

**FROM “MILK TO MEAT”:  
CULTIVATING A MINISTRY OF MULTIPLICATION AND MATURITY**

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There are several locations in South Asia that are seeing a phenomenal move of God resulting in disciples being multiplied and churches being planted and established. In the midst of these movements occurring in South Asia, there are many lessons that have been learned by both ex-pat missionaries and national leaders. This paper will highlight several of those lessons employed from the spiritual new birth of a believer to the establishment of an association of churches. I will limit my scope to address aspects of these movements that are the responsibility of disciple-makers; however, each of the disciple-maker’s tasks should be seen as being accomplished ultimately through the power of the Holy Spirit and the Word of God, both of which govern the transformation of the believer.

**The Value of a Beginning Discipleship Package**

As new believers come to faith in Jesus Christ, like spiritual infants they need “milk,”—the basics of the faith. These basics include things like how to pray and listen to God, how to share their new faith in Christ Jesus, how to love their neighbors, and how to read and study the Word of God. By establishing these basics in a new believer’s life, they learn what it means to abide in a relationship with Jesus. “Milk discipleship” should center on obedience to the commands of Christ as encountered in Scripture; we want to teach them to obey Jesus without

delay. This process, feeding on the word and learning to obey Jesus' commands, is the pathway to transformation as knowledge and application grow together. The disciple-maker plays an important role in the "milk discipleship" phase. By providing training, guidance and an example to follow during these initial days, the disciple-maker orients the new believer to the basics of the Christian faith.

*Milk lessons* should introduce simple commands and tools to get the new believer started in the practice of disciplines that are crucial to their spiritual vitality. I personally have committed to teaching what Dr. George Patterson calls the "Seven Commands of Christ."<sup>1</sup> These Commands provide necessary structure for growth and obedience in the new believer and also serve to initiate church formation when practiced corporately.

If one gives a toddler a knife and fork and puts a plate of solid food before him, the likely result is a mess. It will take a season until he learns how to properly use the knife and fork. Similarly, with new believers, the disciple-maker needs to work with them through the transition between "the milk" and "the meat." Missionaries who are seeing generational disciple-making take place suggest spending a minimum of 9 months in basic discipleship with them, working through the commands of Christ with a simple Discovery Bible Study (DBS) tool.<sup>2</sup>

### **Implementing a Discovery Bible Study Tool in Beginning Discipleship**

The purpose and primary goal of a DBS tool is to train the new believer in the crucial task of observing the text of the Bible. Helping a new believer begin the process of feeding on the Word is similar to providing the growing child a knife and fork. Modeling, providing simple

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on Patterson's "Seven Commands of Christ" teaching, see <http://ojs.globalmissiology.org/index.php/english/article/viewFile/134/390>

<sup>2</sup> For more information on the concept of Discovery Bible Studies, see <http://www.davidlwatson.org/>

instructions and granting the freedom to try are all part of the disciple-maker's plan for the new believer to learn to find his own spiritual nourishment in the Word of God.

The DBS tool begins with reading the Scripture for a total of 5 times (dependent on literacy) followed by telling and re-telling the story found therein. As new believers read and re-tell the story from Scripture, they begin to move this story from their heads to their hearts (Ps 119:11). The telling and reading of the story multiple times is the starting point for observations of the text. After reading or telling the passage, several questions lead the disciple to make crucial observations of the text. The first two questions are, "What does this passage say about God?", and "What does this passage say about mankind?" Those who have been believers for years must resist the temptation to draw from other passages. Doing so, even when appropriate application exists, carries the potential to discourage new believers who lack a breadth of Bible knowledge. In some cases, a certain inferiority complex may emerge that erodes confidence to simply obey Scripture. As use of the DBS tool increases, then model and train new believers to interpret Scripture with Scripture, but be careful not to overwhelm them with too much too soon. The goal is to marry the new believer's mind to simple observation and application in obedience.

After asking for observations about God and mankind, additional questions for the DBS tool pertain to applying the specific text to the new disciple's life. Do so by asking, "Is there a sin to avoid or a promise to claim?" Next ask, "Is there an example to follow or a command to obey?" Collectively these questions are intended to prompt the new believer to examine their fallen worldview (God/mankind), as well as initial steps to transform their actions through putting off the old life (sin to avoid), and putting on the new life of abiding through claiming what Scripture promises. Through noting examples, both good and bad, as well as identifying

what Scripture commands, the new believer encounters the Word and sees its relevance and authority over his new life in Christ.

By introducing the DBS tool in the first months of discipleship, we have equipped new disciples of Jesus with a tool that serves them in study of the Word, moving them toward spiritual maturity. Practicing the DBS tools corporately also allows the disciple-maker to identify gifts of teaching within the group of new believers. Identifying these ‘emerging leaders’ is a key marker for the disciple-maker in the transition from short to long-term discipleship.

### **Developing Competent and Confident Teachers of the Word**

Where church planting is the goal, the transition to indigenous or local leadership of new churches demands application of Paul’s instruction in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9. Identification of emerging leaders within a local church is served by the processes introduced within short-term (milk) discipleship. Where character is being transformed by a growing knowledge and obedience to Christ, we have often found the ‘ability to teach others’ (1 Tim. 3:2) and to ‘refute false teaching’ (Titus 1:9) is a skill that must be nurtured. Following are several *meat tools* that can be used in the development of competent and confident teachers of God’s Word

### **Foundations for Teaching the Bible<sup>3</sup>**

*Foundations* is a primarily oral Old Testament and New Testament survey that develops the DBS tool for solid hermeneutics which is practiced over and over. In a 6-18 month program, emerging leaders develop 36 messages in a community of learning guided by a trainer. The

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<sup>3</sup> See <http://sugarcreek.net/docs/missions/Foundations.pdf>

trainer will recognize opportunities to move from directive instruction, needed in the early months of disciple making, to the “self-correcting” function stewarded by local church leadership under the authority of the Word. At this point, the trainer is not answering all of the questions. Rather, wherever possible, the trainer points emerging leaders back to Scripture to find passages that address their concerns and issues. The basic guidelines for hermeneutics developed and practiced within *Foundations* serves entire networks with accountability as lessons are developed and scrutinized for accuracy among peers in a corporate setting. The Training for Trainers (T4T) *three-thirds process* provides structure for the meetings by ensuring that the developing leaders “look back,” “look up” and “look forward”.<sup>4</sup> Looking back involves holding one another accountable to what was learned in previous studies. Looking up involves going into the Word for new lessons to obey. And looking forward involves planning and setting goals for application of the new lesson. Throughout *Foundations* training sessions, trainees are expected to reproduce the lessons they develop in their local church setting. These lessons, facilitated by local emerging leaders, mark the transition to long-term discipleship capable of worldview evaluation and community transformation that only study of the Word of God can provide.

I am so grateful for my seminary education, but in 5 years and two Master’s degrees, I was only asked to prepare 4 Bible messages. *Foundations* trainees who complete the program will have developed more than 30 Bible lessons prior to their completion of the training. *Foundations* trains emerging leaders how to rightly divide and teach God’s Word. These emerging leaders then train multiple generations of believers via multiplication in long term

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<sup>4</sup> See [t4tonline.org](http://t4tonline.org) for more information on this approach to training. See also <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1yQZoYAMOXBzWuJKhVexmZKa0eyRBd4P7uaBITeOh5nk/edit> for a description of the “Three-thirds Process” developed by Ying Kai.

discipleship as church planting continues. The intense experience in handling the Word helps leaders to discern Holy Spirit revealed truth, learn to read and interpret Scripture for themselves, and confidently lead their congregations. *Foundations* trains them that the Bible is the real authority; they need not be dependent on another person, including the trainer.

### **National Disciple-Makers Putting Meat on the Table**

Now fast-forward 4-6 years after the prior processes have been implemented and passed on among a group of new believers. By the grace of God, some of the new believers will have multiplied disciples and churches. In the fields where we have served, for example, we often see generations of autonomous churches retain a loose affiliation through disciple-making relationships. As such networks mature, the desire is to bring them together to revisit and solidify vision and cooperation for the task of the Great Commission. During the early years of my service overseas, we simply translated a document known as “The Baptist Faith & Message”<sup>5</sup> (BF&M) into local languages. The challenge in this scenario was ownership, or a lack thereof. Unpacking the BF&M was great teaching, and local pastors enjoyed the training. But as they returned to their churches they would say, “Jeff said this ...” or “Dr. such and such said this ....” They weren’t confessing their own convictions about Scripture! Our team agreed this was an error in our approach.

Recognizing this challenge, we took the same BF&M, stripped away our definitions, and just gave them the headings and the scripture references. We gathered the leaders together and studied a couple of the topics and passages at a time. Instead of lecturing, we dug into scripture for 4-5 days. As a group, we worked together to develop doctrinal statements concerning God

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<sup>5</sup> The Baptist Faith and Message was developed to provide doctrinal unity among the 40,000+ autonomous Southern Baptist Churches. See <http://www.sbc.net/bfm2000/bfm2000.asp>.

the Father, God the Son, etc. The church leaders debated back and forth as to how to craft these statements and how to voice what they believed about the scriptures. Our team members participated with them in this dynamic process of building the doctrinal statement not only for the specific churches represented in the meeting, but for the association of churches that was now forming around statements of purpose, vision and faith.<sup>6</sup>

As associations of churches were formed, peer relationships between these churches emerged; they participated in projects together, such as sending local missionaries to Unreached People Groups (UPG's) or to a village where there was no church to plant a church. These associations also provided a local community of practice valuable for both maintaining vision and cross-pollinating sound doctrine. Where false teaching was introduced, we began to see networks of local leaders leaning on other local brothers for discernment and encouragement in the Word (Titus 1).

In Asia, another important issue for a young church is determining who to allow to speak to the assembly. Where visitors attend church services, Asian hospitality suggests local leaders provide a platform for the visitor's teaching. Inviting strangers to speak because they are from another country or display certain credentials can be an invitation to problems. Many of the associations we worked with began to practice a "closed pulpit," in which only those within that particular local body could address the gathering. My team and I even encouraged them not to invite us to speak, but to rely on those that God had provided in the local church. One fellow missionary told me that one of the greatest days of his life was when he visited a young church for the first time and a leader asked him not to teach because the leader felt that God had spoken to him, and he needed to deliver the message to the church for that day.

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<sup>6</sup> A detailed description of this process titled "*Confessing the Faith within CPM's*" can be accessed at <https://t4tusa.files.wordpress.com/2013/07/confessing-the-faith-within-cpm.pdf>

## **Conclusion**

Over the years, we have been absolutely amazed by the power of God's Word and the Acts of the Holy Spirit to transform lives to grow His church. At the same time, we have been diligent to look for the obstacles, problems, and issues in a movement and attack these via the Word of God and many times through fasting and prayer. We were encouraged to be students of the Word and students of movements who ruthlessly evaluated the Church Planting Movement and also listened to outside observations of the Movement. This took us back to the Scriptures where, through fasting and prayer as a team, we found Biblical solutions. We knew we needed a tight system for learning from the Movement to help these churches and leaders get to the point where they could rightly divide the Word and train others in the Word of God. It took the team a number of years via trial and error and great dependence on God to develop a system of learning that could be reproducing in these new churches as they grew from infants obeying the commands of Jesus to mature believers writing their own covenants as a new group of churches associating together in the Movement.