I command you to go!' The dogs turned and went away, with all those people watching. Inside, of course, you are scared but outside you have to recognize who you represent because you are in Christ. He promised that he is with me.

A pioneer in Latin America had the opposite experience when his horse knew better than he did, and it saved his life!

I was riding my horse to go a meeting. The miracle was that my horse refused to go on that road I was supposed to go on! I had to take another, roundabout route. After I got to that village, I learned that a group of men with guns had been waiting to kill me and stop me entering the village—but God saved me.

Sometimes the pioneers themselves were taken by surprise when God used them in supernatural ways. A church planter in East Asia, whose denomination was (as he puts it) "not into signs and wonders," told this story:

A man invited us to his house, and we were talking until about 2:00am. His mother was sick in bed, with an I.V. bottle next to her. She had been sick for a week. My teammate and I both felt a burden for her. I laid hands on her and prayed, and as I did so I felt a heat coming from my hands. That was it. We prayed for five minutes and then went to sleep. At breakfast the next morning this old woman who had been bedridden was there helping to cook the breakfast! She said she was feeling totally great.... That was the only healing I was a part of.

These examples come from interviews with both catalysts and non-catalysts. Again, some catalysts reported that their movements were started without any accompanying signs and wonders. This data needs to caution us against making generalizations.

### **Impact of Conversions without Human Involvement**

So far we have focused on signs and wonders. Survey participants were also asked a related question: "To what extent have you experienced conversions without human involvement contributing to your fruit, for example Jesus appearing to people in dreams or visions, or people coming to faith by reading the Bible without any human agent involved?"

	Not at all significant	Not very significant	Neutral	Somewhat significant	Very significant	Total:
Catalysts	40	37	23	28	19	147
	27%	25%	16%	19%	13%	100%
Non-catalysts	37	35	31	41	16	160
	23%	22%	19%	26%	10%	100%

Table 2 shows an interesting contrast to Table 1, with a far greater percentage at the lower end of the scale, indicating that “supernatural” conversions without human involvement are less common than signs and wonders in general. Here the results are more evenly spread between effective catalysts and the control group.

As was the case earlier, the interviews shed more light on these raw statistics. The following graph presents interviewees’ answers to the above question in visual form, showing that supernatural interventions occur much more frequently among the catalysts than those in the control group.

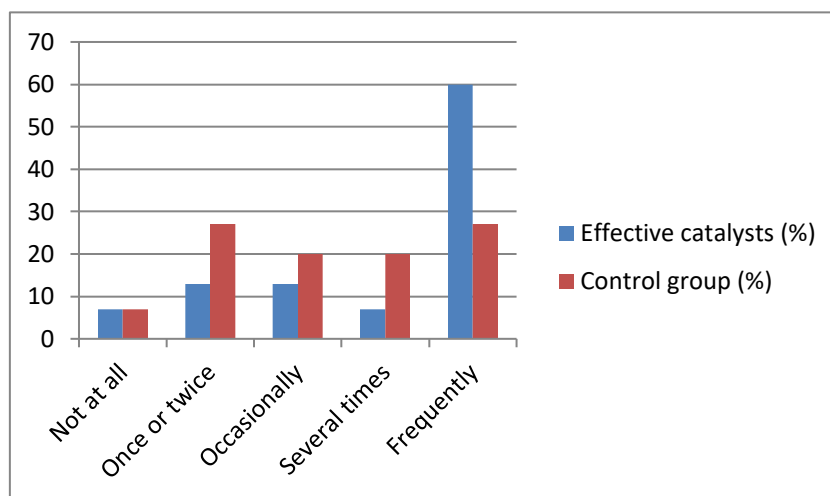


Figure 1: Frequency of Supernatural Interventions

When it comes to healings, the difference between effective catalysts and the control group is even greater, with catalysts reporting healings to occur almost three times more frequently in their ministry.

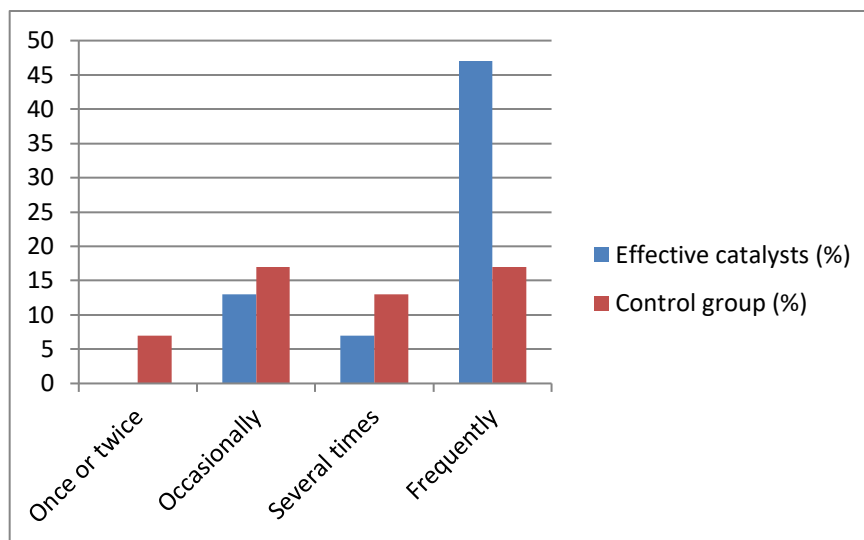


Figure 2: Frequency of Divine Healings

Dreams and visions were reported to occur less frequently than healings, as shown in the next graph.

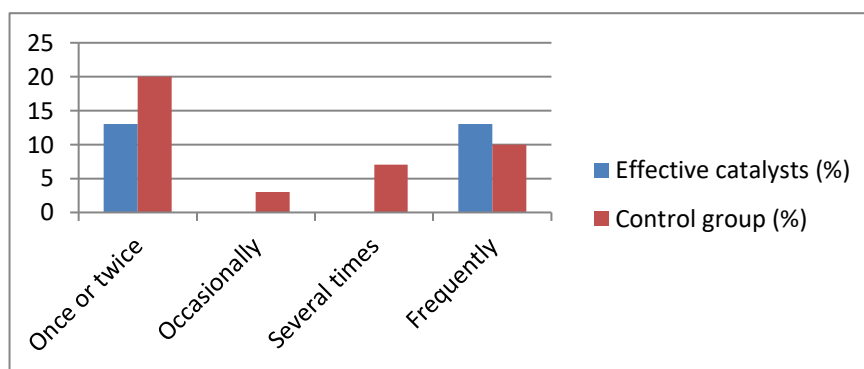


Figure 3: Frequency of dreams and visions

A pioneer in East Africa described the impact of dreams on his ministry:

Every time someone came to the church it was almost always because of having had a dream. For example, one man was a neighbor who had seen us meeting for three years. He had three dreams. In the first he was climbing a coconut tree and fell off it. In the second dream he was on his bed and his head was being cut off. Then in the third dream he saw a man in white—Jesus—who told him to come to him.

Almost everyone in the church had had a significant dream. An old woman had a dream and then said she needed to go to church. She didn't know where a church was and asked a neighbor who pointed her to our home.... Almost everything God does is outside of us. People would come along to my house and ask me to tell them about Jesus. God was working in his way.

In South Asia, a catalyst had been sharing the gospel with one family for some time and watched them “kind of inching towards faith.” One of the sons, however, belonged to a radical

fundamentalist Islamic movement and planned to kill the pioneer. He didn't follow through with his plan, and a year later, disillusioned with Islam, he saw Jesus in a dream:

Jesus told him, 'I have a gift for you and your family: people are going to explain it and when they arrive you must listen to them.' Meanwhile, we (the pioneer and his team) were actually travelling all that night to go to see him, although he didn't know that. So when he woke up the next day we were already in the house!

The whole family ended up coming to faith because of that dream. They all came together: about 18-19 people including some girls who had married in.... They promised that they would tell other people, and they did. They just started telling people and all we did was to keep studying Scripture with them.

Stories like this are very common: an individual had a dream, which ended up affecting his or her extended family and the wider community. They also greatly strengthened the faith of the pioneers, as they saw God at work to build his church by supernatural means.

The earlier 2016 study also examined the impact of conversions without human involvement. Note this comparison of the results:

	Not at all significant	Not very significant	Neutral	Somewhat significant	Very significant
Catalysts surveyed in 2021	27%	25%	16%	19%	13%
Catalysts surveyed in 2016	31%	21%	17%	17%	14%

The percentages are remarkably similar, given that the 2021 survey included 147 catalysts and the 2016 study only 31. In addition, the original survey was limited to Muslims, whereas the later survey covered the six regions or groupings where most movements occur, specifically Francophone Africa, East Africa, India, Indonesia, Latin America, and among Ethnic Chinese.

A minority of 32% (2021) and 31% (2016) rated the impact of conversions without human involvement as either somewhat or very significant, while the majority of catalysts did not see these as having a significant impact on the catalyzing of their movements.

### **Catalysts' Personal Experience of Miraculous Gifts**

The catalysts in the 2016 study provided additional details about their personal experiences of miraculous gifts, which span a broad spectrum. Many said that they exhibit a miraculous gift and practice it frequently, whereas others reported that they don't have such a gift and even that no miracles at all have happened in the entire catalyzing of their movement.

Those who have seen miraculous gifts at work identified them as prophecy/prophetic words, supernatural revelations, miraculous answers to prayer, and dreams and visions. Each one was asked to describe in what way these gifts had contributed to the catalyzing of their movement. Their answers can be summarized as follows (Prinz 2021, 71-72):

- Prophecy reveals ministry strategy to the catalyst. It reveals how to pray specifically, and it reveals ministry problems before they become obvious, so they can be addressed early and effectively.
- Miracles in answer to prayer in the name of Jesus evidence to Muslims the authority of the name of Jesus and demonstrate that spiritual power in Jesus is greater than theirs, which makes them want to join the movement.
- Miracles cause people to pray to God, and even encourage Muslims to gather together to pray, which leads to house churches being formed.
- Seeing prophecies fulfilled stimulates faith and boldness among believers.
- The catalyst's example (even if miracles are only a few) leads to local believers walking in miraculous gifting (often with more miracles).
- Dreams about the Bible, or Jesus, or the exhortation to meet an apostolic leader or local believer lead to Muslims being convinced of the gospel.

The following example illustrates a number of these factors:

The apostolic leader received a prophetic word from God to pray specifically for a miracle that would bring a particular family to faith in Jesus within twelve hours. The catalyst devoted himself to prophetic intercession. The next night someone in the family received a prophetic dream, which led the entire family to faith the next morning. In this family a house church was started, and from this house church a movement began.

In some of the movements miraculous gifts have played a very significant role, as shown by this example from Southeast Asia:

In our group of now 11 movements, from seven key nationals and myself, ... this phenomenon widely starts new clusters of groups. Last week at our quarterly retreat, we took a two-hour session to hear stories of miracles, and each of about ten people contributed stories, trying to limit themselves to two miracle stories each, while some slipped into three stories. In almost all of the stories, there was the commonality that at least seven believer groups in three generations were spurred from one miracle.

The fact that a single miracle could lead to seven new house churches being established, as a consistent pattern among ten different apostolic leaders, points to the significant role of this variable in the catalyzing of some of the movements.

In the case of the apostolic leaders who did not practice miraculous gifts, or not at all frequently, and yet effectively catalyzed a movement, the following rationale was provided (Prinz 2021, 73):

- Although the apostolic leader did not practice a miraculous gift, local believers did. Two reasons were given: (1) it promotes the health of the churches and demotes the foreigner; (2) it demonstrates to Muslims that following Jesus is not only the religion of the foreigner.
- Catalysts wanted the faith of believers to rest on Scripture, and wanted their focus to be on sin, repentance, and forgiveness, rather than on miracles.
- Miraculous gifts were not a significant part of the apostolic leader's personal tradition and theology.
- Miracles were necessary for the initial breakthrough, but not in the later stages of the movement.



Apostolic leaders other than the primary catalyst reported practicing a miraculous gift among the people group, which contributed to the movement.

### **The Correlation of Signs and Wonders with the Catalyst's Faith and Prayer Life**

One possible explanation for the occurrence of signs and wonders is to seek its origin in the traits of the movement catalyst. We base this conjecture on the theological conviction that God often performs signs and wonders in response to faith and prayer. (See for example Mark 11:22-24; Acts 4:30-31.)

In addition to assessing signs and wonders and other contributing factors, the studies also examined the personal traits and competencies of effective catalysts. Two traits that consistently characterize effective catalysts are *expectant faith* and *fervent intercession*.

The 2016 study identified expectant faith as one of 11 qualities that every single one of the 31 participating catalysts in the Muslim world exhibited strongly and consistently. On a 1-4 Likert scale, catalysts self-assessed their expectant faith with an average rating of 3.65, the second-highest rating of all 33 qualities identified (Prinz 2021, 40). This trait is defined as follows: "Catalysts are expectant that God will grow a movement among their people group and save many soon, and they have great faith that *God will show his power* through their lives." Clearly this trait includes the element of expectancy that God will demonstrate his supernatural power. The same study also identified fervent intercession as a trait exhibited by more than 80% of effective catalysts in the Muslim world. Catalysts self-assessed their fervent intercession with an average rating of 3.45 on the 1-4 scale, still comparatively high.

The 2021 study verified a total of 21 qualities of effective catalysts worldwide, including both expectant faith and fervent intercession. On a 1-5 Likert scale, catalysts self-assessed their expectant faith (same definition as the 2016 study) as one of the highest-rated qualities, with a very high average rating of 4.67. Fervent intercession was also verified as a trait that catalysts exhibit worldwide, both in depth and breadth. This was confirmed in the interviews, with many testimonies to the power of prayer by the catalysts and their disciples. Questions about their prayer life revealed that they prayed with more frequency than non-catalysts, with many catalysts reporting that they devote between six to nine hours weekly to intercession for their people group. Effective catalysts are also almost twice as likely to include fasting with their intercession. This result confirms from a representative sample what has been reported anecdotally.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, the data reveals that effective movement catalysts possess a strong expectant faith that God will show his power through them—and he does! Most effective catalysts are also more fervent intercessors than non-catalysts. The New Testament links faith and prayer with miracles. This may help to explain why miraculous events occur more frequently in the ministries of effective catalysts than those of non-catalysts.

Although signs and wonders have often led to movement breakthrough, in some cases they have played a relatively minor role. Other movements have been catalyzed without any miracle at all. However, when signs and wonders do happen, they point unbelievers to God and cause his church to grow, often dramatically, just as they did in the days of the first Apostles.

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