

Rapid Kingdom Advance: How Shall We View It?

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Abstract

Rapid and multiplicative increase constitutes one of the most contentious aspects of Church Planting Movements, as described by David Garrison and others. Numerous concerns have been expressed about the element of rapidity. This article interacts with some of the most salient concerns, discussing the following questions: How does the Bible view rapid kingdom advance? Is rapid growth a goal of CPM? Does rapid growth lead to superficial and fragile faith? Does desire for rapid growth bring temptation to take shortcuts? Does stress on rapid growth add temptation to claim big numbers?

Key Words: Church Planting Movements, rapid, superficial

Introduction

In 2004, David Garrison defined a Church Planting Movement as “a rapid and multiplicative increase of indigenous churches planting churches within a given people group or population segment” (Garrison 2004, 21). In the years since then, much has been written about Church Planting Movements (CPMs) and other closely related terms, such as “Disciple Making Movements” (DMMs) and “Kingdom Movements.” This article uses CPM as the best-known and most inclusive of these terms. Many of God’s people are celebrating the rapid and multiplicative increase of indigenous churches planting churches. Those celebrating with greatest joy include those *experiencing* the phenomenon—especially the many newly coming to salvation in Christ—and those close enough to observe it firsthand. The global body of Christ seems to be currently experiencing a missional season of remarkable growth in many places.

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

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

Each of these concerns deserves serious consideration.

How Does the Bible View *Rapid Kingdom Advance*?

How did the inspired writers of Scripture view rapid kingdom advance? And how does the Bible guide God's people to view rapid kingdom advance today? Of course, as Creator, Sustainer, and Sovereign God could do *everything very quickly*, if he so desired, including the whole of salvation history. He chose instead to work through processes that have taken many thousands of years, as noted in Psalm 90:4 and 2 Peter 3:8b. God is not in a hurry, and while on earth Jesus never seemed in a hurry—for example in his apparently casual response to his friend Lazarus's fatal illness (John 11:6, 17, 21-23). Hence God's people must guard against acting in haste, which can result in missing the right way (Proverbs 19:2) and sharing in the sins of others (1 Timothy 5:22).

As for Scriptures related to rapid advance in kingdom purposes, 2 Chronicles 29:36 reports that "Hezekiah and *all* the people rejoiced at what God had brought about for his people, *because* it was done so quickly."¹ The speed with which God acted in that time of spiritual revival gave ample grounds for righteous rejoicing among *all* his people.

The Psalms reveal at least a dozen verses calling on God to act *quickly* (Psalms 22:19; 31:2; 38:22; 40:13; 69:17; 70:1,5; 71:12; 79:8; 102:2; 141:1; 143:7). In light of Jesus's command to love our neighbor as ourselves, these model prayers for personal rescue can rightly be applied in praying for salvation to come quickly to the lost.

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

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

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

In Romans 15:19 and 23, Paul states that from Jerusalem all the way to Illyricum there was no place left for his pioneering work. Adequate discipling and laying firm spiritual foundations clearly did not depend on Paul being physically present in every location for great lengths of time. How could sufficient leadership be developed and adequate spiritual grounding and discipleship happen

among so many in such a short time? A clue lies in Paul's instructions to Timothy: "And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others" (2 Timothy 2:2). Paul describes here multigenerational discipling of *groups* of leaders. We see four generations described: Paul, Timothy plus "many witnesses," "reliable people," and then "others." Paul applied a very reproducible approach to leadership training, so "reliable people," many of whom may have never even met Paul, could quickly become "qualified to teach others."

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

Luke has recorded in Acts 14:23 that Paul's appointment of elders in certain churches did not depend on lengthy theological education. Paul's practice here does not argue against theological education per se; rather, the relevant point is that Scripture does not present it as a *prerequisite* for spiritual leadership in all contexts. The criteria found in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 can and should be applied contextually in every situation, fitting also with 1 Timothy 5:22, as already mentioned.

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

Two mission leaders offer helpful clarification of biblical perspective on rapid multiplication. Zane Pratt writes: "Gospel urgency makes rapid multiplication something we should desire.... Our passion for the glory of God in the gospel and our love for our lost global neighbor compels our desire for the gospel to advance as rapidly as God will bless" (Pratt 2017). Steve Smith illustrates well the interplay of human methodology with God's sovereign choice in the advance of CPMs:

Think of it this way. As a sailor, I can work on all of the controllables: making sure my sails are up, the tiller is in the right position, the sails are trimmed correctly. But until the wind blows, my sailboat is dead in the water. The wind is the uncontrollable. Or if the wind is blowing, but I as a sailor fail to raise the sails or trim them to catch the wind, I go nowhere. In this case, the wind is blowing but I don't know how to move with the wind. Jesus [said] 'The wind blows where it wishes'.... The Spirit blows in ways we cannot forecast, but blow He does. The question is not whether He is blowing. The question is: 'Is my ministry positioned to move the way He blows so that it can become a movement of God?' (Smith 2013, 29).

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

Is Rapid Growth a Goal of CPM?

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

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

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

Does Rapid Growth Lead to Superficial and Fragile Faith?

As conveyed in the Parable of the Sower, superficial and fragile faith *can* result from rapid growth. But is that always the case or even the norm in CPMs? Most accusations of shallow faith seem based more on fear² or non-movement cases³ rather than actual data from any of the more than 1,300 CPMs known to the 24:14 Coalition (www.2414now.net). Numerous actual case studies, assessments, articles, and books (see references and appendix) describing Kingdom Movements illustrate the faith of ordinary believers. They describe a faith that is passionate, well-grounded, and thriving *despite* persecution (the acid test mentioned in the Parable of the Sower). What might we find if we compare the resilience through persecution of disciples’ faith in CPMs with the resilience of believers’ faith in U.S.-American Evangelical churches? Those in movements have, on average, much *stronger* testimonies of enduring persecution than those questioning their depth of faith (John and Coles 2019, 69-84).

Regarding sound doctrine, it is instructive to compare results of research in the United States with samples of data from CPMs in developing nations. The 2018 LifeWay Research survey found that a majority of U.S.-Americans with “evangelical beliefs” (Smietana 2015) say, “Most people are basically good (52%); God accepts the worship of all religions (51%); Jesus was the first and greatest being created by God the Father (78%)” (Weber 2018). In contrast, the 2005 assessment of a CPM among the “K” people of Guatemala found that: “There was an overwhelming consensus among them that Jesus is God. There was no question about their theology of Jesus. The question asked was, ‘Who is Jesus?’.... all responded in various ways that ‘Jesus was God’” (from a confidential assessment of CPM among the K people of Guatemala, 2005). Meanwhile an outside team assessing a CPM in Africa in 2018 found “a quality of discipleship that is producing solid new believers who understand basic doctrines and sacrificially follow Jesus.... The new believers had a good understanding of basic doctrines like salvation, Jesus, Holy Spirit and even baptism although they have not had a lesson on that yet” (from a confidential assessment of a movement in Africa, 2018). A full assessment of the 73 million disciples currently involved in CPMs globally has not been attempted. However, all existing evidence suggests that their doctrinal orthodoxy stands up quite well when compared to U.S.-American Evangelicalism.

Every CPM within this article's purview has some pattern for follow-up and discipleship. In fact, many have thorough curricula designed to equip believers with firm doctrinal foundations for their life in Christ. By definition, a CPM has four or more generations of churches reproducing churches (Coles and Parks 2019a, 315). By passing on biblical truths, these disciples internalize the teachings better than if they had just passively received them. Those fearing doctrinal shallowness usually envision (or cite examples of) first-generation converts won through traditional methods rather than believers within a multi-generational movement. It turns out that rapid growth in the context of a healthy movement tends to produce disciples with a more passionate and contagious faith than the slow growth to which most of us are accustomed (Coles and Parks 2019a, 174-184).

Does Desire for Rapid Growth Bring Temptation to Take Shortcuts?

Temptations to take shortcuts exist among *all* servants of Christ—both in traditional approaches and in movements. Yet as shown above, the specter of shortcuts in discipleship dissolves in the light of actual data from CPMs. Fear of shortcuts in leadership training and equipping turn out to be based on traditional assumptions about how leaders should be equipped rather than on biblical commands or examples. Jesus said, “by their fruit you will recognize them” (Matthew 7:20). The questions this article considers receive more accurate answers through examining the fruit being borne in movements rather than through fears based on *a priori* assumptions or occasional anecdotes.

Does Stress on Rapid Growth Add Temptation to Claim Big Numbers?

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

Certainly the temptation to exaggerate numbers in hopes of financial gain or prestige can lure those using *any* church planting approach—traditional or CPM. The larger numbers related to CPMs might trigger those thinking traditionally to reason, “How could that possibly be true? Based

on what I've seen and experienced, someone must be lying or exaggerating to come up with number like that!" Better, however, than assuming falsehood or bad motives among Christian brothers and sisters is to check with reliable sources who can support or suggest caution concerning various reports.

Justin Long, Director of Research with BEYOND and Research Team Leader for the 24:14 Coalition, has summarized the criteria used by the 24:14 Coalition to accept a movement report as credible:

1. We only accept data reports from established and trusted movement practitioners, many of whom have been working for 10 to 30 years. There are approximately 30 movement families (networks of multiple movements) with significant interrelationships of trust, training and accountability inside the family and sometimes between families. Most fellowship reports are cross-referenced between at least five generations of churches and leaders within the movement.
2. The leaders from this network must be vouched for by a trusted movement practitioner or coach who is not a part of the network before they are counted in the global and regional totals.
3. For larger movements, we as the global 24:14 movement generally round to the nearest order of magnitude, and often the movements themselves will intentionally undercount or reduce by certain percentages if they feel caution is warranted. Some outside assessments conclude that the reports are significantly undercounting what is happening. Thus, we feel confident what we report is a "floor" not a "ceiling."
4. Most movements report numbers on a semi-annual basis to the 24:14 research team via secure email.
5. Occasionally, as warranted, movements will invite practitioners or researchers in to do an external audit. The main goal is to analyze the health and dynamics of the movement to help them improve, but it can also help verify the numbers (Coles and Parks 2019b, 40-41).

Sources such as the 24:14 Coalition and those listed below in the References and Appendix offer carefully weighed reports from movements around the world. Many CPMs also track other categories of fruit besides numbers of disciples. Some use advanced software tools to track *all* the major elements of church life found in Acts 2.

Does High Expectation for Rapid Multiplication of New Churches Give Workers Little Patience for the Hard Slogging in Evangelism and Discipleship Needed to Launch a Movement? Does Such Expectation Increase the Likelihood of Workers' Discouragement If They Don't See Fruit Quickly?

As already clarified, CPM principles *do not* promise quick results. The early stages of catalyzing a CPM rarely happen quickly or easily. Much prayer, hard work, and interaction with local people (both believers and unbelievers) in a focused context are needed to lay a solid foundation. CPM trainings often share the maxim, "Go slow to go fast." It normally takes much *longer* to find a person of peace who opens their household than to find just anyone who is open to the gospel. It takes longer to share a vision and discover others who resonate with the vision—enough to pursue

it without pay—than to hire local believers as evangelists. The greater danger is that workers may start out aiming to catalyze a movement but over time begin to settle for traditional methods because they are *initially quicker and easier*. Such a shift might include just reaching individuals instead of groups, hiring local evangelists, paying for transportation so seekers can attend gatherings, and other methods that can yield traditional church planting fruit but be unlikely to result in a movement. It turns out that a high level of vision and expectation inspires the perseverance in useful steps that more often *do* result in movements. Movements usually have a period of multiple years with little or no growth while a foundation is laid that sometimes results in exponential growth (John and Coles 2019, 9-12).

We believe in a great God who has done and continues to do mighty things. “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Hebrews 13:8). We stand by faith in him along with William Carey who said, “Expect great things from God; attempt great things for God.” The rapid Kingdom advance of Church Planting Movements consists of millions of “great things” taking place in our day. God has moved powerfully at many points throughout church history, and many CPM principles consist of the best wisdom of past missions work being re-launched. God does not guarantee a specific set of methods will yield abundant or rapid fruit. We know that all our best effort, using any method, is subject to his sovereign choice to bless. We also know he clearly blesses the use of appropriate means to advance his Kingdom. We can join the early Thessalonian believers in obeying the Lord’s command to: “Pray for [gospel messengers] that the message of the Lord *may spread rapidly and be honored*, just as it was among [the first Thessalonian believers].” And when the Lord is pleased to answer such prayers with rapid Kingdom advance, we can rightly join the psalmist in saying, “For you make me glad by your deeds, Lord; I sing for joy at what your hands have done” (Psalms 92:4).

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Appendix: Additional Books Describing CPMs

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Larsen, Trevor (2018). *Focus on Fruit! Movement Case Studies and Fruitful Practices*. www.focusonfruit.org (accessed January 22, 2022).

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¹ All Scripture references quoted from the NIV, except where otherwise specified; any italic font has been added for emphasis.

² For example, in the 36-minute podcast “[Are Explosive Disciple-Making Movements Really Healthy?](#)” Zane Pratt uses the word “fear” five times to describe his perspective on various aspects of Church Planting Movements, including rapid reproduction. *The Missions Podcast*, July 2, 2018 (accessed January 22, 2022).

³ For example, Pratt (ibid, @ 9:46-12:20) cites numerous cases to illustrate his concern about the danger of syncretism. None of the examples he cites claims to be a Church Planting Movement.