

## Rapid Kingdom Advance: How Shall We View It?

By Dave Coles

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In his 2004 book *Church Planting Movements: How God Is Redeeming a Lost World*, David Garrison defined a Church Planting Movement as: “*a rapid and multiplicative increase of indigenous churches planting churches within a given people group or population segment.*”<sup>i</sup> In the years since then, much has been written about Church Planting Movements (CPMs)<sup>ii</sup>. Many of God’s people are celebrating the rapid and multiplicative increase of indigenous churches planting churches. Those celebrating with greatest joy include those *experiencing* the phenomenon – especially the many newly coming to salvation in Christ – and those close enough to observe it firsthand. The global body of Christ seems to presently be experiencing a missional season of remarkable growth in many places.

At the same time, the description of rapid increase brings cause for concern among many, including some missiologists and experienced missionaries. Of all the elements in Garrison’s definition, perhaps the greatest stumbling block for many is the word “rapid.” Some of the most common concerns expressed about rapid multiplication include:

1. Scripture gives no promises that reproduction will be rapid.
2. Rapid growth is an unbiblical and unhealthy goal.
3. Rapid growth can lead to superficial and fragile faith. Is there adequate follow-up and discipleship? Or are CPMs laying a foundation a mile wide and an inch deep?
4. Desiring rapid growth may bring temptation to take shortcuts, in order to see fruit happen quickly.
5. Stress on rapid growth may add temptation to claim large numbers.
6. High expectation for rapid multiplication of new churches gives workers little patience for the hard slogging in evangelism and discipleship needed to launch a movement. If they don’t see similar fruit, they will lose enthusiasm and hope and want to give up.”

Each of these concerns deserves serious consideration.

*How does the Bible view rapid kingdom advance?*

How did the inspired writers of Scripture view rapid kingdom advance? And how does the Bible guide God’s people to view rapid kingdom advance? We first note that as Creator, Sustainer, and Sovereign, God could do *everything very quickly*, if he so desired, including the whole of salvation history. He choose instead to work through processes that have taken many thousands of years so far.<sup>iii</sup> God is not in a hurry, and Jesus as a human never seemed in a hurry.<sup>iv</sup> So we need to guard against being hasty<sup>v</sup> in our actions, which can result in missing the right way (Proverbs 19:2) and sharing in the sins of others (1 Timothy 5:22).

As we consider Scriptures related to rapid advance in kingdom purposes, we see in 2 Chronicles 29:36 that “Hezekiah and *all* the people rejoiced at what God had brought about for his people,

*because* it was done so quickly.”<sup>vi</sup> The speed with which God acted in that time of spiritual revival gave ample grounds for righteous rejoicing among *all* his people.

The Psalms reveal at least a dozen verses<sup>vii</sup> calling on God to act *quickly*. In light of Jesus’ command to love our neighbor as ourselves, these model prayers for personal rescue can rightly be applied in praying for salvation to come quickly to the lost.

In the parable of the sower, Jesus sounds a note of caution about the danger of shallow discipleship: “Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow.... But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away” (Matthew 13:5, 21). Clearly not all rapid growth is healthy growth. Yet it doesn’t logically follow that all rapid growth is *unhealthy* growth. The difference between health and unhealth is *determined* by adequate roots and *manifested* by endurance in Christ or lack thereof. We see also in this parable that the seed falling on good soil “produced a crop – a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown” (Matthew 13:8b). This is abundance more than speed per se, but such abundance in one generation would normally be considered very significant – and rapid.<sup>viii</sup>

Luke, in his reporting of God’s work among the early church, seemed to view positively his report of rapid growth and large numbers: “So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem *increased rapidly*, and a *large number* of priests became obedient to the faith” (Acts 6:7). Some might claim this was mere historical narrative, neither a command nor a normative pattern for the church age. Yet the Apostle Paul himself would challenge such arguments with his command to the church in Thessalonica: “Pray for us that the message of the Lord *may spread rapidly and be honored*, just as it was with you” (2 Thessalonians 3:1b). God’s people are *commanded to pray for* rapid advance of the gospel.

A few other New Testament texts give us insight into the nature of gospel advance in the New Testament: Acts 19:10 says all the Jews and Greeks in the province of Asia (an estimated 15 million people) “heard the word of the Lord” in two years. They certainly didn’t all hear it *directly* from Paul or the 12 initial disciples in Ephesus. The message apparently spread quite quickly through generational multiplication of disciples.

In Romans 15:19, 23 Paul states that from Jerusalem all the way to Illyricum there was no place left for his pioneering work. Adequate discipling and laying firm spiritual foundations clearly didn’t depend on Paul being physically present in every location for great lengths of time. How could sufficient leadership be developed and adequate spiritual grounding and discipleship happen among so many in such a short time? We see a clue in 2 Timothy 2:2. “And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others.” Paul describes here multigenerational discipling of *groups* of leaders. We see four generations described: Paul, Timothy plus “many witnesses,” “reliable people” and then “others.” Paul applied a very reproducible approach to leadership training. This meant that “reliable people,” many of whom may have never even met Paul, could quickly become “qualified to teach others.”

How was Paul able to start a church and leave it three weeks later and it would become healthy and reproduce? He would come back six months to a year later, write a few letters, and those churches changed the world. How? As he wrote to Timothy: "What you heard from me, keep as the pattern (*hupotupōsis*) of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus" (2 Timothy 1:13). He urged others to imitate him and his "way of life in Christ Jesus, which agrees with what I teach everywhere in every church" (I Corinthians 4:17b). He gave thanks to God that the believers in Rome had, "come to obey from your heart the pattern of teaching that has now claimed your allegiance." (Roman 6:17b). Paul had a pattern of teaching that he used in every church: a simple reproducible pattern backed up by sound leadership training and grand vision. Such a pattern enabled rapid reproduction. Modern CPMs likewise generally develop an easily reproducible pattern of instruction for discipleship.

We see also in Acts 14:23 that Paul's appointment of elders in certain churches did not depend on lengthy theological education. I don't argue against theological education, I merely note that Scripture does not present it as a *prerequisite* for spiritual leadership in all contexts. The criteria found in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 can and should be applied contextually in every situation, fitting also with 1 Timothy 5:22, as already mentioned.

To summarize this brief overview of some biblical passages, God does not promise that reproduction will be rapid in every situation. In some cases he chooses to work slowly. Yet Scripture encourages us to *rejoice* at rapid kingdom advance and to pray for it.

#### *The commentary of two witnesses*

Two mission leaders offer helpful clarification of biblical perspective on rapid multiplication. Zane Pratt wrote: "gospel urgency makes rapid multiplication something we should desire.... Our passion for the glory of God in the gospel and our love for our lost global neighbor compels our desire for the gospel to advance as rapidly as God will bless."<sup>xix</sup>

Steve Smith illustrated well the interplay of human methodology with God's sovereign choice in the advance of CPMs:

Think of it this way. As a sailor, I can work on all of the controllables: making sure my sails are up, the tiller is in the right position, the sails are trimmed correctly. But until the wind blows, my sailboat is dead in the water. The wind is the uncontrollable. Or if the wind is blowing, but I as a sailor fail to raise the sails or trim them to catch the wind, I go nowhere. In this case, the wind is blowing but I don't know how to move with the wind. Jesus [said] "The wind blows where it wishes"....The Spirit blows in ways we cannot forecast, but blow He does. The question is not whether He is blowing. The question is: "Is my ministry positioned to move the way He blows so that it can become a movement of God?"<sup>xx</sup>

Right methods don't guarantee rapid kingdom advance, but they play a role in preparing the way for God's Spirit to work mightily. Ultimately, we surrender all sacrificial effort invested in any missionary approach into the sovereign hand of our loving Father.

#### *Is rapid growth a goal of CPM?*

Rapid growth is not and should not be a goal per se. The rapid multiplication seen in CPMs results naturally from God blessing the use of appropriate means for making disciples and planting churches. These usually include reaching groups (rather than individuals), consistent evangelism by all believers, involvement of all believers in studying and applying God's Word, and empowering local leaders. Simple low-cost approaches can multiply much more quickly than approaches requiring large investment of resources. Applying these and other CPM-oriented patterns often *naturally* results in rapid multiplication. In fact, though, the early stages of catalyzing a CPM rarely happen quickly. Things like learning a new language and culture, finding a person of peace, and having a Discovery Group continue to the point of decision to follow Christ can take many years. CPM principles are far from a recipe for quick success.

CPMs multiply rapidly, but not because of focusing on *rapidity*. They focus on *immediacy*. Believers hold a value of *immediately* obeying what they learn. The Gospel of Mark uses the word *εὐθὺς* -“immediately” – over 30 times. *And Jesus said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men." And **immediately** they left their nets and followed him.* (Mark 1:17-18 ESV, emphasis added). Mark emphasizes that disciples, out of their love for God, obeyed immediately. Disciples in CPMs frequently obey the Word without delay or reservations. This results in rapid life transformation and rapid multiplication of believers and churches. In CPMs such Christianity is normal.

Descriptions of rapid growth in CPMs are exactly that: descriptions. If description becomes interpreted as prescription, unhealthy patterns could develop. But as already mentioned, speed is not a goal per se; it's a natural result of applying easily reproducible biblically sound patterns. We also note that sub-Saharan Africa is seeing rapid growth through other church planting approaches as well as through CPMs. This article does not address the health or shortage thereof in every case of rapid growth. The issue in question is rapid growth taking place specifically through CPMs.

*Does rapid growth lead to superficial and fragile faith?*

As we saw in the Parable of the Sower, this *can* happen. But does rapid growth always lead to superficial and fragile faith? Is that the norm in Church Planting Movements? Most accusations of shallow faith seem based more on fear<sup>xi</sup> or non-movement cases<sup>xii</sup> rather than actual data from any of the more than 1000 Church Planting Movements known to the 24:14 Coalition. Numerous actual case studies, assessments, articles and books<sup>xiii</sup> describing Kingdom movements illustrate the faith of ordinary believers: passionate, well-grounded and thriving *despite* persecution (the acid test mentioned in the Parable of the Sower). What might we find if we honestly compare the resilience through persecution of disciples' faith in CPMs with the resilience of believers' faith in American Evangelical churches? Those in movements have, on average, much *stronger* testimonies of enduring persecution than those questioning their depth of faith.

Regarding sound doctrine, we could compare the results of the 2018 LifeWay Research in America with samples of data from CPMs in developing nations. The LifeWay Research survey found that a majority Americans with “evangelical beliefs”<sup>xiv</sup> say: “Most people are basically

good (52%); God accepts the worship of all religions (51%); Jesus was the first and greatest being created by God the Father (78%).”<sup>xv</sup>

In contrast, in a South American CPM: “There was an overwhelming consensus among them that Jesus is God. There was no question about their theology of Jesus. The question asked was, ‘Who is Jesus?’... all responded in various ways that ‘Jesus was God.’”<sup>xvi</sup> Meanwhile an outside team assessing a CPM in Africa found “a quality of discipleship that is producing solid new believers who understand basic doctrines and sacrificially follow Jesus....The new believers had a good understanding of basic doctrines like salvation, Jesus, Holy Spirit and even baptism although they have not had a lesson on that yet.”<sup>xvii</sup> A full assessment of the 73 million disciples currently involved in CPMs globally has not been attempted. However all existing evidence suggests that their doctrinal purity stands up quite well when compared to American evangelicalism.

Every CPM has some pattern for follow-up and discipleship. In fact many have thorough curricula designed to equip believers with firm doctrinal foundations for their life in Christ. By definition, a CPM has four or more generations of churches reproducing churches.<sup>xviii</sup> By passing on biblical truths, these disciples internalize the teachings better than if they had just passively received them. Those fearing doctrinal shallowness usually envision (or cite examples of) first-generation converts won through traditional methods rather than believers within a multi-generational movement. It turns out that rapid growth in the context of a healthy movement tends to produce disciples with a more passionate and contagious faith than the slow growth to which most of us are accustomed.

*Does desire for rapid growth bring temptation to take shortcuts, in order to see something happen quickly?*

Temptations to take shortcuts exist among *all* servants of Christ – both in traditional approaches and in movements. Yet as shown above, the specter of shortcuts in discipleship dissolves in the light of actual data from CPMs. Fear of shortcuts in leadership training and equipping turn out to likewise be based on traditional assumptions about how leaders should be equipped rather than on biblical commands or examples. Jesus said, “by their fruit you will recognize them.”<sup>xix</sup> Our questions receive more accurate answers when we look at the fruit being borne in movements rather than fears based on *a priori* assumptions or occasional anecdotes.

*Does stress on rapid growth add temptation to claim big numbers?*

Those catalyzing movements and those within movements do not put “stress on rapid growth.” They focus on loving God and immediately obeying what he tells them through his Word. The immediacy of obedience (along with application of other CPM principles) tends to *result in* rapid growth.

Certainly the temptation to exaggerate numbers in hopes of financial gain or prestige can lure those using *any* church planting approach – traditional or CPM. The larger numbers related to

CPMs might trigger those thinking traditionally to reason, “How could that possibly be true? Based on what I’ve seen and experienced, someone must be lying or exaggerating to come up with number like that!” But rather than assuming falsehood or bad motives among our brothers and sisters, we can instead check with reliable sources who can support or suggest caution concerning various reports. Justin Long, Director of Research with BEYOND and Research Team Leader for the 24:14 Coalition, has summarized the criteria used by the 24:14 Coalition<sup>xx</sup> to accept a movement report as credible.<sup>xxi</sup> Sources such as the 24:14 Coalition or the books listed in footnote xiii offer carefully weighed reports from movements around the world. Many CPMs also track other categories of fruit besides numbers of disciples. Some use advanced software tools to track *all* the major elements of church life found in Acts 2.

*Does high expectation for rapid multiplication of new churches give workers little patience for the hard slogging in evangelism and discipleship needed to launch a movement? Does it increase their likelihood of discouragement if they don’t see similar fruit?*

As already clarified, CPM principles *don’t* promise quick results. The early stages of catalyzing a CPM rarely happen quickly or easily. Much prayer, hard work, and interaction with local people (both believers and unbelievers) in a focus context are needed to lay a solid foundation. CPM trainings often share the maxim: “Go slow to go fast.” It normally takes much *longer* to find a person of peace who opens their household than to find just anyone who is open to the gospel. It takes longer to share a vision and discover others who resonate with the vision – enough to pursue it without pay – than to hire local believers as evangelists. The greater danger is that workers may start out aiming to catalyze a movement and over time begin to settle for traditional methods because they are *initially quicker and easier*. This might include just reaching individuals instead of groups, hiring local evangelists, paying for transportation so seekers can attend gatherings, and other methods that can yield traditional church planting fruit but be unlikely to result in a movement. It turns out that a high level of vision and expectation inspires the perseverance in useful steps that more often *do* result in movements. Movements usually have a period of multiple years with little or no growth while a foundation is laid that sometimes results in exponential growth.

We believe in a great God who has done and continues to do mighty things. “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.”<sup>xxii</sup> We stand by faith in him, with William Carey who said, “Expect great things from God; attempt great things for God.” The rapid kingdom advance of Church Planting Movements consists of millions of “great things” taking place in our day. God has moved powerfully at many points throughout church history, and many CPM principles consist of the best wisdom of past missions work being re-launched. God does not guarantee a specific set of methods will yield abundant or rapid fruit. We know that all our best effort, using any method, is subject to his sovereign choice to bless. We also know he clearly blesses the use of appropriate means to advance his kingdom. We can join the early Thessalonian believers in obeying the Lord’s command to: “Pray for [gospel messengers] that the message of the Lord *may spread rapidly and be honored*, just as it was among [the first Thessalonian believers].” And when the Lord is pleased to answer such prayers with rapid kingdom advance, we can rightly join the psalmist is saying: “For you make me glad by your deeds, Lord; I sing for joy at what your hands have done.”<sup>xxiii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> WIGTake Resources, 21

<sup>ii</sup> Other closely related or synonymous terms have been used, such as “Disciple Making Movements” (DMM) and “Kingdom Movements.” For clarification of the overlap in meaning of these terms, see [24:14 - A Testimony to All Peoples](#). Ed. Dave Coles and Stan Parks (24:14, 2019): “Appendix A: Definitions of Key Terms,” 314-315. In this article I use CPM as the best-known and most inclusive of these terms.

<sup>iii</sup> Noting, as Peter reminded his first readers: “With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day” (2 Peter 3:8b). Except where otherwise noted, all Scriptures in this article are quoted from the NIV.

<sup>iv</sup> Note, for example, his seemingly casual response to his friend Lazarus’s fatal illness (John 11:6, 17, 21-23).

<sup>v</sup> Merriam-Webster defines “hasty” as 1a: done or made in a hurry; b: fast and typically superficial; 2: acting too quickly: overly eager or impatient; 3: exhibiting a lack of careful thought or consideration.

<sup>vi</sup> Italic font within any Scripture references in this article has been added for emphasis.

<sup>vii</sup> Psalm 22:19; 31:2; 38:22; 40:13; 69:17; 70:1,5; 71:12; 79:8; 102:2; 141:1; 143:7

<sup>viii</sup> I recognize that not every detail of parables is intended for specific interpretation, yet it seems clear that Jesus’ intent is very abundant harvest from the good soil.

<sup>ix</sup> In [“What Should We Think about Rapid Church Multiplication?”](#) Posted September 26, 2017; accessed 10/4/2019. This quotation of Pratt does not constitute an endorsement of all the contents of this article.

<sup>x</sup> In “Kingdom Kernels: CPM Essentials On a Napkin,” *Mission Frontiers*, July-August 2013, 29

<sup>xi</sup> For example, in the 36-minute podcast [“Are Explosive Disciple-Making Movements Really Healthy?”](#) Zane Pratt uses the word “fear” five times to describe his perspective on various aspects of Church Planting Movements, including rapid reproduction. (Published July 2, 2018 by Alex Kocman; accessed 10/3/2019.)

<sup>xii</sup> For example, Pratt (ibid, minute 9:46-12:20) cites numerous cases to illustrate his concern about the danger of syncretism. None of the examples he cites claims to be a Church Planting Movement.

<sup>xiii</sup> See, for example, *Church Planting Movements, How God Is Redeeming a Lost World*, by David Garrison (WIGTake Resources, 2004); *T4T: A Discipleship Re-Revolution*, by Steve Smith with Ying Kai (WIGTake Resources, 2011); *Miraculous Movements: How Hundreds of Thousands of Muslims Are Falling in Love with Jesus*, by Jerry Trousdale (Thomas Nelson, 2012); *A Wind in the House of Islam: How God is drawing Muslims around the World to Faith in Jesus Christ*, by David Garrison (WIGTake Resources, 2014); *The Kingdom Unleashed: How Jesus’ 1st-Century Kingdom Values Are Transforming Thousands of Cultures and Awakening His Church*, by Jerry Trousdale and Glenn Sunshine (DMM Library, 2018); *Focus on Fruit! Movement Case Studies and Fruitful Practices*, by Trevor Larsen (www.focusonfruit.org, 2018); *Bhojpuri Breakthrough: A Movement that Keeps Multiplying*, by Victor John with Dave Coles (WIGTake Resources, 2019); *24:14 – A Testimony to All Peoples*, Edited. by Dave Coles and Stan Parks (24:14, 2019)

<sup>xiv</sup> For definition used, see [“What Is an Evangelical? Four Questions Offer New Definition,”](#) by Bob Smietana, *Christianity Today*, November 19, 2015. Accessed 10/4/2019.

<sup>xv</sup> As quoted in [“Christian, What Do You Believe? Probably a Heresy About Jesus, Says Survey”](#) by Jeremy Weber, *Christianity Today*, October 16, 2018. Accessed 10/4/2019.

<sup>xvi</sup> Confidential assessment of CPM among the K people of Guatemala, 2005.

<sup>xvii</sup> Confidential assessment of a movement in Africa, 2018.

<sup>xviii</sup> “When consistent, multiple-stream 4<sup>th</sup> generation reproduction of churches occurs, church planting has crossed a threshold to becoming a sustainable movement.” “Appendix A: Definitions of Key Terms,” in *24:14 – A Testimony for All Peoples*, 315

<sup>xix</sup> Matthew 7:20

<sup>xx</sup> For more information on the 24:14 Coalition, see [www.2414now.net](#).

<sup>xxi</sup> “1. We only accept data reports from established and trusted movement practitioners, many of whom have been working for 10 to 30 years. There are approximately 30 movement families (networks of multiple movements) with significant interrelationships of trust, training and accountability inside the family and sometimes between families.

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Most fellowship reports are cross-referenced between at least five generations of churches and leaders within the movement.

2. The leaders from this network must be vouched for by a trusted movement practitioner or coach who is not a part of the network before they are counted in the global and regional totals.

3. For larger movements, we as the global 24:14 movement generally round to the nearest order of magnitude, and often the movements themselves will intentionally undercount or reduce by certain percentages if they feel caution is warranted. Some outside assessments conclude that the reports are significantly undercounting what is happening. Thus, we feel confident what we report is a “floor” not a “ceiling.”

4. Most movements report numbers on a semi-annual basis to the 24:14 research team via secure email.

5. Occasionally, as warranted, movements will invite practitioners or researchers in to do an external audit. The main goal is to analyze the health and dynamics of the movement to help them improve, but it can also help verify the numbers.” From “Kingdom Movements: Are you ‘Out of your Mind’ or ‘Overjoyed?’” *Mission Frontiers*, January-February 2020.

<sup>xxii</sup> Hebrews 13:8

<sup>xxiii</sup> Psalm 92:4