

# The Church Planting Movement Debate: Getting to the Heart of the Matter

J. A. Irons

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## Abstract

Discussions about church planting movements, supportive and critical, have been a part of missions for the past two decades. While many individual issues have been addressed, the central issue has been less clear. This article suggests that discussions and debates about church planting movements center on implicit values. Instead of debating secondary issues, it is important to understand the different values of CPM/DMM proponents and critics and to discuss these differences more directly. While these primary values do in fact conflict with one another, they could also be seen in a complementary way in the advancement of God's kingdom.

**Key Words:** church planting movements, CPM, criticism, disciple making movements, DMM

## Introduction

For eight years, I served as a missionary with a church planting movement organization. I sat in training after training, conference after conference, and Zoom call after Zoom call hearing about CPM, DMM, and various tools used in disciple-making. But I never had full “buy-in.” In fact, some of what I heard was so outrageous and objectionable that I finally decided to leave the organization. I have met several others who share a similar experience.

For years I have wanted to write a critique of the methodology used in church planting movements and disciple-making movements based on my experience. However, when I finally decided to do so, I discovered that much of what I had observed, experienced, and wanted to write about had already been said. For most of my years as a field missionary in the organization described above, much of the critical literature, which is located in academic journals or hard to find online, was inaccessible to me. Instead, I was always being confronted with the latest promotional literature. But after some newly acquired research skills and time spent reading much of what has been written, I realized that I did not have anything new to contribute to the discussion. Instead of writing another article repeating what other critics have already expressed, I decided I would focus on making critical resources more accessible to others who need to hear an important but largely unheard voice in the church planting movement debate (Irons 2022b).

It was through a deeper review of the critical resources that I began to see what I believe to be the core issue between church planting movement practitioners and those, like myself, who are critical of movement methodology. I want to point out first, however, that I and many other critics are not *against* movements. I believe God can and does move in powerful ways among people, and has done so for ages in various forms—in revivals, people movements, and church planting movements. But I/we *are* opposed to certain methods, practices, and interpretations of Scripture that are commonly associated with movements. Those, I believe, are *not* God-ordained and should be discarded.

## The Core Issue

What is the core difference between CPM/DMM proponents and critics? Why do some embrace the methods and others critique or reject them? The core issue, I believe, is one of *values* and the prioritization of such values. For CPM/DMM proponents (herein “proponents”), the highest value is reaching the unreached. For critics, the corresponding highest value is being faithful to Scripture.

Proponents place great emphasis on reaching the unreached. They want the gospel to be preached to all the world so that the end shall come (Mt. 24:14). They want disciples made of all nations. They want to finish the task. They are *passionate* and untiring about accomplishing these objectives—which, after all, have been given to them by our Lord. They rejoice when the gospel penetrates formerly resistant and previously unreached people groups. They celebrate that Jesus is being worshipped and obeyed among people who formerly worshipped idols. Reaching the unreached is their lifeblood and *raison d’être*. Even among critics, the most frequently mentioned positive attribute of proponents is their passion for the unreached (Irons 2022a). A quote by William Carey that characterizes them is, “Attempt great things for God. Expect great things from God.”

This central emphasis on reaching the unreached does *not* mean that nothing else matters to proponents. The Bible does matter. It is the Word of God. It is also where their marching orders are found. It is to be studied and obeyed. It is even used as a centerpiece in movements as the unreached learn it, obey it, and share it with others. The Jesus to be worshipped is the Jesus of the Bible. The Bible is indispensable in movements.

For CPM critics, the Bible is the ultimate standard. It is the source of orthodoxy and the guiding post for light and truth. It is the measuring rod by which methods and practices are assessed. It contains the principles, practices, and structures that are key to the life of the church and the believer. When methods do not line up with Scripture, it is the methods that have to go. But world evangelism is still important to the critics. In fact, many missionaries serving the unreached are the very ones critical of movement methods (e.g., Rhodes 2022; Wu 2014). Reaching the unreached is important, and so is making disciples of all nations. However, these tasks must be done in a way that is faithful to Scripture. A quote by Hudson Taylor that characterizes critics is, “God’s work, done God’s way, will never lack God’s supply.”

The crux of the matter is in the prioritization of these two values. At times, these values conflict and choices have to be made. I value both my family and my work—but sometimes I have to choose between them. For proponents, their priority is the unreached, and any alleged biblical constraints on reaching the unreached have to be reexamined or reinterpreted. For critics, the priority is the Bible, and methods that seem to be working have to be analyzed or even discarded. Pictorially, the conflict looks like this:

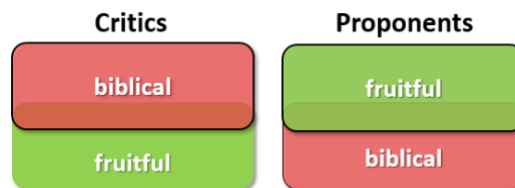


Figure 1. Pictorial representation of the conflict between critics and proponents.

Note that “fruitful” in Figure 1 could also refer to such objectives as reaching the lost, finishing the task, and completing the mission.

This implicit difference in values is the central reason that proponents and critics are unable to effectively communicate. They are on different wavelengths. They are debating secondary issues. The issue is not the CPM approach versus the proclamational method (*Debate: Church Planting Movement Model vs the Proclamational Model* 2018). Nor is it the movement approach versus the traditional approach (*Movements vs. Traditional: Church Planting Debate* 2019). Critics are only supportive of proclamational or traditional methods so long as they are biblically faithful and Scripture-based. Some analysts divide the sides into the “finish the task” and “healthy church” sides, but even what is “healthy” is largely defined by what is biblical, supported by the fact that the largest healthy church organization, 9Marks, includes “biblical” in six of its nine “marks” of a healthy church. The issue is not methods, models, or approaches, but rather the values that lie behind them.

The primary way that critics have addressed issues with movement methodology is through their highest value: a biblical lens. They have pointed out biblical questions with regard to such teachings and practices as obedience-based discipleship, definitions of church, finding persons of peace, promoting new believers to church leadership, and using discovery methods over and against proclamational ones. Critics are concerned with heresy and false teaching creeping into movements. But for proponents, these issues are secondary, and critical comments or calling certain practices “unbiblical” are largely ignored.

If critics wanted to see a change in movements methodology, they would need to offer suggestions and critiques from the proponents’ core value of fruitfulness. Indeed, they have done so, pointing out that movements have died out in certain places, which ultimately means “failure.” But proponents have replied by highlighting movements that have lasted (John & Coles 2019). If critics *could* point out that movements die out or that there is a better way to reach the world, then proponents might be more easily convinced to hear and incorporate certain suggestions. But pointing out that movement teachings and practices are not Bible-based largely falls on deaf ears since that does not address proponents’ primary value. It is like telling a championship team that their coaching style was inappropriate or recruiting was unfair. But in missions, there is no governing body and proponents do not need to listen. If they were losing or their methods were not working, however, they would be all ears.

Similarly, in order to persuade those who primarily value a biblical approach, proponents need to promote movements on biblical grounds. In fact, they have done so. They have argued that the Book of Acts is one big church planting movement and that certain methods such as finding a person of peace are timeless biblical mission principles. Unfortunately, the arguments have been less than convincing to critics who have offered a host of rebuttals to these and other issues (*CPM Critic* 2022; Matthews 2019; Wu 2014).

Some proponents have responded that critics have not provided an alternative to CPM methodology they can evaluate and assess (Esler 2013). In fact, alternatives have been provided; however, those alternatives have not been presented in a way that proponents value. The alternatives are usually principle-centered or Bible-based rather than methodological (e.g., Vegas and Kocman 2021). As one proponent quipped, “They’re kind of boring” (Roberts 2015). As a whole, critics and proponents have failed to come to an understanding since they are operating out of a different set of values.

## Critics' Views of Proponents

Critics often view proponents as pragmatists (Johnson 2010; Massey 2012). Pragmatism has been defined as “action or policy dictated by consideration of the immediate practical consequences rather than by theory or dogma” (Collins 2022). For critics, the “theory” and “dogma” come from Scripture. The Scriptures are the driving force by which to judge practice. Critics see proponents as ignoring biblical principles and practices in order to achieve their goals. In critical literature, “pragmatism” often means that the end justifies the means. It is viewed as cutting corners to reach a stated objective. The corners cut are perceived by proponents to be of minor importance in comparison to reaching their objective.

From a critic’s viewpoint, what is trimmed off by proponents usually has some bearing on people’s conversion or a movement’s reproducibility. Qualifications of biblical leaders become watered down and egalitarian so that church leaders can be raised up quickly to meet the demand of a movement. The definition of a biblical church is made as minimalist as possible so that such churches reproduce like rabbits, an analogy sometimes used by proponents (Garrison 2004; Trousdale & Sunshine 2018). One critic has remarked that ecclesiology is the “Achilles’ heel” of church planting movements” (Terry 2019). Another, using a borrowed analogy from Garrison’s book, has claimed that proponents are “wrinkling time in the missionary task” (Garrison 2004; Massey 2012).

I remember one of the first training events I attended on church planting. We were taught not to teach or share our opinions with national believers. Actually, this was not too different than what I was taught in seminary—that we should encourage national believers to look to the Bible for answers rather than looking to us, the foreign missionaries, as the gurus. But the trainers took it a step further. They proceeded to share with us the biblical basis for the principle they were advocating. I remember thinking, “Why don’t they just tell us that this is what is *effective*? Why do they insist on making this *biblical*?” I probably would have been more accepting if the principle of not teaching national believers was sold as a *fruitful* approach without any reference to Scripture. But instead, I was supposed to believe that it was God-ordained—and that was going too far. It is still the teaching in many church planting circles that *missionaries* are *not* to teach the Bible; rather, they are to facilitate discovery among the unreached. But how could that approach possibly be seen as *biblical*?

Clearly what is biblical is a fundamental value for me—hence I am arguing here as a critic. To me, the biblical approach matters the most and takes precedence over the results. I suspect the above sentiments resonate with other critics who have similar values. Proponents, on the other hand, focus fundamentally on people getting saved and the nations being reached. From my point of view, that fundamental value—as important as it is—prevents proponents from hearing critiques about methodologies being unbiblical or pragmatic.

## The Source of the Values Difference

The above discussion has merely labeled the issue; it has not explained why the issue exists. The question then becomes, “Why do some people value the biblical above the fruitful and others value the fruitful over the biblical?” While this would be an interesting research topic of its own, I would like to offer some reflections after having been involved in discussions about church planting movements discussions for two decades now.

I believe the source of the differences lies in a combination of people's backgrounds, identities, associations, relationships, and personalities. People naturally are influenced by the values of people around them and the groups to which they belong. They also prefer to fit in rather than be considered outsiders. They assume that the values of people they know and trust are right. For those who grew up in churches with a preacher who was always taking a stand and addressing issues that were "unbiblical," they would most likely internalize this value and incorporate words like "biblical" and "unbiblical" into their vocabulary. Likewise, those who attended churches that were highly evangelistic would internalize the value of reaching the lost.

Some proponents have come out of what might be called traditional approaches that were not particularly effective. The "old ways" meant that church buildings had to be built, ministers had to attend seminary and be ordained, and knowledge of God's Word was of the utmost importance. Traditional approaches also meant that missionaries taught Greek at theological institutions overseas and that national believers were taught by the missionaries—and sometimes even needed to dress like the missionaries. When church planting movements thinking emerged, its proponents were enlightened and hopped on board this new approach that emphasized house churches, church planting, lay leadership, and obedience. In many ways, the new approach *was* more biblical; but more importantly for proponents, it was *way* more fruitful.

There are also differences among believers belonging to the same group, such as in 1 Corinthians 8 and Romans 14 where some believers are able to eat food sacrificed to idols and others cannot eat without damaging their consciences. Some believers are simply more conscientious than others. Some—and probably a lot of proponents—are go-getter types. They do not question; they just *do*. Others who are more reflective, skeptical, or conscientious may be more inclined to question or wrestle over these issues. Most likely, there are all types among proponents and critics who have been influenced by a combination of the above factors.

Some have used the word "fad" when discussing church planting movements or specific movement methodologies (Rhodes 2022; Richard 2021; Stiles 2020). While I am not convinced that the "movements movement" is a fad, I do see characteristics of a *subculture*. Movements circles have certain defining Bible verses, such as Matthew 24:14 and 2 Timothy 2:2. They have their own values, slogans, and terminology. Common acronyms include CPM, DMM, T4T, MAWL, POPs, DNA, and DBS. They talk about "streams," "stages," "generations," "*oikos*," "Four Fields," "catalyzing," "starting groups," and "going slow to go fast." They are down with "tradition" and tell us that "if you keep doing what you have been doing, you keep getting what you have been getting." (This was presented to me as an acronym whose meaning we were supposed to try and guess: IYKDWHBDYKGWYHGB. Needless to say, no one figured it out.) As a whole, how much do all of the above speak of the values of being *biblical* and faithful to Scripture in contrast to the value of *reaching a goal* and the *means of getting there*?

Among North American missionaries today, it is easier to fit in as a movement proponent, not a critic. While proponents have surely been frustrated at times over the lack of people who really "get it" and who fail to embrace movements thinking and methods, the trend in the last two decades has been increasingly towards movement approaches. If there is an "in" approach in evangelical missions today, it would be church planting or disciple-making movements.

## The Need for Discernment

Some proponents have prioritized the results-orientation of movements over biblical faithfulness because they see God in it. For example, that belief is evident in the subtitles of two movement books: *How God Is Redeeming a Lost World* (Garrison 2004) and *The Movement of God to Disciple the Nations* (Farah 2021). God is behind the movements, and we simply need to join him in what he is doing, the thinking goes. Movements are taking place among historically resistant peoples. Miracles are occurring and people are being healed. How could anyone argue with this? If you oppose movements, you are opposing God (Terry 2019). As Adam Coker has noted, “To doubt the validity of CPMs is treated as an affront to the sacred” (Coker 2016, 87). And how can one argue with the reported numbers? We hear of these in another popular movements book, the subtitle of which is *How Hundreds of Thousands of Muslims Are Falling in Love with Jesus* (Trousdale 2012). The thinking is that movements are a work of God’s Spirit and that God is moving in amazing ways. How then could anyone question what God is doing?

The subtle problem is that almost any spiritual movement or phenomenon has elements of God and other elements that are not. Pentecostalism has spread around the world like wildfire, but many have rejected the doctrine of a necessary second baptism of the Holy Spirit manifesting in speaking in tongues. The charismatic movement has also been a highly successful movement, but many have been critical of certain phenomena in the movement, such as “holy laughter” and being “slain in the Spirit.” Megachurches have grown into the tens of thousands, but many have rightly questioned the prosperity teachings and lavish lifestyles of many megachurch leaders. The church in Corinth was a work of God, but what about their divisions, sexual immorality, and views on spiritual gifts? So then, if we say that God is the author of movements, does that mean we take everything that goes along with movements, or do we address and reject the areas that do not line up with the Scriptures and our consciences?

The problem for proponents is that faithfully following certain scriptural principles can create difficult conditions for a movement to occur. If missionaries become gospel proclaimers rather than discovery facilitators, then you become too reliant on the missionary and may be hindering a grassroots movement. If churches are required to have male elders who have been believers for some period of time, then you have to wait for the availability of men and enough time for them to be somewhat mature. If you insist that a church has to have biblically qualified leaders, then you have to wait for people to meet those qualifications. For many proponents, these conditions are trivial and secondary to the greater purpose of making Christ known.

## Anticipating Reactions

Some readers may object, “But your definitions of positions that are ‘biblical’ are not the same as mine.” Very well, since clearly not everyone has the exact same theological views, and there can be a wide range of evangelical views that are considered “biblical.” A central factor in the discussion is the degree to which the Bible or movement thinking has shaped one’s views. One example is Southern Baptist missionaries’ views on gender roles in leadership. While the Southern Baptist Convention has maintained a complementary position on the role of women in leadership (*Baptist Faith & Message* 2000 n.d.), many Baptist missionaries have switched to a more egalitarian position—not out of a study of Scripture, but in light of movement thinking and practice (Irons 2022c).

Some proponents will retort, “But the CPM approach is the most biblical *and* fruitful approach.” Such a claim, however, is a loaded one and dependent on how “church planting movements” and “biblical” are defined. Some proponents need to examine their approach in the light of Scripture to know how “biblical” it is. Others are not aware of what the criticisms are. For example, how many proponents can name not just one, but two, three, or more reasons that critics have criticized the methodology of finding persons of peace? It is highly unlikely that proponents are aware of all the issues—just as critics do not have insider knowledge of all of the movements that have taken place on the ground.

Some proponents may also argue, “Well, you just haven’t heard of movement XYZ.” Again, this suggestion is nothing new. I have been encouraged to connect with various individuals involved in movements and to read certain books that include movement case studies. I have read and/or reviewed Garrison (2004), Farah (2021), Coles (2019), and Larson (2018), all of which contain examples or case studies of movements. Even so, I have yet to come away thinking, “Now *that’s* an example of a biblical movement!” Most have issues with biblical qualifications of leaders and a biblical definition of church, the very issues that conflict with what makes movements *move*. Most of these books are actually excellent case studies on the very point I am making, that *fruitful* trumps *biblical* in movements methodology. Even if an example of a critic-satisfying, biblically faithful movement existed, it would still be problematic that 99 percent of the others contained questionable elements that have been introduced by proponents and movement methodologies.

Some readers may find the proponent-critic dichotomy overly simplistic. I agree: it *is* difficult to neatly fit everyone into two camps. There are differences of opinion among both proponents and critics. I do not agree with what some critics have said, and proponents do not endorse everything other proponents say. Some critics argue on pragmatic rather than biblical grounds, and other critics are just naysayers who doubt any report of God working in this world. Some critics will become proponents and some proponents will end up critics. Some may be on the fence about such matters, actively applying movement methods but with doubts and reservations. The situation is indeed complex. Even so, the proponent-critic dualism takes into account much of the data available and has much explanatory value. (As an aside, I suspect proponents will also like my “simple” approach here—if only I had a count of the number of times I heard that word used in training events!)

Some proponents have employed a piecemeal approach to movement methods, taking the good and discarding the rest. They may also consider themselves movement proponents. I see nothing wrong with this since there is much good that can be learned from movement proponents, such as their passion for the lost and emphasis on prayer. There are also many aspects of movements methods that *are* biblical, such as house churches and the rejection of the seminary requirement for church leaders. As long as what is biblical does not infringe upon what is fruitful or reproducible, much about movements is biblical. I would also suggest that if someone has rejected particular movement methods and replaced them with biblical alternatives, within this article’s simplistic critic-proponent model, they sound more like critics than proponents. For someone who wants to see a movement occur but also emphasizes that it must occur biblically, the main motivation appears to be what is *biblical* over and above what is *fruitful*.

### **A Concluding Word on Relationships**

While harsh words like “sinister” and “heresy” have been used by critics to label movements or movement proponents, they are not the prevailing view (DeMars & Berger 2021a; *Mark Dever on*

*Church Planting Movements*, 2019). More frequently, critics see proponents as fellow believers with “good motives” or “good intentions” (Johnson 2010; Kocman 2021; Morris 2014). Based on extant resources, it would seem that most (if not all) involved in the church planting movement debate see one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. But if proponents and critics belong together in Christ, then their relationships should be characterized as such. There should be mutual love, respect, and prayer for one another. We should not pass judgment on each other or put stumbling blocks in front of one another (Rom. 14:13). We should do what leads to peace and mutual edification (Rom. 14:19). But we must also encourage each other by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it; we should encourage and rebuke one another in the Lord (Titus 1:9, 2:1, 15).

In truth, I believe we would all be better off if we complemented rather than opposed one another. We need the inspiration of the go-getter, proponent types who are reclaiming God’s kingdom in this world. But we also need the consciences of reflective or even outspoken critics who want to glorify God in the methods used—and to overhaul methods that are “unbiblical.” We have a mutual mission to accomplish, and we have different gifts—and *values*—that can be used in this mission and in building up the body of Christ. Let’s employ methods of reaching the world that are both fruitful *and* biblical.

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