

THE INFLUENCE OF CULTURE ON THE EVOLUTION OF MISSION METHODS: USING “CHURCH PLANTING MOVEMENTS” AS A CASE STUDY

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Introduction

How precisely does culture influence ministry methods? The question is multi-layered. In a missionary setting, the relationship between culture and strategy becomes even more complicated. At one level, Christian practice should stem from a sound interpretation of the Bible. Yet, ministry does not happen in a vacuum. Global missions brings people from diverse backgrounds together in a cross-cultural setting. Mission strategies are constantly shaped by at least three different cultures—the missionary’s home culture, the local culture in which he or she ministers, and the biblical culture(s).¹ Of course, people may not be conscious of this fact.

Therefore, it is important that we intentionally consider how culture shapes mission strategy and practice. Given the vast breadth of the topic, a helpful approach would be to examine a particular philosophy of ministry that is popular among missionaries around the world. In this way, we can avoid abstraction. Also, our analysis will be relevant for a greater number of people.

This article highlights three specific ways that culture contributes to the evolution of a missionary strategy. As a case study, I will examine the cultural influences behind “church planting movements” (CPMs). This study first considers how CPM practitioners understand culture’s influence on Paul’s missionary efforts. The second section identifies a number of cultural assumptions affecting the application of the CPM paradigm. Third, I give one explanation why the model survives despite a lack of biblical precedent.² There are strong forces within missionary subculture that have enabled CPM theory to evolve into a popular ministry model. Finally, I conclude by offering a few practical suggestions that will help us resist the rapid spread of syncretism within contemporary mission strategy.

Over the past two decades, missionary practitioners have increasingly advocated a model of ministry that prioritizes CPMs over other missionary goals.³ David Garrison is a leading

¹ The biblical account consists of multiple cultures spanning different times and locations. However, I am here referring to “biblical culture,” generally, to refer to whatever particular culture lies behind a specific text that one might study at any given time. Likewise, a “local culture” may be multi-layered blend of subcultures.

² For a fuller defense of this claim, see Jackson Wu, “There are No Church Planting Movements in the Bible: Why Biblical Exegesis and Missiological Methods Cannot Be Separated.” *Global Missiology* 1, No. 12 (Oct 2014).

³ For example, see David Garrison, *Church Planting Movements: How God Is Redeeming a Lost World* (Monument, CO: WIGTake Resources, 2003); Steve Smith and Ying Kai, *T4T: A Discipleship Re-Revolution*

spokesman for CPM theory. He offers a broad but standard definition: “A simple, concise definition of a Church Planting Movement (CPM) is *a rapid and multiplicative increase of indigenous churches planting churches within a given people group or population segment*” (Garrison, 1999, 8; cf. 2003, 21–22). The philosophy of ministry lays particular stress on rapidity.

CPM theorists argue that just as Paul catalyzed CPMs in the book of Acts, so also we can expect God to do a similar work around the world today. In fact, these practitioners primarily derive their theory by what has been called “reverse engineering” (Garrison, 2003, 11–12). In short, they examine various so-called “church planting movements” from around the world to find out what they have in common. These features help CPM theorists discern what they consider to be “best practices” for catalyzing the rapid reproduction of church-planting churches. According to CPM theory, missionaries should expect God to bring about CPMs among modern day Gentiles (Garrison, 2003, 35–170).

De-Contextualizing Paul’s Gentile Ministry

To some degree, modern missionary outreach to Gentiles has little to no true biblical precedent. Certainly, Paul is the called “apostle to the Gentiles” (Rom 11:13).⁴ Nevertheless, there is an important reason why we perhaps cannot expect the same rapid response by Gentiles today that Paul enjoyed in his own ministry. In short, Paul’s ministry thrived among Gentiles who were *already* under the influence of Judaism, such as proselytes or “God-fearers.” Whenever Paul reached out to “full Gentiles, the response was anything but a “movement.” By “full Gentiles,” I mean those Gentiles who were not yet indoctrinated by Jewish ideas prior to hearing the gospel.

Furthermore, we should observe the specific conditions that accompanied those responses that have any sort of CPM-type quality about them. In what way do the Christian Gentiles in Acts compare with the Gentiles to whom modern missionaries share the gospel? These observations from Scripture should factor into our strategic thinking today.

In Acts, a number of verses describe the positive response of people to the gospel message.⁵ The most rapid growth happened among those who, to some degree, affirmed the

(Monument, CO: WIGTake, 2011); Steve Addison, *Movements That Change the World: Five Keys to Spreading the Gospel* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Books, 2011). Also, see the collection of articles by CPM advocates in the March-April 2001 issue of *Missions Frontiers*, Vol. 33, no. 2, entitled “Church Planting Movements: Rapidly Multiplying Faith Communities.” Likewise, see the various resources online at www.churchplantingmovements.com. Others have raised concerns, including John D. Massey, “Wrinkling Time in the Missionary Task: A Theological Review of Church Planting Movements Methodology,” *SWJT* 55, no. 1 (2012): 100–137; Greg Gilbert, “Book Review: Church Planting Movements by David Garrison,” *9Marks*, March 5, 2010, n.p. [cited 9 October 2013]. Online: <http://www.9marks.org/books/book-review-church-planting-movements-david-garrison>; George Robinson, “Book Review of T4T: A Discipleship Re-Revolution,” *Globalmissiology.org*, October 2011, n.p. [cited 9 October 2013]. Online: <http://ojs.globalmissiology.org/index.php/english/article/view/681>.

⁴ All Scripture citations come from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise noted.

⁵ Acts 2:47; 4:4; 6:1, 7; 9:31, 42; 11:21, 24 (Antioch). Already in 6:5; 11:19, we see clear evidence of many Jews in the city; 12:24; 13:43, 48–49; 14:1, 21; 16:5; 17:4; 18:8; 19:10, 19–20, 26.

Jewish faith (e.g. Cornelius; Acts 10:2, 22). Compared to those unaffected by Judaism, these persons had a foundational understanding of the Bible. They also gathered at synagogues having established networks of likeminded relationships and practice.

On the other hand, “full Gentiles” were slower to accept Christ when first hearing the gospel. On Paul’s missionary journeys, only one or two passages in Acts clearly show him preaching to full Gentiles, those who were uninitiated with respect to Jewish doctrine. The clearest instance is found in Acts 17, when Paul speaks at the Areopagus. According to Acts 17:34 only a few responded positively: “But some men [τινὲς . . . ἄνδρες] joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.”

In addition, some might consider those in Lystra (cf. Acts 14:8ff) to be “full Gentiles.” Whatever the case, Paul was not warmly welcomed by the people; we have only very indirect references to possible Christians in that city (14:21; cf. 16:1–2). In view of Acts 16:2–3, where Luke notes the presences of Jews living in Lystra, it is possible that even those Gentile Christians in Lystra were already familiar with Judaism.⁶

Regardless of what one decides about the background of Gentile converts, we should note two points. First, the Bible offers no evidence of a CPM among Gentiles. We cannot call something a CPM simply because “many believed” Paul’s message. Second, the data we *do* have suggests a reason that Gentiles received Paul’s message as well as they did. The most responsive Gentiles had already been exposed and/or even embraced Jewish ideas prior to hearing the gospel. Not only do we lack clear evidence of a CPM among “full Gentiles,” the possibility appears unlikely.

Can we compare the Gentile converts in Acts with those now living in modern day China, Pakistan, and India? Do we have biblical precedent for thinking that today’s “full Gentiles” will react the same as those to whom Paul preached? Should we *expect* a CPM to occur among contemporary Gentiles, who hear the gospel while being unfamiliar with Jewish teaching? Christians can certainly affirm God’s sovereignty and pray with all hope for a CPM to occur; however, there is no biblical evidence to suggest if or “how Church Planting Movements unfolded in the first century” (Garrison, 2003, 241; cf. 200).

Cultural Assumptions Shape Application

There is another reason CPM-missiology has survived even though there is no biblical precedent for the phenomenon.⁷ At first glance, CPM-theory appears to be universally true for

⁶ One other passage is ambiguous with respect to the Gentiles who accepted Christ. However, there are clues suggesting that those Gentile believers had Jewish backgrounds. In Acts 11:21–24, the mention of “Cyrene” echoes Acts 2:10; the reference to “Hellenists” and “Stephen” following the Cornelius account is consistent with the idea that the “great number who believed” were exposed to Jewish teaching.

⁷ Using the standards established by proponents of CPM-theory, there are no CPMs in the Bible. See Jackson Wu, “There are No Church Planting Movements in the Bible: Why Biblical Exegesis and Missiological Methods Cannot Be Separated.” *Global Missiology* 1, No. 12 (Oct 2014).

any cultural context. This is because it overlooks the pervasive influence and importance of context.

Additionally, CPM theorists seem not to recognize how cultural assumptions drive application. Philosophically speaking, this approach is thoroughly “western.” In using the label “western,” I in no way intend to convey a negative judgment. Rather, I simply make a *descriptive* judgment. Missiologists need to be cognizant and critical of their own cultural perspectives.

There is no room here for a full-orbed analysis of the worldview behind CPM theory. Therefore, I will briefly list a few prominent features of CPM theory that also characterized Western cultures. The approach is distinctly focused on rapidity, numerical growth, novelty (new believers, new churches) and independence (not letting tradition encumber progress). Also, the strong emphasis on “best practices” displays a bent towards western pragmatism. Inasmuch as success is measured in quantitative terms, CPM theory has an empirical orientation. Further, John Massey observes, “Most non-western societies do not embrace the egalitarian ethos and structure of church leadership put forth by the CPM paradigm” (Massey, 2012, 125).

“Western” culture aside, various subcultures also can subtly influence missionary thinking. For example, one can easily seem to reproduce the methods espoused by one’s own churches, denominations, and sending agencies. CPM subculture attempts to universalize its values across world cultures. John Massey aptly makes this point when he says,

The need for lay leadership partially arises out of Garrison’s belief that relying on adequately trained and fully or even partially supported pastors will always slow down Church Planting Movements. Has Garrison, however, missed a key contextualization principle at this point? Indigenous church planting demands that local leaders and believers decide the shape of the church? What if a church decides to have a building as a central gathering point? What if small groups want to merge together into a larger group for enhanced worship, concrete expression of their unity in Christ, instruction, and cooperation for ministry? What if formal theological education for leaders is valued, available, and strongly encouraged of gifted leaders, like in many western and Asian cultures? What if the church chooses to provide full or partial financial support for their pastor (1 Cor 9:3–14)? If churches choose yes to all of the above, then does this mean these components inherently are obstacles to reproducibility? Most non-western societies do not embrace the egalitarian ethos and structure of church leadership put forth by the CPM paradigm. Garrison imports a model of church and church leadership that does not arise from the New Testament or the flow and shape of local cultures, highlighting one weakness of a “one size fits all” approach in mission strategy. (Massey, 2012, 125)

Once again, it seems that CPM theorists overlook the profound influence of culture and context.

Why do these cultural assumptions go unrecognized? One cause may be that people fail to sufficiently prioritize biblical interpretation. We see an example in what has already been argued above. CPM theory does not consider the fact that Gentiles responded differently to the

gospel. When Paul's Gentile audience had received some theological instruction prior to his arrival, they were far more welcoming of his message. In other words, those who most eagerly accepted Paul's preaching were not like the Gentiles among whom modern missionaries labor.

CPM-theorists generally argue for particular *principles* from Scripture, such as the need for prayer, evangelism, and local leadership. However, one struggles to find any writer who explains and defends CPM theory by rigorous exegesis of specific texts. Instead, broad theological assertions are made with little more than a passing quotation or verse reference.

Despite the widespread influence of CPM methodologies (like T4T), advocates do not show how their use of Scripture compares with that of biblical scholars who have written on key texts, such as the book of Acts. CPM theorists do not defend the criteria used to assess potential CPMs.⁸ If we suppose that Paul actually catalyzed CPMs, as some assert, then there should be some explicit biblical basis to define what "rapidity" means. CPM writers argue from silence, reading their assumptions into the biblical context.

The Evolution of Western Missionary Subculture

What cultural influences have led to the popularization of CPM-driven missiologies?

The controversy stirred by Charles Darwin's 1872 publication of *The Origin of Species* persists to the present day. Although Darwin's theory explores the topic of biological *evolution*, people have drawn more extreme conclusions about the *origins* of life. That is, based on observations about the changes that happen within species, people speculate about the cause of such changes. The theory is problematic because it extrapolates from small observable changes *within* a species to make systematic assertions about the evolution of animals *across* species.

Without equating Darwinian "evolution" and CPM-theory, we should notice that both theories commit a similar logical error. CPM theorists first see comments in Scripture indicating that believers were "increasing in number" (Acts 6:1) and "many" people believed the gospel (cf. Acts 17:4, 12; 18:8). CPM advocates then conclude too much from these vague statements (which typically describe different places and at different times). Without biblical evidence, they sweepingly assert that the book of Acts recounts how God brought about CPMs in the first century (Garrison, 2003, 241; Smith, 2006).

Why has CPM-theory grown legs among missionaries around the world? No doubt part of the reason is because people want it to be true. Naturally, those who love Christ would want to see and expect the rapid multiplication of churches around the world. The generalized comments in Acts provide the final impetus needed to start a movement to popularize what is imagined to

⁸ To see how CPMs are assessed, see Jim Slack, "How Many Church Planting Movements Are There?" *Mission Frontiers*, 13. Garrison rephrases the latter clause, stating there must be "field-based affirmation that a CPM is emerging." See David Garrison, "Church Planting Movement FAQs." Accessed 9 Oct 2013. Online: <http://www.missionfrontiers.org/issue/article/10-church-planting-movement-faqs>; David Watson, "About," Blog, *TouchPoint: David Watson's Blog* [cited 9 October 2013]. Online: <http://www.davidwatson.org/about/>. David Watson, "Church Planting Movement (CPM)—Our Definition" *TouchPoint* Blog Post. Accessed 9 Oct 2013. Online: <http://www.davidwatson.org/2009/06/15/church-planting-movement-cpm-%E2%80%93our-definition/>.

be a biblical norm. In addition, there is the need to raise funds. Missionary subculture emphasizes numbers in order to attract potential contributors. Thus, financial pressure also fosters an ethos in which CPM theory thrives.

Furthermore, CPM-theory is made popular due to a “survival of the *fastest*” principle. That is, in a missionary culture where numbers are valued, many workers, whose churches grow very slowly, will rapidly fall prey to discouragement and leave the field. Those missionaries who have the fastest growing churches will naturally move up the organizational food chain, assuming leadership positions within mission agencies. The result is that they spread the “DNA” that perpetuates CPM-theory.

Stopping the Rapid Spread of Syncretism

The previous sections highlight a number of ways that culture and worldview influence CPM theory. If one is not careful, CPM practitioners run the risk of syncretism. That is, missionaries may unwittingly use methods that more closely reflect their own culture and personal bias rather than the clear teaching of Scripture.

How might we resist the rapid spread of syncretism? This concluding section gives a few practical suggestions. Given enough time and space, one could certainly list countless other applications. For now, I will simply focus on four broad points that I think can systemically improve missionary practice.

First, we should recognize that those who hear the gospel need significant time to see the big picture. Many evangelistic presentations only allude to but do not make explicit the grand story of the Bible. The gospel beckons people to forsake everything for Christ’s sake. To do this, people will need a better grasp for how biblical truths fit together and their significance for daily life. “Full Gentiles” cannot be expected to accept the gospel, after having only been introduced to the gospel with a 3–5 minute presentation.

Second, strategies need to be developed that prepare “full Gentiles” for a time when they will be truly ready to accept the gospel. Missionaries need more intentionally to not only preach the gospel but also prepare the way for the gospel. At one level, this could include “pre-evangelism” discussions about worldview and apologetics related topics. On another level, we should reflect on the gospel message as preached in the Bible. As has been shown elsewhere, certain ideas are consistently emphasized in Scripture that do not always find their way in contemporary evangelism tracts.⁹ For example, popular gospel presentations almost never make much of Israel’s history, especially the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants.

⁹ For examples, see Jackson Wu, “Contextualizing the One Gospel in Any Culture: A Model from the Biblical Text for a Global Context,” *Global Missiology* 3, no. 10 (2013), n.p. Online: <http://ojs.globalmissiology.org/index.php/english/article/view/1187>; Scot McKnight, *The King Jesus Gospel: The Original Good News Revisited* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2011); John Dickson, “Gospel as News: Ευαγγέλιον from Aristophanes to the Apostle Paul,” *NTS* 51 (2005): 212–30. For a shorter summary, John Dickson, *The Best Kept Secret of Christian Mission: Promoting the Gospel with More Than Our Lips* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2010), 111–41.

Third, we need to train missionaries (and nationals) more rigorously in the areas other than anthropology and linguistics. Exegesis and biblical theology may be among the most important and yet most neglected of these areas. Missiology is best understood as a discipline *within* theology. Missionary training should integrate various academic disciplines. In addition to history, missiologists should develop their analytical skills through the study of philosophy.

Such training will assist missionaries resist the temptation to oversimplify theological truths in general and the gospel in particular. Without this training, many people will tend to use whatever tool seems best based on popular usage. So long as an approach does not directly contradict certain assumed theological conclusions, a person may accept any number of methods.

We always face the danger of both theological and cultural syncretism (Wu, 2013). Our theologies and methods of ministry are influenced by our cultural background, which includes various subcultures. A complex web of cultural and historical influences makes up a person's worldview. It is all too easy to assume the goodness of one's own culture. Missionaries might better understand other cultures as they are expressly taught to understand their home culture.

Fourth, mission organization would do well to diversify their model of leadership selection. I will pose a series of questions to reflect on. How do cultural values determine a mission agency's strategic and organizational decisions? What type of person tends to assume positions of leadership? Are they characterized more by their administrative skills? Do leadership teams lack people with especially strong theological or pastoral skills? Which has a more controlling influence on leadership decisions—pragmatism or exegesis?

Conclusion

This essay has offered a few ways that culture shapes missionary methods. Even if people are not aware of these dynamics, the influence of culture on mission strategy and practice is unmistakable. A fundamental exegetical problem needs to be addressed. It appears that some methodologies may in fact *de-historicize* the biblical narrative.

By way of illustration, we examined the views of CPM theorists, which fails to account for the ways that culture impacts the events in the book of Acts as well as their interpretation of those events. We found certain “evolutionary” forces at play that reinforced the CPM-theory's “DNA.” Finally, we considered a few practical suggestions that address these prior oversights. As a result, we have hope that the churches we plant will not go extinct. Rather, strategies and methods can foster growth that truly spans generations.

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