

Garrison, David. *Church Planting Movements: How God is Redeeming a Lost World*. Midlothian, VA: Wigtake, 2004.

David Garrison's *Church Planting Movements* examines many of the common features and practices that have led hundreds of thousands of people across the world to profess a faith in Jesus. In the book, he characterizes a CPM ("Church Planting Movements"), as ". . . a rapid multiplication of indigenous church planting churches that sweeps through a people group or population segment" (21). More than a mere study, the book's triumphal tone conveys the intention to promote the idea that right vision and methodology make this God-sized work not only possible but perhaps even probable since, it is implied, CPMs are "God's ideal" (297).

Positively, Garrison recounts a number of characteristics that have shaped CPMs across diverse cultures outside the Western world. Although resembling one another, he helpfully distinguishes CPM thinking from the Church Growth Movement (24–25). Accordingly, readers can better sort out what is empirically and theoretically descriptive of CPMs versus other kinds of methodologies. One strength of the book is that it offers a range of anecdotes from around the globe that represent the type of strategies and responses people have had where mass movements have taken place. Therefore, missiologists can assess the patterns that emerge since CPMs essentially act as large sample cases.

In addition, the book urges readers to recall some most basic practices of the Christian life, necessary if churches are to experience healthy multiplication. These include prayer, evangelism, a stress upon Scripture, churches planting churches, and the mobilization of laypersons (rather than keeping all ministry confined to a select group of professions). Furthermore, missionaries are reminded that in most such movements, ambiguity, struggle and even suffering are normal. The author rightly poses, "Putting obedience to God's word into the church's DNA is indispensable . . ." (269). Amid the growing technical jargon and complexity within missiological dialogue, such straightforward reminders keep fundamental factors in the foreground.

However, the book exposes the challenge of assessing so vast a topic. For example, the very definition of a CPM is vague and artificial. At its heart, one must ask what defines "rapid?" Numerical data is assumed when he speaks of "*near*" CPMs (19). Elsewhere, Garrison is more explicit about what statistics and opinions mark a CPM.¹ Since, as he says, ". . . the word 'rapid' is undefined," deference is given to the opinion of the Kekchi people who think, ". . . if a church didn't reproduce itself after six months it was considered an unhealthy church" (195). Furthermore, in order to characterize a worldwide movement, he makes the tenuous decision to define a "church" in the most broad and general terms possible. Therefore, at the expense of even the most minimal exegesis, Garrison forces himself to bullishly assert theological parameters of a "church" from texts irrelevant to the question (259). He lists a number of elements that supposedly depict every or most CPMs. However, one wonders whether some elements really are predications of a CPM or perhaps whether they are simply tautologies. That is, does "rapid" *characterize* a CPM or *define* it? Similarly, the book argues that "house churches" are elements

¹ See his article "10 Church Planting Movement FAQs," in *Mission Frontiers* (Mar-Apr 2011) Accessed 5 Sept 2011. Online: <http://www.missionfrontiers.org/issue/article/10-church-planting-movement-faqs>.

on every CPM (172; 191–93). Yet, if a CPM is defined by subjective notions of rapidity, might Garrison actually be guilty of begging the question? After all, would other models render a CPM impossible, *by definition*, even if a mega church were to experience rapid growth itself, though only covering a handful of “campuses”?

Despite its early caveat, the book runs into trouble precisely by moving away from merely being descriptive to instead “*prescribing what could or should happen*” (21). This happens most clearly in Part Three and Four, where Garrison offers various proof-texts for CPM methodology and suggests a number of practical action points that may hinder or hasten rapid growth. In effect, Garrison moves into CPM apologetics thus requiring at least some glance at Scripture (Ch. 12). The book regards CPMs as “*the most effective means in the world today for drawing lost millions into saving, disciple-building relationships with Jesus Christ*” (28). Yet, in what sense are CPMs really an “effective means” when a CPM is essentially the tag given whenever “millions” rapidly profess Christ? The “effective” descriptor may disguise an implicit (and prescribed) methodology undergirding CPM thinking.

This brings up the fundamental failure of *Church Planting Movements*. Throughout the book, Garrison’s use of Scripture is inexplicable. When discussing the meaning of “church,” he cites a passage on church discipline (“wherever two or more are gathered”), immediately followed by a most indefensible claim, “Paul seized on this truth when he referred to the church as the body of Christ” (259). At times, the preoccupation with numbers replaces exegesis (206–7). Garrison also justifies family conversions (within CPMs) on the fact that God choose two cousins (John the Baptist and Jesus) to bring forth the gospel (209–10). Also, CPMs are defended on the basis of texts that describe particular instances of gospel expansion but without any clear evidence of prolonged growth by means of churches “rapidly” multiplying through church planting churches (at least as defined by modern missiological researchers). Thus, phrases like “multiplied greatly” and the fact that two disciples “at once left their nets and followed” Jesus become the grounds for CPM methodology (214–15; cf. 337). Similarly, the scattering that followed the persecution of Stephen hardly warrants the claim that this is an instance of “churches planting churches” (336–37).

Church Planting Movements has exerted great influence on missionary practice around the world. This is the primary reason for reading the book; otherwise, many other books could better give practical, strategic advice or establish theological principles for mission practice. Whatever benefits do exist can be found elsewhere. Garrison’s account functions more like promotional material than a serious and comprehensive attempt to assert strategy or missiological theology. The pragmatic bent and weak use of Scripture make it hard to distinguish from the kind of literature that non-Christian groups might produce in propagating their own influence. There is little about the book that is distinctly “Christian.” While passing qualifications are made about trusting in God to change hearts and the importance of theological education, little time is given on these issues so as to counter the overwhelming pragmatic thrust. This is not a book to use for the sake of forming missionary strategy. It is better used as a resource for seeing different examples of the way people are trying to serve God in various missionary contexts.