

## **DECISIVE DISCIPLESHIP: WHY RAPID DISCIPLESHIP IS PREFERABLE**

### **AND HOW IT IS POSSIBLE**

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One of the most common issues that mission supporters, pastors, and even missionaries have raised during my 35 years of mission involvement has to do with the speed of mission advance. Yes, some are concerned that the gospel is not advancing quickly enough, but many also raise questions because it appears to be advancing too quickly. These questions are usually raised in regard to the rapid planting of churches in a Church Planting Movement (CPM)<sup>1</sup> or the speed at which missionaries disciple new believers<sup>2</sup>. What appears like good missiology to missionaries sounds outrageously irresponsible 8,000 miles away.

In this article I will explore why many American Christians are skeptical of rapid discipleship due to cultural and ecclesiastical presuppositions. I will show that rapid discipleship is not only a possibility, it is missiologically preferable. I will explain why rapid discipleship is more likely to avoid syncretism and to result in sustainable faith in new believers. I refer to the rapid establishment of a pattern of obedience to Christ as *decisive discipling*.

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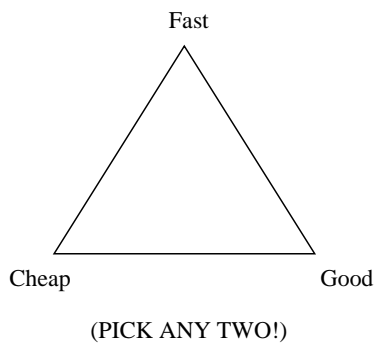
<sup>1</sup> A Church Planting Movement is a rapid multiplication of indigenous churches planting churches that sweeps through a people group or population segment. See [www.churchplantingmovements.com](http://www.churchplantingmovements.com)

<sup>2</sup> See Smith, Steve and Ying Kai. *T4T: A Discipleship Re-Revolution*. WIGTake, 2011.

### Project Management Theory

Rapid discipleship may seem like a pipe dream to many Western Christians. Our cultural assumptions and teachings strongly suggest that we cannot achieve both spiritual depth and breadth simultaneously. For example, one of the most influential models of business management states that a project manager must balance speed, quality, and cost. Any change in one of these factors will impact the other two. This cultural viewpoint is known as *the law of triple constraint*. If you want speed and quality, then you must increase the cost of the project. If you want to keep costs down, the manager must compromise speed or quality or both. In other words, the project manager must choose which two factors he most needs, because he cannot have high speed, good quality, and low costs. The project management triangle is widely used in American business, medicine, education, IT, and engineering to illustrate this concept.<sup>3</sup>

#### PROJECT MANAGEMENT TRIANGLE



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<sup>3</sup> The project management triangle is common knowledge today and has morphed into multiple variants and applications appearing in hundreds of websites, journals, and books. The model was introduced in 1979 by Harold Kerzner in a seminal book that is now available in its 11<sup>th</sup> edition. Harold Kerzner, *Project Management: A System's Approach to Planning, Scheduling, and Controlling*, 11<sup>th</sup> ed. (Hoboken: Wiley & Sons, 2013), 13. I am grateful to my mission colleague overseas who drew the triangle on a napkin and told me he had seen it daily while working in a nuclear power plant.

Ever since Roland Allen pointed out that Paul rapidly produced quality disciples, the possibility and even the wisdom of accomplishing this has been a popular topic among missionaries. Allen assumed speed and quality as requirements for this discipleship “project,” so the necessary corollary is that *expensive discipling* is necessary. Allen also believed in quality disciples who were able to reproduce themselves, or the result would be only one rapid generation of disciples.<sup>4</sup>

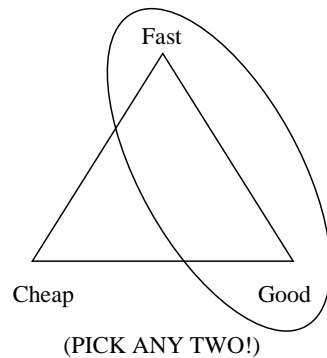
However, good mission practitioners get nervous about the idea of expensive discipling. Does this involve expensive upscale seminars that are dependent on outside funding and therefore not reproducible? Does the cost involve expensive, usually foreign, discipleship materials that are limited in supply? What about providing benefits to being disciplined? Informed mission practitioners since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century have recognized that such benefits often corrupt pure faith and spiritual motivation. Sadly, many Western Christians are presently using these methods, and some like the fact that they are now viewed as indispensable to the functioning of local believers in a country far away.

The project management triangle does help us clarify what goes on in rapid production of quality disciples. As we will see, a great expense is involved when rapid discipleship occurs, but not in the way that some may think. The great cost is the investment of intensive time by the missionary and/or local partners in discipling the new converts, not in funding people to grow as a believer.

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<sup>4</sup>In essence these two ideas are core concepts in Allen’s writings. “By teaching the simplest elements in the simplest form to the many, and by giving them the means by which they could for themselves gain further knowledge, by leaving them to meditate upon these few fundamental truths, and to teach one another what they could discover, St Paul ensured that his converts should really master the most important things.” Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods: St. Paul’s or Ours?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Pub., 1962), 90. Or as he put it elsewhere, “our missions ought to prepare the way for the evangelization of the country by the free spontaneous activity of our converts.” Roland Allen, *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1962), 19.

## PROJECT MANAGEMENT TRIANGLE



### 3 Phases of the Church

One major reason for skepticism regarding rapid discipling may be that it is so foreign to the church experience of most missionaries, and of almost all of their ministry partners. In fact, some of the greatest challenges in missions today are related to the challenge of sending missionaries from one ecclesiastical context and helping them to create a completely different kind of church elsewhere. This is true whether the missionary is Southern Baptist, African Anglican, or Korean Presbyterian. Failure to adequately address this challenge results in missionaries who merely transplant “potted plants” of non-reproducing churches that look just like the churches they came from. Today it often results in churches in one country focusing their mission efforts on already established churches in other countries rather than on planting churches among the unreached. I believe it contributes to strategies advocated by some missionaries that we avoid planting churches altogether, because they know their ecclesiastical default is too complex for a pioneer work. The New Testament model of missions results in

churches, although those churches looked quite different from our Western contemporary ecclesiastical default.

When my wife and I served in Indonesia I divided my time between two very different contexts. Several days a week I ministered in and trained leaders for established churches that were typically several decades old. Those churches were filled with wonderful godly people who taught me many things. The rest of the week I ministered to the majority Muslim people of our province and it was obvious that new churches among them would have to be radically different. Those churches needed to be a) biblically sound, b) spiritually dynamic, c) culturally relevant, and d) functionally reproducible. The established churches scored well in terms of biblical soundness and some were quite dynamic spiritually. They were culturally relevant for the people they were winning to Christ, but had only reached a handful of the people group that made up 80% of our city. However, in terms of being functionally reproducible, they had so many extra-biblical expectations that reproducing churches was difficult for them. Out of that experience I began to sketch out the differences in the churches already present and the churches needed to win a large UPG to Christ.

The following table outlines the major differences between three historical phases in the development of the church among a particular people. All peoples are in the unreached phase until someone brings the gospel from outside. Then, a movement can begin as people hear the gospel, are transformed, share their faith, and encourage other new believers. Over time the church settled into an established phase that includes deep Christian expression, but will drift towards decline if some elements of movement are not renewing the church. If we attempt to

jump from the unreached phase directly to the established phase, it is unlikely that many from that people group will come to Christ.<sup>5</sup>

| <u>Phase 1 - UNREACHED</u>   | <u>Phase 2 - MOVEMENT</u>  | <u>Phase 3 - ESTABLISHED</u>   |
|--|--|--|
| GOSPEL WITNESS – the message has not been communicated broadly. Most people are ignorant and unaware.  | GOSPEL WITNESS – the message is spreading “without hindrance”. There is growing gospel gossiping.  | GOSPEL WITNESS – there is broad awareness of Christian concepts. Gospel should influence culture and public policy.  |
| BELIEVERS – there are none or only a few scattered believers. Believers may be unaware of each other.  | BELIEVERS – many new Christians with vibrant faith and miraculously changed lives.   | BELIEVERS – most believers are from Christian families. Early discipleship and nominal faith co-exist in church. May lack confidence in gospel’s transforming power.   |
| CHURCH – there is usually no indigenous church or it is statistically insignificant. Few people have seen the Body of Christ incarnated in their society and culture. A tiny non-indigenous church may be a hindrance to initiating a vibrant Christian movement. There is little ministry taking place. | CHURCH – simple, indigenous, reproducing. Mostly unpaid or bi-vocational leadership (functional). Meet in available space - homes, courtyards, etc. New churches begin from witness and changed lives. Ministry is done by all believers. Obedience-based discipleship. “Go, stand, speak” ministry pattern. Primary role/gift is apostolic. | CHURCH – structured, organized. Mostly paid clergy leadership (positional). Church identified with buildings/programs. Denominations, institutions, traditions. Church planting by transplanted programs, but limited by financial expectations. Ministry is largely done by professionals. Knowledge-based discipleship. “Come, sit, listen” ministry pattern. Primary role/gift is pastoral. |
| PERSECUTION – can easily wipe out the few believers at this point.   | PERSECUTION – is seen as normal and challenges the church. Often results in further growth.  | PERSECUTION – surprises the unprepared church. Often results in church seeking protection of rights.   |
| MIRACLES – numerically rare, but a large percentage of believers may have witnessed one.   | MIRACLES – signs and wonders are common in most movements. The greatest miracle is the number of radically changed lives.  | MIRACLES – signs and wonders relatively rare. Many changed lives can still be a powerful testimony.  |
| ** SUMMARY - Unless someone successfully brings the gospel from outside, the status quo is assured.  | **SUMMARY - The longer this phase continues, the greater the number of churches and believers.   | **SUMMARY - The church will eventually begin to decline unless it experiences renewal/revival/reformation.   |

I once assumed these three phases of the church were eras of global church history, until I realized each people group needs to experience its own movement phase. Discipling in the established church almost exclusively means teaching the maturing children of believing parents. Training children from Christian families can result in deep and early discipleship, but in the West it often results in nominal Christianity or outright loss of faith. Getting people’s attention and motivating them is a critical factor in discipling those within the established church. A brief informal survey of several seminary students showed that 90% of these young adults who want

<sup>5</sup> Over the years many people contributed ideas to this simple table of the 3 phases of the church including former colleagues Thom Wolf, David Garrison, and Nik Ripken.

to serve Jesus grew up around the established church. Although their knowledge of the gospel started early in life, most had a life changing discipling experience between the ages of 15 and 25. Many of those life-changing experiences resulted from some intensive discipling over several days at a camp, retreat, or mission trip. Most of the rest reported the kind of life-on-life influence of a campus ministry. So, even a high percentage of those who grow up around the gospel cite an intensive discipling experience later in life that pushed them into a deep relationship with Jesus. In other words, most needed something beyond the slow maturation process in a church program that we assume is the key. *Intensive discipleship is often decisive even in the lives of those who grow up in the church.*

Discipleship in a pioneer movement is focused more on those who come to faith as adults from other religious backgrounds. These converts are more likely to have explored the gospel and counted the cost before believing. Once they believe, they are hungry to understand their new faith. The freedom and joy they experience in Christ pulls them into deeper fellowship with him. The spiritual and social pushback in their village or neighborhood may push them to deep prayer and Bible study. These new converts are more likely to share their faith boldly than those who are disciplined in the established church, especially if they are taught to do so immediately.

A friend and I once gave a Bible to Imran, the Muslim watchman in our apartment complex. He had a lot of time sitting at the gate so he read that Bible for hours each day and had read the New Testament three times in three weeks. Although he had never been to church and was not yet baptized, he could explain the gospel better than 80% of the people I know who have been in church all their lives. Imran reminded me of another MBB friend, Iit, who came to faith and started reading the Bible each morning from 4-6am. I tried discipling Iit through traditional

methods for 6 months until I asked him what God was teaching him. Then for the next 6 months this man with a 6<sup>th</sup> grade education taught me, a missionary with a seminary degree, far more than I ever taught him. This experience amazed me at how quickly new Muslim converts can come to a deep understanding of their faith.

### **Conversion as Change of Habit**

Evangelical mission efforts are usually aimed at the conversion of individuals and groups. Conversion means a radical change in the self, including identity, loyalty, beliefs, and behavior. It is more than the typically slow maturing of a person, but the result of receptivity to the truth and the work of God.<sup>6</sup> We often assume the process of behavior change necessarily follows the development of a new but mature belief system, but there is evidence that new behavior develops simultaneously or even precedes the completed belief system.<sup>7</sup> New belief inspires new behavior which deepens belief.

On a typical Friday at my high school in 1971 Billy was his usually sullen self. We barely knew each other because we associated with two different groups, “Drugs” or “Jesus.” On Monday morning Billy arrived at school gregarious, joyous, and completely transformed. At first I did not even physically recognize him; even his face and mannerisms were those of a new man. Within a few days Billy was wearing a cross and every student in our high school had heard that Jesus got a hold of him. In fact, his sudden, radical transformation shocked my slowly maturing Christian faith and challenged me to submit my life more deeply to Christ.

Many Christians do not experience that kind of rapid change, although many have at least read or heard of biblical examples such as Paul. When God performs such a miracle, we

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<sup>6</sup>Bernard Spilka. *The Psychology of Religion: An Empirical Approach*. (New York: Guilford Press, 2003), 345.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid*, 353-5.



may even be slow to acknowledge it. However, in pioneer mission settings the gospel calls men to turn from their non-Christian heritage and trust Christ; a rapid change in direction is required.

Evangelical Christians often talk about conversion as a U-turn, a radical redirection of one's life. What is the typical time sequence and turning radius of a traffic U-turn? Let's be generous and say 15 seconds and 80 feet. Now, what happens if the time sequence turns into an hour and the turning radius is 11 miles? Although it might still be a U-turn, there are now so many turn options that it is unlikely the result is actually a 180° turn so the person is now unsure if they are heading in the right direction. In fact, under those conditions it seems more likely the turn will be anywhere from 18° to 90°. Rapid discipling is not more likely to result in syncretism and incomplete conversions; slow discipling is far more prone to produce a syncretistic faith.

Recent research points to four critical truths about the formation of habits or new patterns of behavior in people.<sup>8</sup>

1. *New habits can be formed quickly.* In one study the average period of time that it took participants to develop a new simple habit was 66 days. Rapid change is possible.
2. *New behaviors become automatic when they are done with consistency.* Inconsistency, even over an extended period of time, does not result in a new habit.
3. Immediate repetition of the new behavior is more powerful than cases when the repetition is delayed. *Rapid change is deeper than delayed change.*
4. *Perfection is not required.* Participants could miss their new pattern once, as long as they immediately started again. For instance, missing one day is not too problematic, but missing a week likely means no new habit.

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<sup>8</sup> Philippa Lally, Cornelia Van Jaarsveld, Henry Potts, and Jane Wardle. *How are habits formed: Modelling habit formation in the real world.* European Journal of Social Psychology 40 (2010), 999-1009. This fascinating seminal research article has informed and inspired multiple other studies since its publication. Although the study focused on simple habits like tooth brushing, it does provide insights into how change occurs humanly speaking. Conversion is more complex than brushing your teeth, but it also involves the power of God.

These insights support what missionaries often report about enthusiastic converts to Christ. Men can be transformed more rapidly than we assume. Consistency of behavior, and not immediate perfection, is our goal. If change does not begin quickly, then a new habit of disobedience can quickly set in. Regular, perhaps daily, contact is essential in the early stages of making disciples. It is no wonder that discipleship in the established church, where we rarely emphasize behavior, connect with the disciple once a week, and expect small adjustments over a long period, is clearly not working very well.

Charles Duhigg provides other insights into how habits work in our lives. He explains that some behaviors are “keystone habits” that “have the power to start a chain reaction, changing other habits.”<sup>9</sup> Three examples of such keystone habits are regular exercise, families eating dinner together, and making up your bed. Each of these habits often starts a chain reaction that brings about well-being, confidence, and higher productivity in other areas.<sup>10</sup> In addition to the importance of keystone habits, Duhigg also explains other critical factors in making radical change in your life. Studies of the effectiveness of 12 Step programs found that many participants could exchange behaviors and form new habits under normal circumstances. However, participants were more likely to endure stress and difficulties with new habits intact if two more factors were present: belief and community. Recovering alcoholics point to faith in a higher power and their AA community as critical to maintaining change in crises.<sup>11</sup>

Reading *The Power of Habit* reminded me of something a missionary colleague shared with me years ago - a simplified statement of faith for new converts. I had used it in several mission settings where it evolved into 4 basic affirmations/commitments:

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<sup>9</sup> Charles Duhigg. *The Power of Habit: Why we do what we do and how to change*. (UK: Random House, 2013), 100.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 109. Every parent ought to make a mental note: make sure the kids make up their beds each morning, play sports or go for a run every day, and eat dinner with the family most nights.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 84-5.

- *Jesus is my Lord.*
- *The Bible is my book.*
- *Making disciples is my task.*
- *The church is my family.*

That seems overly simplistic in light of Western systematic theology and many generations of theological confessions. However, I am not talking about where new converts should eventually arrive. I am talking about getting new believers rapidly into faith habits that lead to a lifetime of obedience and continued learning. These four commitments speak to a number of keys to establishing a long-term change in behavior. Daily Bible reading and making other disciples focus on obedience to Christ. I believe that either can be the keystone habit that transforms a life, although the two combined are even better. The convert's faith that Jesus himself is working to transform him and his relationship with a body of believers provide the long-term stability to handle the challenges a new convert may face.

So, rapid discipling of new converts is not only possible, it is highly preferable. Slow, methodical discipleship is not an effective way to lead to real change of life. *Decisive discipleship* gives intense attention to the new converts in their first few weeks and months. This method does emphasize simple obedience to critical commands that develops into new habits that are bolstered by intense faith in Jesus and the support of a new faith community.

Various forms of decisive discipleship are being used successfully to initiate church planting movements. Three excellent examples are T4T, Four Fields, and Rapidly Advancing Disciples (RAD).<sup>12</sup> Each of these approaches trains believers to share their faith and begin a new pattern of obedience to Christ quickly. When new believers immediately start to share their faith, spend time in Scripture, and identify with a reproducible church, then the multiplication of churches is also likely. The witness of converts is powerful because their lives are transformed

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<sup>12</sup> See [T4Tonline.org](http://T4Tonline.org) for more information. Also, *Four Fields of Kingdom Growth* and *RAD* curricula can be accessed at [www.churchplantingmovements.com](http://www.churchplantingmovements.com).

and most of their friends and families are non-believers, although that can begin to change rapidly because of their ministry. This is what makes the multiplication of churches possible. These recently transformed converts share the gospel and disciple others who respond; they are the leadership base for the multiplying churches.

### Healthy Disciples in Thessalonica

Paul, Silas, and Timothy made disciples in the city of Thessalonica for a period that appears to be little more than three weeks.<sup>13</sup> The team sent their first letter to Thessalonians just a few months after their unplanned exit. Although they wrote out of concern for the new believers, the letter confirms some surprising qualities of the new converts' faith. Any serious discipler would be excited to see these results in any context. These signs are solid foundation stones for deep discipleship in any cultural context: conversion, conviction, confession, and congregation. Paul's team certainly disciplined the Thessalonians decisively in terms of both speed and quality.

### Conversion

Paul comments on the way the Thessalonians "turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God." (1 Thess. 1:9) This language is typical of the radical change that takes place when people believe the gospel. Peter stated, "You were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers." (1 Peter 1:18)

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<sup>13</sup> Morris and Martin disagree on the meaning of specific evidences, but they both agree that the ministry visit in Thessalonica was relatively short. Morris says, "it was certainly a short period, and may have been as little as about a month." Martin states, "Paul easily could have been in Thessalonica several weeks beyond the three during which he focused on converting the Jews." Leon Morris. *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians, NICNT*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Pub., 1959), 18; D. Michael Martin. *1, 2 Thessalonians, The New American Commentary*. (Nashville: B&H, 1995), 24.

Commented [GR1]: Which scholars? You need to footnote them if you refer to them.

Paul wrote to other churches with dramatic language to describe the gap between their state before Christ and their state in Him.

“When you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are no gods” (Gal. 4:8)

“You were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air and the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience” (Eph. 2:1-2)

“For He delivered us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His Beloved Son.” (Col. 1:13)

Previous generations of missionaries sometimes erred by assuming converts should become Dutch or English, i.e. to enter Christendom as a means of coming to Jesus Christ. I fear we may go too far in the opposite direction and underemphasize radical conversion. If our predecessors were blinded by their colonial attitude, let us be careful to avoid the almost complete cultural relativism of our day. While we acknowledge that there are positive and neutral elements in every culture, there are also some false and evil things that are strongholds set up against the gospel. New believers must experience a break with these elements while trying to maintain relationships with their community. Paul expected the believers to experience cultural continuity in the sense of walking and talking like Greeks. He did, however, expect them to be transformed in their allegiances, beliefs, and lifestyle through a religious conversion. For instance, Paul did not encourage new believers to stay in the cult of Isis or to continue worshipping in the temple of Artemis.

### **Conviction**

In the initial sentence of his letter, Paul affirms basic convictions about the person of Jesus. He is the Lord Jesus Christ whose Father is God (1 Thess.1:1)

It is important that we teach new believers the “faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching” (Titus 1:9). The Bible is the authority and the Holy Spirit is the primary teacher, but it is not enough to simply hand it to them and walk away. Paul intensely and carefully taught his new converts in order to establish the church. He then kept in touch with them and made return visits to encourage and, if necessary, correct their teaching. We must do the same. A clear doctrinal stance is not only necessary for survival, it is a basis for rapid growth.

Christology is a particularly important aspect of conviction. Muslims deny the divinity of Isa Al Masih, Buddhists see no need for a Savior, Hindus are prone to view Jesus as one of innumerable incarnations, and Western secularists think of him as a social reformer. Each must come to a new belief in order to be saved. We should not expect new believers, whether American or Afghani, to be able to articulate theological concepts it took the Western church centuries to develop, and that most mature Western Christians barely understand. On the other hand, the truth of Jesus is the decisive point of conversion and the primary reason of pushback from the convert’s community. New believers need to be prepared for such opposition. Believers share a conviction that he is “Jesus Christ, Son of God, Lord and Savior.”

There has been a lot of dialogue<sup>14</sup> about the term *Son of God* in Muslim friendly translations and the need to find another term. I know the term is problematic and needs explanation, but the truth is that Jesus is divine. The insurmountable obstacle would seem to be finding a dynamic equivalent to *Son of God* that is not problematic to Muslims. From John 10: 29-35 we see that the radical monotheists who Jesus faced every day understood the term *Son of God* to be blasphemous because it associated Jesus too closely with God. Therefore, any

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<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Rick Brown. *Part I: Translating the Biblical Term ‘Son(s) of God’ in Muslim Contexts*. IJFM, 22(3) (2005) and *Part II: Translating the Biblical Term ‘Son(s) of God’ in Muslim Contexts*. IJFM, 22(4) (2005); Michael LeFebvre and Basheer Abdulfadi. *Scripture in Context – A Further Look at Translating “Son of God.”* IJFM, 29(2) (2012); Larry Caldwell. *Coming to Terms – Why Can’t Evangelicals Agree? Clarifying Evangelical Responses to Insider Movements and Familial Language Translations*. IJFM, 30(2) (2013).

dynamic equivalent of this phrase should do the same. It is better to translate the phrase as closely as is practical and deal with the objections and misperceptions in other ways.

### **Confession**

Personal conviction is not private; it must result in personal confession. The letter affirms that “the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth.” (1 Th. 1:8) On the basis of a few weeks of ministry and within a short period of time, these believers were successfully sharing news about Jesus. Although they faced difficulties, their witness had already reached to their city, their province, and beyond. They had seen the missionaries share boldly in spite of opposition, and they followed the example. Boldness begets boldness. Sadly, timidity also begets timidity.

Jesus commanded us to baptize his disciples, an act of obedience and testimony that is essential to beginning a life of following him. Baptism involves confessing Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Baptism usually has more cost and meaning for those who become believers from other faith backgrounds. Baptism separates those merely entertaining ideas from those who convictionally believe and intend to follow Jesus, and it was meant to do so.

In the New Testament, baptism appears to have taken place fairly soon after a person decided to follow Christ. Some missionaries delay baptism until enough believers can be baptized together to function as a small church. In other places it is delayed so that the family of a new believer can hear the gospel before his independent act offends the whole family. One question we must struggle with is how long a person can delay this act of obedience without negatively impacting his walk with Christ and his modeling of what it means to follow Christ? At some point, a believer must move ahead with baptism even if his loved ones are not ready.

## **Congregation**

Perhaps the most surprising characteristic of the believers in Thessalonica was that they were an *ecclesia* after only a few weeks or months of ministry by Paul and his team: “Paul and Silvanus and Timothy to the church of the Thessalonians.” (1 Thess 1:1) The New Testament pattern is that believers gather into assemblies that represent the Body of Christ. They do not need a signboard or a steeple, but these groups of believers gathering together wherever they can is essential in the biblical model of what it means to follow Jesus. Only early adopters are likely to come to faith without a visible community to represent what that means. As we have already seen, most people need a community to endure challenges to their faith. Mutual ministry and the development of ministry gifts confirm faith in multiple ways.

Today some mission practitioners are questioning whether congregating is essential to following Christ. Some do this because their established church definition seems out of reach in a pioneer setting. They need to return to the New Testament to rediscover the simple and reproducible nature of the church in its movement phase. Others question the necessity of the church out of a desire for converts to stay in their religious community. If converts are clearly confessing their new convictions, they will usually be excluded from their mosque or temple, although they can often remain in the community. If the believers remain for even a brief period for courageous witness, then they need to also meet as the Body of Christ to encourage their own faith. The Jerusalem church continued to meet in the temple of Yahweh to openly expressing their faith, but they also met separately from house to house.

### **How Paul’s Team Discipled Decisively**

Having established the fact that Paul’s team produced great quality disciples in an amazingly short period of time, it is helpful to look at the great cost they paid in order to



accomplish this goal. The pattern of their ministry is clearly evident in the descriptions of their ministry in 1 Thessalonians.

1. *Work as a team to bring a variety of strengths to discipling.*

- A close reading of 1 Thess. 1-2 reveals that Paul, Silas, and Timothy worked as an apostolic team. They wrote the epistle together and described their common ministry – “We give thanks... our gospel... we proved... the reception we had... we never came with flattering speech... nor did we seek glory... we proved to be gentle... we were pleased to impart... our labor and hardship... we proclaimed... we behaved... we also thank God... we, brethren, having been taken away... for we wanted to come to you....”
- We often hold up one-on-one discipleship as the best model, but they did three-on-many discipling. There are numerous advantages to a team working intently to disciple new believers. For one thing, the disciples gain from the mix of strengths and gifting of the team, rather than having just one teacher. Hearing the same concepts from three different voices only adds to deeper and broader understanding.

2. *Pray as if everything depended on God.*

- The team wrote, “We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers.” (1:2) They further described their prayer commitment in these words, “For what thanks can we render to God for you in return for all the joy with which we rejoice before our God on your account, as we night and day keep praying most earnestly that we might see your face, and may complete what is lacking in your faith?” (2:9-10)
- Paul’s team knew they were working in cooperation with God and prayer was a major activity in their discipling. Nothing is as powerful as prayer in terms of helping new believers understand what Christ has done for them and to begin a new life pattern in response to His grace. Most of us admit mentally that prayer is essential to cooperation with God, but much of our discipling is largely void of prayer for and with our disciples.

3. *Trust God to work and cooperate with His powerful presence.*

- The discipleship team was empowered by God, “for our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake.” (1:5)

- God's power seems to have been evident through miracles, the presence of the Holy Spirit, and deep conviction regarding truth. The result was that the new believers were discipled in an atmosphere where they knew God was the one who was working around and within them.
- They were serious about their new faith and their ears were attuned to God's agenda for their lives. This dynamic facilitates rapid changes in belief and behavior.
- Decisive discipleship is possible because the indwelling Holy Spirit is the primary discipler. A primary task of the human discipler is to keep the new converts connected to the Holy Spirit.
- Reading the Bible while listening to the Holy Spirit is a keystone habit – it leads quickly to the establishment of multiple other behavioral patterns. It is no coincidence that much of what we know about the Holy Spirit comes from Paul's teaching of his young disciples.

4. *Show and tell how to follow Jesus.*

- When I was a college student I attended summer missions training for 4 days. There was a lot of good teaching and helpful ideas. However, my life was changed by seeing my roommate, Dave, get up and spend an hour with Jesus every morning. He has no idea the impact he had on me, but I was impacted by the example of his life. Paul and his team worked that way to make disciples. It was 24/7 life-on-life with the new believers in their homes and the marketplace. "You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. You also became imitators of us and of the Lord. . ." (1:5-6)
- I once wondered if Paul was a bit egotistical to often remind the churches to intentionally remember and follow his example. Now I realize that Paul understood that most people, especially new believers from pagan backgrounds, need a concrete model to emulate.
- The problem with so much of our discipleship is that we want to fly in and tell people what to do; they need someone to show them day by day. Good teaching with consistent modeling of the life that is expected is a powerful combination. Rapid discipling will almost always require intentional modeling of the new Christian way of life.

5. *Make suffering a central theme of the gospel and following Christ.*

- "You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit. . . For indeed when we were

with you, we kept telling you in advance that we were going to suffer affliction; and so it came to pass as you know.” (I Th 1:6, 3:4)

- In America we value risk avoidance so highly, that we assume somebody messed up when we suffer. Paul’s gospel included suffering and persecution as the normal Christian life. The best time to introduce suffering is the first time you tell the story of Jesus since the cross makes little sense otherwise. When people come to faith having fully counted the cost, their discipleship moves along much more quickly.
- This is so counter-intuitive to many Western missionaries that some hesitate to boldly share the gospel because they do not want the new believers to bear the brunt of society’s reaction. Disciples who have suffered for their decisive transformation are often much deeper than disciples whose faith is safe and slow.

6. *Make disciples through intimate relationships.*

- Because we cannot watch Paul, we should pay attention to his statements about the importance of relationships to him personally and to his discipling methodology. “But we proved to be gentle among you, as a nursing mother tenderly cares for her own children. Having so fond an affection for you, we were pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives, because you had become very dear to us. . . . Just as you know how we were exhorting and encouraging and imploring each one of you as a father would his own children, so that you would walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.” (1Th 2:7-8, 11-12)
- It is striking that Paul chose the intimate relationship of parents with their own children to express the commitment and closeness of his discipling relationships. As a nursing mother cares for and protects her young baby and just as a father expects and exhorts his growing children to be their best, so Paul showed love and exhortation to his disciples. He loved them and expressed that love openly. The believers knew the disciplers cared deeply for them and sacrificed to minister to them.
- For Paul discipleship was not programmatic, impersonal, cerebral, and distant. It was relational, personal, emotional, and intimate. Those who are so disciplined listen intently to those who help them establish a new pattern of life.

7. *Prioritize whatever time is necessary for decisive discipleship.*

- A common concern about Paul’s departure from Thessalonica after only a few weeks is based on our assumption that only a few hours of discipleship took place. Much of our teaching/discipling is programmatic; we assume a weekly

meeting in a particular place at a certain time. From my observation of a number of churches, this often results in 30-40 minutes of meaningful input per week.

- How could Paul create disciples in only 3-4 hours time? First, we should not forget that all of Paul's letters can be read in that time period, and this includes the repetition of important themes. Secondly, missionaries often report a hunger to know and grow so great in those coming to Christ out of darkness that they are want to meet for several hours 3-4 days a week. For instance, a missionary told his new converts that he could not come the next Sunday and suggested they meet without him. He was surprised to find out they had been meeting the other six days a week. If disciples met just twice a week for 2 hours, then they could go through all Paul's written teaching 8 times in 2 months.
- This intensive teaching/encouragement is essential for establishing the rapid turn-around required of new believers in a non-Christian environment.

8. *Make sure the believers understand and obey core teachings.*

- Paul's discipleship method included passing on a specific body of teaching. "Finally, then, brethren, we request and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us instruction as to how you ought to walk and please God (just as you actually do walk), that you excel still more. For you know what commandments we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus." (1 Th 4:1-2)
- Based on the overwhelming model of his epistles, it appears that Paul's teaching had two primary emphases: a) understanding our salvation in Christ, and b) how we should walk in that salvation. Both sides of this coin are gospel focused.

9. *Aim to be blameless blamelessness before Christ.*

- The driving vision of Paul's ministry was to prepare believers for the Appearing of Jesus Christ. "so that He may establish your hearts without blame in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints. . . . Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." (1 Th 3:13; 5:23)
- This was so much more than completing a program or filling a ministry timeslot. Paul's passion was to present them as a blameless offering to the Lord. This eschatological obsession drove Paul and challenged the new disciples. How much more powerful discipleship is when it is about standing soon before the Lord and Judge of all.

Paul did not want to leave Thessalonica when he was forced out, but the work he and his team had done left behind solid disciples who were formed into a church within a matter of weeks. The apostolic team continued relationships and contact with these believers in the following years.

### **Conclusion**

This brief study has shown that in spite of much Western missiological skepticism, rapid discipling is possible and is actually preferable in mission settings. God transforms those who come to faith in Jesus, and we should work with that expectation. This method is costly for the missionary and the new converts who begin discipling others because it demands an intensive commitment of time. Ultimately, Paul is a good model of *decisive discipleship* that we should study and emulate.