

**THERE ARE NO CHURCH PLANTING MOVEMENTS IN THE BIBLE:  
WHY BIBLICAL EXEGESIS AND MISSIOLOGICAL METHODS  
CANNOT BE SEPARATED**

By Jackson Wu, PhD

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In recent years, missionaries have discussed and strategized ways to catalyze “church planting movements” (CPMs) around the world.<sup>1</sup> However, many people have challenged mission practices that are oriented on CPM-theory.<sup>2</sup> Both sides of the debate appeal to Scripture to support their arguments. Indeed, CPM theorists implicitly and explicitly contend that CPMs are found in the Bible itself.<sup>3</sup> This article examines and contests any such claim.

This article makes a simple argument: there are no “church planting movements” in the Bible. Although someone might regard this as a “negative” thesis, the aim of the essay is quite constructive. It is utterly critical that certain notions and associations be set aside if we are to

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<sup>1</sup> Other books advocating CPM-missiology include 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* (Monument, CO: WIGTake, 2011); Steve Addison, *Movements That Change the World: Five Keys to Spreading the Gospel* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Books, 2011). A collection of articles by CPM advocates can be found in the March-April 2001 issue of *Missions Frontiers*, Vol. 33, no. 2, entitled “Church Planting Movements: Rapidly Multiplying Faith Communities.” Also, see online at [www.churchplantingmovements.com](http://www.churchplantingmovements.com).

<sup>2</sup> Among those raising concerns, see 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>.

<sup>3</sup> Smith and Kai, *T4T*, 29–33. After citing various passages from Acts, Smith says, “Today, we call such a discipleship revolution *Church Planting Movement*,” (33; italics original). Likewise, in a PowerPoint presentation used to train missionaries, Smith lists six so-called “church planting movements” in the book of Acts. See below for a detailed discussion. To see a PowerPoint presentation, see “Building a Strategy toward a Sustained & Saturating CPM: Cooperating with God based on what we learn from a Pauline Case Study.” Revised Aug 2006. Available online: <http://jacksonwu.files.wordpress.com/2013/10/building-a-cpm-strategy-based-on-pauline-model-revised-aug-2006.ppt>. Likewise, see “Yes, But What Does the Bible Say About CPMs,” *The Strategist*, n.d., n.p. [cited 9 October 2013]. Online: [http://www.imb.org/strategist/CPMs/what\\_does\\_the\\_bible\\_say.htm](http://www.imb.org/strategist/CPMs/what_does_the_bible_say.htm).

develop biblically faithful and strategically wise missiology. Of course, there is much to commend in CPM literature. However, we cannot simply draw out what is good from a CPM theory without examining related ideas, such as its use of Scripture. When applying some aspect of CPM missiology, we may unwittingly assume ways of thinking or interpreting the Bible that are counterproductive. Therefore, this essay tries to help readers discern theory from theology.

What am I *not* saying? I am not saying that CPMs are impossible. God is sovereign to do as He wills. I am also not saying that all principles associated with CPM-theory are unbiblical. Likewise, I am not claiming that those who espouse CPMs oppose the Bible. Given the ease with which people can misunderstand one another, all sides of the discussion should be careful when they assert that CPMs are either “biblical” or “unbiblical.”

It is one thing to use the Bible to affirm certain ministry principles; it is quite another to claim that particular mission practices are actually in Scripture. This article lays out the following argument. CPM theorists claim that in the Bible we see God starting CPMs through the Apostle Paul. However, they do not use the Bible to define a CPM. In that sense, the standards used to assess CPMs are quite arbitrary. By “arbitrary,” I simply mean that such measures are determined by CPM researchers, not the Bible. Practically speaking, an unfortunate correlation is thus made. CPM theorists appeal to biblical authority while affirming the extra-biblical criteria established by researchers to assess so-called “CPMs.”

What is at stake? Does it matter if there are (or are not) CPMs in the Bible? Yes. What at first seems like a benign use of the Bible to affirm good principles in fact leads to a number of negative consequences. These will be discussed in more detail at the end of the article. For now, I will simply trace a few broad thoughts regarding application.

First of all, mission practice should be grounded in Scripture. At a minimum, methodologies should be consistent with (i.e. not contradict) the biblical text. More hopefully, mission methods will even *derive* from Scripture.

Second, those who train others to use particular methods must be careful about appealing to the Bible to authoritatively support their approach. Perhaps, a certain church planting method affirms biblical principles; however, trainers could easily overstate their biblical support by saying that the Bible *prescribes* the use of those methods.

Third, our ministry methods can unwittingly shape the theology of those influenced by such methodologies. For example, if trainees accept the assertion that CPMs (or any other theory or practice) are in the Bible yet we discover the contrary, then the trainees will not only misinterpret Scripture. Further, they can foster bad habits of biblical interpretation and even develop systems of thought to compensate for their wrong understanding of the Bible.

### **What is a “Church Planting Movement” (CPM)?**

In order to identify a “CPM,” we should first try to define it. If the label “CPM” is to have any practical significance, it is important to specify as clearly as possible what is and is not a CPM. Reasonably distinct boundaries are needed to assess potential CPMs; otherwise, the term becomes utterly arbitrary such that nearly anything could be called a “church planting movement.”

David Garrison and the IMB offer a 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.*”<sup>4</sup> Garrison elaborates, “there is an exponential increase. This means that the increase in churches is not simply incremental growth--adding a few churches every year or so. Instead, it compounds when two churches become four, and four churches become eight to ten, and so forth.”<sup>5</sup>

When it comes to assessing what constitutes a CPM, Jim Slack, researcher for the IMB, is more specific. In 2011, he stated, “Five years ago, IMB’s Global Research identified 42 emerging CPMs. As a rule, we look for 50% annual growth rate in new churches; 25% annual growth rate in total churches and/or other field support for an emerging CPM.”<sup>6</sup> In order to even be on a “CPM Watch List” Garrison says that these growth rates must hold “for the past two years.”

David Watson, Vice-President of Global Church Planting with CityTeam International, is a well-known spokesman for CPM theory. His personal blog claims, “God has used the leaders David trained to start over 100,000 churches in the past 15 years, and more than 4 million people have been baptized as a result of God’s moving in the areas where trained local workers have devoted themselves to God’s work.”<sup>7</sup> He further illustrates how people define CPMs:

A Church Planting Movement is an indigenously led Gospel Planting and obedience-based discipleship process that has resulted in a minimum of 100 new locally initiated and led churches, three generations deep, within two years. . . . Less than 100 churches, regardless of generations, do not constitute a CPM. More

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<sup>4</sup> David Garrison, *Church Planting Movements* booklet (Richmond, VA: IMB, 1999), 8. Accessed 9 Oct 2013. Online: [http://www.churchplantingmovements.com/images/stories/CPM\\_Profiles/cpm\\_booklet\\_standard\\_english.pdf](http://www.churchplantingmovements.com/images/stories/CPM_Profiles/cpm_booklet_standard_english.pdf). Also, Garrison, *Church Planting Movements*, 21–22.

<sup>5</sup> Garrison, *Church Planting Movements* booklet, 1999, p. 8.

<sup>6</sup> 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>.

<sup>7</sup> David Watson, “About,” Blog, *TouchPoint: David Watson’s Blog*. [cited 9 October 2013]. Online: <http://www.davidlwatson.org/about/>.

than 100 churches, but not at least 3 generations deep, is not a CPM. It has to happen within two years or it does not qualify. The two years can count from the initiation of the work, or count back from a given point in time. If counting back, 3 new generations must be demonstrated.<sup>8</sup>

Notably, Watson adds that a CPM must consist of at least 100 churches and span 3 generations in less than two years. Watson speaks in more absolute terms; whereas Slack appeals to rate of growth: “When generations of local church members multiply churches to the extent that the total number of churches doubles every four to six years, a CPM likely exists.”<sup>9</sup>

In short, CPM practitioners use at least three objective measures to determine what constitutes a CPM. The three critical areas include quantity, time, and location. Numerically, CPMs are described using either rate of growth or in absolute terms. With respect to time, there is some discrepancy among leading CPM theorists. At a minimum, two-years seems to be significant marker. Finally, the location of a CPM generally focuses on a narrow segment of the general population. In other words, one would not count the total number of Christians in a vast region (e.g. all East Asian countries) to assess whether a certain city, like Hong Kong, experienced a CPM.

Of course, CPM-theorists mention other characteristics that should mark a CPM. Garrison says every CPM will have “abundant evangelism,” local lay leadership, and “healthy churches.”<sup>10</sup> However, an unmistakable and essential emphasis of CPM theory is “rapid reproduction.” As has been seen, key CPM theorists have quantified the word “rapid” in quite specific terms. Does the Bible have the same understanding of “rapidity?”

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<sup>8</sup> David Watson, “Church Planting Movement (CPM)—Our Definition” *TouchPoint* Blog Post. Accessed 9 Oct 2013. Online: <http://www.davidlwatson.org/2009/06/15/church-planting-movement-cpm-%E2%80%93-our-definition/>.

<sup>9</sup> Jim Slack, “How Many?” 12.

<sup>10</sup> Garrison, *Church Planting Movements*, 171–97. These are included in a list of 10 essential attributes of a CPM.

What happens when these quantitative measures are applied to the Bible? If Garrison, Watson and others applied these standards to assess Paul's work, could they be able to say that he catalyzed a "church planting movement?"

### **How People Read CPMs into the Bible**

We can find no CPMs in the Bible. A formal word for biblical interpretation is "exegesis." By "exegesis," one should "read out" of the text what the original meaning that biblical author wrote *within* a passage. On the other hand, "eisegesis" is the term that describes the problem whereby one's own ideas and assumptions are "read into" a passage of Scripture. I suggest that CPM-theory suffers a fundamental problem in that it commits "eisegesis."

I personally attended a meeting in which Steve Smith presented Paul as a case study.<sup>11</sup> He mentions seven passages from Acts.

1. Acts 13:4–52
2. Acts 14:1–25
3. Acts 15:39–16:40
4. Acts 17:1–34
5. Acts 18:1–21
6. Acts 18:23–20:1
7. Acts 20:1–38

What lessons does Smith draw from his study? First, Paul started "6 CPM streams in 8 years." Second, he says of Paul, "Once there were sustained CPMs he moved on."

Based on the evidence available to us, would Paul's work satisfy the assessment criteria mentioned above? The undeniable answer is "no." To begin, we are *not* routinely told the

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<sup>11</sup> Smith, "Building a Strategy." Implicit, in Smith and Kai, *T4T*, 29–33.

number of people who became Christians. The most famous exception is found in Acts 2:41, when “there were added that day about three thousand souls” (ESV).<sup>12</sup>

However, the remark only describes what happened in a single day. Six verses later, the writer Luke adds, “And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47). Yet we should observe that Luke does not say that 3,000 believers were added each and every day. Not only this, the group of 3,000 consists of people originating from three different continents. Concerning Jerusalem in particular, Luke does not give us any numbers concerning the size of the city’s church after two or three years. The Bible is simply silent.

What does the book of Acts actually say? In short, Luke gives us little data concerning the quantity of converts. We will examine a few key passages. These examples will sufficiently illustrate how easily one might read CPMs *into* the biblical text.

Concerning Acts 13, Smith says the “whole island [of Cyprus] receives the gospel in 2 months via gospel & signs.”<sup>13</sup> In fact, Acts 13:5–6 says, “When [Paul and Barnabas] arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews. And they had John to assist them. When they had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos . . . .” The text says nothing about the whole island actually accepting the gospel.

It is possible, if not more likely, that Luke more specifically refers to preaching in all the synagogues throughout the whole island. Although Smith suggests that a “[m]ovement results through [the] whole region” of Phrygia,<sup>14</sup> in fact Luke simply states, “And the word of the Lord was spreading throughout the whole region” (Acts 13:49). It is not clear how many of those that

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<sup>12</sup> All Scripture citations use the English Standard Version (ESV) of the Bible.

<sup>13</sup> Smith, “Building a Strategy.”

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

heard this word actually received it with faith. For example, we today could say the gospel has spread (geographically) throughout the Middle East; however, no one supposes that every person in the region accepted the gospel.

Someone might be tempted to exaggerate the claims of Acts 19. Specifically, verse 10 says, “This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.”<sup>15</sup> Again, Luke’s statement concerns the scope of Paul’s preaching. In fact, verse 26, Paul’s accuser, Demetrius, argues, “And you see and hear that not only in Ephesus but in almost all of Asia this Paul has persuaded and turned away a great many people [ἱκανὸν ὄχλον], saying that gods made with hands are not gods.” Again, “all of Asia” describes the geographic scope in which “many people” believed his message.<sup>16</sup> Acts 19:27 reaffirms the point that “all Asia” did not accept the gospel since Demetrius warns that the goddess Artemis “may even be deposed from her magnificence, she whom all Asia [ὅλη ἡ Ἀσία] and the world worship.”

The fact that “many people” believe Paul’s message in no way indicates a CPM. To claim more goes beyond the text moves toward eisegesis. Accordingly, we cannot call something a “CPM” simply because Acts tells us about “great numbers” of converts, as in Antioch (11:21), Iconium (14:1), Derbe (14:21), Thessalonica (17:4), Berea (17:12) and Corinth (18:10).<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> The key Greek phrase is “πάντας τοὺς κατοικοῦντας τὴν Ἀσίαν ἀκοῦσαι τὸν λόγον τοῦ κυρίου . . . .”

<sup>16</sup> The Greek word ἱκανός is far too general in meaning to attribute any sort of number to it. The context makes it even more difficult to estimate any a numerical figure. This is because Paul’s accuser no doubt would face the temptation to exaggerate Paul’s influence in order to persuade his hearers.

<sup>17</sup> Note also Rom 15:19–20, where Paul states, “. . . from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum I have fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ; and thus I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else’s foundation.” Clearly, this does not mean every person in this area became a Christian. Rather, verse 20 suggests Paul refers to his fulfilling his duty to preach the gospel where it has not been heard.

We also need to consider time and location in order to assess whether Paul established a CPM. The specificity of the biblical account suggests that Paul would not have “passed” a CPM assessment. According to Acts 20:31, Paul spent three years in Ephesus. This appears to be the longest period of time Paul spent in any one city during his missionary journeys. He spent two years jailed in Jerusalem (Acts 24:27) and Rome (Acts 28:30). We know nothing of his church planting influence in those two cities during that period. Paul also spent 18 months in Corinth (Acts 18:11). Paul simply did not routinely spend sufficient time in any particular place to meet the criteria set by CPM assessors.<sup>18</sup>

To lengthen time frame of reference beyond 2–3 years, one would need to include the entire geographic scope of Paul’s missionary travels.<sup>19</sup> However, such a large area covering so many different provinces and local cultures stretches beyond usefulness Garrison’s criteria that a CPM occurs within “a given people group or population segment.” Even if one accepted so vast a territory as reasonable, we still have no numbers to state how many churches Paul planted and how fast they grew.

The considerations above raise serious concerns about CPM theory’s use of the Bible. This article primarily focuses on empirical measures like numerical growth, time of increase, and location. Nevertheless, these observations should cause us to reflect on other criteria used to assess CPMs. We should examine other aspects of CPM theory to discern whether they directly

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<sup>18</sup> Let me add a few comments about Paul’s ministry to the Ephesians. Acts 20:31 looks back to make a summary statement about Paul spending “three years” in Ephesus. When we look more closely, we can see that Paul at times left and returned to the city. It seems that the longest continuous stretch of time was “two years” (Acts 19:10).

<sup>19</sup> In particular, it seems Paul’s second and third missionary journeys were longer than the first.

derive from Scripture?<sup>20</sup> If not, to what degree are they arbitrary assertions of CPM practitioners?

### **Practical Consequences with Confusing the Bible and CPM Theory**

What practical consequences result from using the Bible to affirm CPM-theory? We have seen that there is no evidence of any “CPM” in the Bible. Although we see many new believers and churches started in the book of Acts, we should not correlate that work of God with a contemporary theory. Otherwise, we force our own criteria back into the text and wrongly use biblical authority to support our “best practices.” Massey’s summary is helpful.

CPM missiology moves from the descriptive to the establishment of strategic principles. The inescapable implication is that if applied correctly this methodology will produce results because you are following God’s laws of working. The approach at developing CPM methodology also raises questions regarding the use of a purely empirical method of discovering God’s ways of working in redemption (observation and reverse engineering) and the use of Scripture alone as a sufficient guide to revealing how God works and informing missiological methods. Is the group of CPM practitioners (perhaps unknowingly) claiming a certain level of “inspiration” and authority for their method?<sup>21</sup>

In what follows, I will suggest some of the main problems that follow from confusing theory and theology.

First, missionaries, agencies, and sending churches begin to have wrong expectations. People expect large numbers of conversions and church plants to occur when CPM-oriented methodologies are used. After all, if CPMs are seen as normal in the Bible, then why shouldn’t

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<sup>20</sup> For example, CPM practitioners lay special stress on the fact that CPM churches are led by locals rather than outside missionaries. How far does this extend? What are we to make of the fact that Paul was an outsider from Tarsus and Judea? Likewise, near the end of Paul’s ministry, he leaves Timothy to remain in Ephesus due to problems in the church (1 Tim 1:3ff). In fact, Paul continues to give instruction about the qualifications and responsibilities of church leaders (1 Tim 3). To what degree was this church, in whom Paul had invested more than anyone else, still dependent on outside leaders?

<sup>21</sup> Massey, “Wrinkling Time,” 110.

they be just as typical today? What is perceived as “normal” can quickly be regarded as “normative.”

Second, people can uncritically use weak (e.g. overly pragmatic) methodologies under the guise of biblical authority. If CPMs are in the Bible and CPMs are assessed according to annual percentage of growth, then it will not be long before pragmatism sets in. Practitioners will use whatever method promises the fastest result.

Third, when people do not satisfy the set criteria for a CPM, this creates a sense of failure that hinders missionary labor. They become discouraged that they could not do what Paul supposedly did. One missionary states this very directly:

Missionaries not experiencing the rapid reproduction of churches get discouraged. This methodology sets up 99 percent of missionaries for certain failure, because if no CPM occurs, most missionaries feel as though they have failed.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, CPM theory contributes to attrition among missionaries.

Fourth, by granting CPM theory some degree of biblical authority, missionaries and agencies might be tempted to distort or misreport the number of new converts and churches. Of course, this may not be done overtly. Perhaps, a missionary may report a figure that is more of a generous estimation than an actual account of the facts. Likewise, missionaries may subtly put increased pressure on national partners to report higher numbers; in an effort to save face or receive funding, local Christians may inflate the data. For instance, where exact figures are not available, one may consistently give the “benefit of the doubt” to higher numbers. Other scenarios could also be imagined.

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<sup>22</sup> J. Gerald Harris, “Shining the spotlight on the IMB’s church planting movement,” 24 May 2007. Accessed: 9 Oct 2013. Online: <http://www.christianindex.org/3270.article>.

Fifth, Christians and missionaries in particular are assessed by standards not at all found in the Bible. Quantitative measures are inherently specific but are not in the Bible. Qualitative markers (like the fruit of the Spirit) are explicit in Scripture but can easily get minimized because, as one field researcher once told me, “You can’t put a number to things like patience, . . .” When so much depends on what can be quantified, faithfulness quickly becomes synonymous with numerical fruitfulness.

Sixth, CPM theory’s use of the Bible leads to a selective reading of Scripture. What about texts that suggest that God does not always intend to bring about a CPM? For example, God told Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, from the beginning of their ministry, that they were to preach his message *even though* no one would listen to them (Isa 6:8–13; Jer 1:19; 7:27; Ezek 3:7). In other words, God had no plans for anything like a CPM, as it were, emerging within Israel.

Seventh, imbuing CPM theory with Scriptural authority justifies substandard biblical interpretation in the name of evangelism. As we have seen, there is a great gulf between Scripture and CPM theory. We must resist the temptation to commandeer the Bible on our missionary journeys in order to arrive at a CPM.

Eighth, CPM theory in practice uses the Bible to narrow the profile of an ideal missionary leader. In order to manage or implement a CPM, one especially needs to be proficient at administration or networking. As helpful as these skills are, they are not the prominent characteristics of the Christian leadership we find explicit in the Bible. We must still be slow to turn Paul into a modern-day field strategist, spending his days typing emails, approving budgets, among other essential tasks needed to assist front-line evangelists and church planters.

Ninth, by fusing the Bible and CPM theory, one may ironically discriminate against or discourage those who are more theological rather than pragmatically oriented. For reasons already stated, many with advanced theological training may decide not to become missionaries. For those who do, they may not be allowed to use this critical gifting. Perhaps, where CPM ethos is strongest, pragmatic leaders will look down on someone with a PhD in theology or biblical studies because they are fearful that he will be concerned more with “head knowledge” than obedience. I once heard a missions leader make an astute observation: CPM theorists talk a lot about the resume of Peter and John (being unschooled, ordinary men) but immediately point to the results of Paul, who was very educated.

In some contexts, a missionary may be theologically convicted to be slower to baptize or report “professions of faith” for fear that a “new convert” is simply trying to give them face. Likewise, in many cultures, people may have a pluralistic or functional view of religion. In that case, a profession of faith can easily be regarded as another religious tool to gain some blessing. These dynamics and concerns are not conducive to generating the kind of numbers required to pass a CPM assessment.

Finally, CPM theory’s use of the Bible naturally pressures missionaries to eliminate activities that potentially slow the rapidity of short-term growth. For all practical purposes, obedience is reduced almost exclusively to evangelism. After all, one can count “professions of faith” but not necessarily fruit of the Spirit. Ministries like theological training, family ministry, and the care of orphan and widows will eventually be cut from people’s master strategies.

## Conclusion

It appears that not even Paul would have passed a CPM assessment. Why? By the standards used by CPM theorists, we lack evidence. According to the criteria seen above, one cannot find a CPM in the Bible. These observations indicate a foundational problem with CPM-missiology. Although we could agree with CPM practitioners on a number of biblical principles, we should not “reverse engineer”<sup>23</sup> the process such that we put our “best practices” into the Bible (i.e. “eisegesis”).

It is not bad to establish goals and design strategies to reach the nations with the gospel. Likewise, there is nothing wrong with assessing our work. However, we must be careful about how we use the Bible to do these things. We must be willing to state the plain fact that the numerical criteria used to assess CPMs is arbitrary. Therefore, missionaries should not feel that they fall short of the biblical norm simply because their ministry resembles that of Jeremiah or Ezekiel.

There is a difference between what God *can* do and what God *is* doing.

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*Jackson Wu (Ph.D, SEBTS) teaches theology and missiology for Chinese church leaders in Asia. His publications and blog posts can be found at [jacksonwu.org](http://jacksonwu.org).*

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<sup>23</sup> This phrase comes from Garrison, *Church Planting Movements*, 11–12, 303.