

Coming to Terms

Two Church Planting Paradigms

by Ted Esler

Over the past two decades, with the publishing of David Garrison's book *Church Planting Movements*, (Garrison 2004) many missionaries have shifted the focus of their strategies toward church planting movement (CPM) principles. In some agencies a disagreement has arisen, with proponents of CPM on the one side, and proponents of the "traditional model" on the other. As I have watched this debate unfold it has been rather one-sided. Because the CPM Model is fairly defined the antagonists have had a rather easy time of critiquing it. The traditional model, on the other hand, has not been articulated with similar, well-defined terms and methodologies. This makes effective evaluation and comparison difficult.

It is important for me to state upfront that I personally side, in most respects, with proponents of CPM. From my perspective the debate within my own organization has produced healthy changes. At no time in my ministry do I remember so much great conversation about what church planting is and how to go about it. For those of us who like the intensity of serious peer review it has been an exciting season! There is room, however, to further elevate the conversation by defining the "traditional model." Doing so will make critiquing the model possible while also giving some good comparisons to the CPM approach.

It is with some hesitancy that I put forth my understanding of the traditional model. For the past few years I have challenged traditional model proponents to put forth their own definition, complete with training programs, acronyms, evaluations, and all the "stuff" that accompanies a mission strategy. They have not done so. This vacuum works against the traditional model. It is never a good idea to only be against something. I trust that in the future they can be for something. I apologize to both views because I am not the best advocate for the traditional model.

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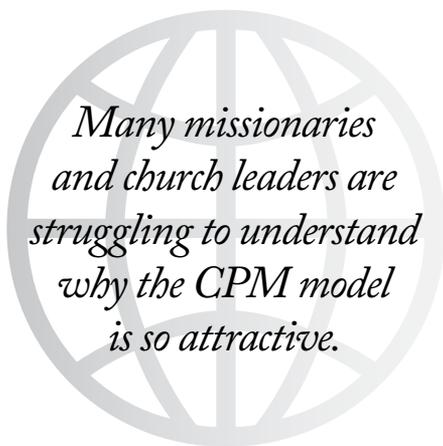
I also hesitate because I don't believe the church in the United States appreciates simple church forms, an assumption of the CPM model. The Protestant Reformation brought many good things to our understanding of ecclesiology. Yet, it also cemented church forms that are relatively inflexible, difficult to multiply, and Western. In particular, by defining the traditional model I am concerned that I will further embolden the critics of simple church forms at a time when we desperately need to be supporting these simpler church structures. Simple church forms are necessary where hostile governments make them the only plausible way to structure church. In the West, simple church forms may be one answer to the renewal of the church in secularizing societies.

Despite these reservations I have concluded that the traditional model must be defined so that it can be evaluated. Many missionaries and church leaders are struggling to understand why the CPM model is so attractive. Part of the answer is to compare the two models.

Definitions

When it comes to church planting the power of polemic is at play. Up to this point I have used the word *traditional* as the moniker for the alternative model to CPM. Who wants to be traditional?¹ In its place I propose a more descriptive and positive term, the *Proclamational Model*. Other terms have been used to describe the traditional model. I have chosen to use Proclamational Model because proponents proposed it and the model itself emphasizes the role of teaching and teachers. This makes the word *proclamational* well-suited as a label for the model.

CPM will be used to refer to the church planting movement model. This title, like *traditional*, is also suspect. Advocates of the Proclamational Model also seek to see self-replicating church planting movements. However, it remains the best title for this model because the methodology is arranged primarily around the movement emphasis. Some advocates of CPM methodologies prefer another acronym, DMM, for *disciple making movement*. The reasons for this will be described further a bit later. For the purpose of this analysis the type of CPM being described is broad: it does not focus on any single implementation of CPM methodology. Rather, it's an attempt to get at the heart of CPM philosophy and avoid the minutiae.



Neither of these definitions is to be considered exclusive of the other. It does not follow that by using the Proclamational Model no CPM will emerge. Similarly, CPM strategies encourage wide-scale proclamation of the Gospel message.

Eight attributes are examined below, followed by a summary table. I have chosen to embed leadership issues throughout the analysis of these attributes because they are not easily separated from them.

Discipleship

At the heart of both methodologies is an objective focused on discipleship. What differs is the manner of getting there, with a particular emphasis on the role of the church in that process. To describe these differences let us consider two different church signs that one might encounter while driving through a small town in the American Bible Belt. As we roll down Main Street we come to our first sign, which says, "If You Want to Grow in the Lord, Come To Church." This concept should be well understood by people living in church-saturated environments. The idea is that the church provides the best environment for spiritual growth. The church is the source of teaching and fellowship. By being a part of a group of committed believers one can mature spiritually and attain to being a disciple of Christ.

A few blocks later our second sign startles us with the phrase, "Read Your Bible, It Will Scare the Hell Out of You." Behind this sign lies the evangelistic concept that reading the Scriptures will enlighten the sinner, provide conviction of sin, and bring a person into the Kingdom.

These two signs provide us with a jumping off point to understanding the first contrast between the CPM and Proclamational Models.

In the Proclamational Model the church (and just as importantly, its leaders) is the main influencer in the process of discipleship. If one seeks spiritual growth the church is the primary means for making this happen. Alternately, the CPM Model suggests that it's only when there are healthy disciples that a church can be

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Discipleship	Discipleship happens in the context of the church. Healthy churches produce healthy disciples.	The church happens in the context of discipleship. Healthy disciples produce healthy churches.

	Proclamational Model	CPM Model
Pedagogy	Training is paramount—the argument is that somebody needs to “rightly handle the Word of God.”	Learning/Learners are paramount—the argument is that “the Holy Spirit is able to teach anybody.”
Missionary Role	Missionary is incarnational and participative. They teach, disciple, and lead.	Missionary is catalytic and incidental. They organize, shepherd, and coach.

produced. At first glance this might sound a bit like a *chicken and egg* conundrum—which comes first, after all? You need one to have the other. But the methodology employed by each model is affected by the philosophy of church planting each suggests.

In the Proclamational Model leaders within the church environment are a necessary component for discipleship to occur. This leadership must be in place before a church can exist. Church planting is the result of strategic spiritual shepherding built upon a foundation of maturity. Scriptures that emphasize the supremacy of preaching and teaching are part and parcel of this model. Church planting is the result of careful and consistent leadership oversight provided by the church.

The CPM Model, in stark contrast, sees church planting as a much more organic process. Churches are formed when people are exposed to the Scriptures and grow spiritually. This most often happens using a self-discovery model rather than through a leader-centric model. The church, more or less, springs into existence as a result of discipleship. The leader does not make this happen directly; it’s the result of growing disciples. This is one reason why some CPM advocates prefer the phrase *disciple making movement* instead of CPM.

Pedagogy

How people learn is tied to how they are taught. This is an area of significant difference between the two models.

I would remind the reader once again that these are not exclusive categories. However, the major pedagogical assumptions of each model influence the role of the missionary substantially. The pervasive assumption in the Proclamational Model, that trained teachers are central to the growth of the church, is something the CPM Model purposefully seeks to *overcome*.

Advocates of both models look to the Scriptures for support. Advocates of the Proclamational Model point to verses like 2 Timothy 2: 15 for support, “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.” CPM supporters look to the presence of the Holy Spirit’s guidance, working through the power of the Scriptures to guide believers. Who guides believers in all truth? Jesus said, “But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth” (John 16:13a).

Missionary Role

The lack of trained teachers makes the growth of the gospel difficult. Is there a way to overcome this obstacle? CPM practitioners believe that the role of the teacher needs to be shifted from the professional missionary to people within the culture being reached. Doing so frees the professional missionary to instead focus on being more “catalytic.” By this they mean that the role of the missionary is to start the fire, not tend to its on-going burning. The role of the missionary is incidental in that the missionary is

not a central figure in the movement but comes along at certain key points and “fans the flames.” My personal experience indicates that most often the movement is actually taking place regardless of the missionary’s involvement. The use of *apostolic* gifting is emphasized (this is not to be confused with Apostolic offices within the church historically).

This stands in contrast to the incarnational approach of missionary service that has been the staple of cross-cultural work for decades. The model of Jesus, who came to be one of us, has been upheld as a model for learning language and culture, and living long-term among the people in an attempt to identify and understand the culture being reached. The Apostle Paul is presented as the prototypical leader of the New Testament church planting movement and his role as a cultural insider is emphasized. He understood the people he was seeking to reach. He was one of them; he became one of them (“a Jew to the Jew, and a Gentile to the Gentile” cf. 1 Cor 9).

The distinction in missionary roles is no doubt one reason why the CPM Model is controversial among some long-serving missionaries who have labored under an assumed Proclamational Model. It highlights the need for a different sort of person and gift mix.

Message Delivery

Because of different assumptions about the role of the missionary, the Gospel message itself is delivered in a different way. The Proclamational Model tends

toward delivering the message as a systematic and concise set of doctrinal truths. These are not separated from the larger Biblical narrative but they tend to be presented as statements of propositional truth rather than principles to be discussed. New Testament sermons are pointed to as the delivery model used in Scripture.

The CPM Model uses a Socratic method that emphasizes self-discovery. People are encouraged to read the Scripture directly, without the leader intervening to explain and provide guidance. They are encouraged to pray and ask the Holy Spirit to give them insight. New Testament examples of self-discovery include Phillip and the Ethiopian eunuch, Jesus and the Samaritan woman, and Jesus on the road to Emmaus. Many CPM strategies rely on chronological Bible storying as a primary means for communicating the gospel.

Learning Style

Following on the heels of message delivery are the implications for the learners.

Because the Proclamational Model emphasizes the teaching of Biblical truths (rather than self-discovery) learners are encouraged to handle the Scriptures through deduction. Starting with

foundational Biblical truths, learners are trained to understand subsequent texts through those truths. One may, for example, be taught that God is faithful. In subsequent teaching the leader may select texts that build on that Biblical truth. The learner is encouraged to look for this foundational truth in subsequent texts. One must pull from the text the foundational truth that has already been established. This is a systematic approach to teaching not unlike that found in much of Western education. The teacher seeks to draw the student into ever-widening circles of theological understanding. A potential problem with this sort of “foundation building” is that it may lead to an over-emphasis on systematic theology. It can bring to a text theological assumptions not present in the text itself, imposing theological interpretation rather than letting the text speak for itself.

CPM advocates challenge people to read the Scriptures, seek to understand the text in its immediate biblical context, and then ask the question, “How do I apply this to my life?” One must pull from the text a personal application. The larger theological system on which the text may be built is not emphasized in the same way it is in the Proclamational Model. Rather

than attempting to wrap a text around a topical theology the student is encouraged to understand and apply the text to real life experience. There is also potential for abuse in this CPM learning style. Some texts are not meant for personal application. Forcing one onto them distorts the text and separates it from its original context and intention.

Note that while the above description of learning styles generally holds true (traditional being more systematic/deductive, the CPM model more Socratic/inductive), proponents of each model will seek to overcome problems inherent in their own approach.

Church Form

The CPM Model pragmatically requires a simple, organic church form. The small group size necessary for self-discovery processes, the purposeful avoidance of leader-centric polity, and the desire for growth apart from institutional trappings all lead to this conclusion. The sort of large church structures apparent in the Western church are simply not possible with a CPM strategy. While attempts have been made to incorporate small groups into institutionalized churches the polity differences make these two forms distinctly different.

	Proclamational Model	CPM Model
Message Delivery	The message delivery is didactic and directive.	The message delivery is Socratic and self-discovery.
Learning Style	Emphasis is on deduction (Understand a general principle then apply it specifically to the text. The criticism is that it relies on systems of theology.)	Emphasis is on induction (Understand a specific text then apply it to your life. The criticism is that it is too subjective.)
Church Form	Favors “higher” or more formalized church government. The church is more stable, organized, and potentially more institutionalized.	Favors “lower” or less formalized church government. The church is discontinuous, less structured, and potentially more transient.

House church forms are discontinuous by nature. This means that they rise and fall within a relatively short span of time. Authors and advocates of this sort of church form often ask, “Why do we think any one church should last forever?” Further, the structures of the church are not as formal as they are in large churches. It is not typically a hierarchy and usually has lay leadership. Elders may lead over a network of house churches. The concept of “Pastor” is tied closer to gifting and less so to an office of the church. House churches are typically transient and do not have the “staying power” that institutionalization brings. A personal observation is that a new and growing movement has less structure than an older and stabilizing movement.

The Proclamational Model makes allowances for leader-led church forms. The forms most often seen in the Western church are the same forms that missionaries seek to plant cross-culturally. If advocates of the Proclamational Model are involved in house churches it is usually because local hostilities force it on them rather than because they see it as a favored form of church. These churches tend to have well-established leadership identities, offices and roles. They are prone to institutionalization as specialization in ministry grows. There is often a marked distinction between the professional clergy (most of whom will have received formal training) and the laity.

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Growth

Clearly, the CPM form of church is easier to start while the Proclamational form tends to stick around.

Advocates of the Proclamational Model argue that the church needs deep roots. Only when a firm foundation is established can the church see significant and lasting growth happen. The emphasis on depth is not only in personal discipleship. It extends into such areas as theological training, professionalization of the clergy, recognition of the church by the government and other areas. Leadership development and a focus on pastoral training are common attributes of strategies using the Proclamational Model.

Many of these latter issues are not a concern for CPM advocates. They believe that numerical growth will come as the discipleship process takes off. CPM advocates look to the oft-repeated illustration of doubling a number with each successive cycle for growth. A critique of CPM has been that it is all about speed. This is actually not a fair assessment because the original stages, as put forth in the theory, are slow-growth stages and large-scale growth does not occur until later on. Most CPM advocates also believe that broader leadership training should occur but not at the initial stages of the movements lifecycle.

Timeline

Each model has its own timeline and each seeks to *begin with the end in mind*. For the Proclamational Model, the timeline is linear and the desired end goal is withdrawal of the missionary team. The concept of working oneself out of a job is reflected in a church planting effort that is mature enough to stand on its own. This is reflective of “The Steffen Scale,” a set of milestones that missionaries should seek to accomplish as they work through the process of church planting (Steffen 1997). From establishing the team, to language and culture acquisition, evangelism, selection of leaders, etc., Steffen provides a rough outline of what a church planting effort should look like. In the final stages the church becomes responsible for itself and the missionary moves on.

The Proclamational Model does not preclude a cycle in which a church plants a church. Such replication, however, is comparatively rare when compared to the CPM Model. This is a major distinction. In the CPM Model the reproduction of the church is central. Unlike the Steffen scale, the timeline is not focused on the efforts of the missionary but on the reproductive capacity of the church that has been planted. In this cycle, the missionary is active only in the initial stages of group

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Growth	Growth tends to be slow, steady, and deep. Numerical growth will follow depth.	Growth is fast, sporadic, and wide. Numerical growth will follow discipleship.
Timeline Model	Fits well with the Steffen Scale. Tends to be linear.	Fits well with the CPM Cycle. Tends to be cyclical.

formation. The overriding goal is to install the appropriate “DNA” or church culture to enable replication.

Summary

The table represented below summarizes the attributes noted above.

At the core of each of these two contrasting models is the role of the missionary and leadership issues central to the planting and maturation of the church. For those of us coming from Western churches the Proclamational Model

makes the most sense. It is the standard church-planting model utilized in the United States and is therefore relatively easy for us to comprehend and implement. The vast majority of pastors from the United States will tend to resonate with this model as the “correct” one and will seek to justify it from the Scriptures.

Missionaries who have labored for many years under the Proclamational Model have had two distinct reactions to presentations of the CPM model. One group sees the CPM Model as a

potential game-changer for the Great Commission. They have enthusiastically adopted it and are implementing it among their agencies and are training national church partners as fast as they can. Another group has been antagonistic toward the CPM Model. In their view, it is a fad that will fade in time. Further, they accuse CPM advocates of being consumed with speed in the church planting process. They are calling their agencies and teams back to a focus on more historically accepted methodologies.

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Growth	Growth is slower, steady, and deep. Numeric growth will follow depth.	Growth is faster, sporadic, and wide. Numeric growth will follow discipleship.
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From my perspective, the debate itself has been a healthy and robust dialogue about church planting that has been sorely lacking over the past few decades. The challenge that CPM philosophy has made to the more traditional approaches has strengthened the missiology present in both. **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ One criticism that has been made against CPM advocates is that they seem to have discovered the CPM principles only recently. It's important to point out that CPM ideas have been around a long time and may actually be more traditional than the so-called "traditional" models. Henry Venn and Rufus Anderson (writing in the mid-nineteenth century), John Livingstone Nevius (mid-to-late nineteenth century) and Roland Allen (early twentieth century) all espoused ideas quite similar to CPM orthodoxy. See their works in the References section below for more information.

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