Review

T4T: A DISCIPLESHIP REREVOLUTION, **BY STEVE SMITH & YING KAI**
Ying Kai and Steve Smith

Reviewed by George G. Robinson
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Introduction

There have been several key methodological shifts in missions over the last few decades, each in some way aimed at the church fulfilling her role in the completion of the Great Commission. In the 1960s Donald McGavran was a catalyst in initiating the *Church Growth Movement*, which sought to see the gospel extended among receptive peoples through the application of sociological research. In 1974 Dr. Ralph Winter gave a watershed address at the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization effectively helping missionaries to gain much-needed insight on engaging the remaining *unreached people groups* of the world. Then in the late 1990's missiologist Dr. David Garrison released a pamphlet documenting a phenomenon known as *church planting movements* (CPM), from which he derived certain "universal elements" that are present in places where there is a rapid multiplication of churches planting churches. Each of these paradigm shifts in missions has served to shape the missiological landscape as we enter the 21st century. Since the time of Garrison's initial publication at least one such CPM has emerged in East Asia, which claims millions of new believers and tens of thousands of new churches.

Two of the men that God has used greatly in that CPM, Ying Kai and Steve Smith, have recently published a book that documents their methodology. The purpose of this review is to highlighting some of *T4T's* strengths and weaknesses within the context of the existing spectrum of opinions related to CPM practices.

Superheroes and Skeptics: The CPM Debate Continues

Change agents usually are not without their detractors. One of the most recurring complaints regarding each of the paradigm shifts noted above is that they were driven by pragmatism. Before I received my copy of *T4T* I was already hearing a buzz from some along similar lines. To be forthright, I live with my feet in two worlds. I have invested over a decade of my life to facilitating evangelism, discipleship and church planting in South Asia where a CPM *ethos* abounds. For half of that time period I have also kept an

office in academic circles. I have friends and colleagues on either end of the spectrum of the debate surrounding the alleged pragmatic foundation underlying CPM practices and I respect each of them, even while often disagreeing. It has been questioned whether the emphasis on speed and quantity in church planting would eclipse the establishment of healthy churches.[1] The response by advocates of CPM has often been to claim that urgency necessitates a simpler, more reproducible church be planted so that we can "finish the task" as quickly as possible. Though *T4T* was not necessarily written to be a response to those criticisms, it does seem that the book's emphasis on discipleship and training leaders is in some ways an attempt to lay those criticisms to rest. (21)

Part One of the book focuses on "The Foundations of T4T" and features anecdotes from both Kai and Smith's fields of service. The authors couch their stories in references to the miraculous growth of the 1st century church declaring triumphantly that, "It's Happening Again!" My first thought is that this book is not likely to change any opinions among the CPM skeptics. The emphasis given to "Why It's Working", which is the title of chapter 4, only serves to exacerbate the claims of a pragmatically driven methodology. And for that reason I think that the authors could have left out what I perceived as the "marketing" elements that were so prevalent throughout. They really add fuel to that flame stating things like, "Perhaps you just need a slight adjustment for the next stage of kingdom advance. T4T may provide that 10 or 20% tweak that God will use to spark a movement. Perhaps you need a complete overhaul! No matter where you are between a tweak and an overhaul, T4T can help." (44) When I first read those words the infomercial voice of Billy Mays was ringing in my head. At times this promo-like language comes across like an inconsistent sales pitch. For example, the authors tout, "T4T is an all-inclusive process" (36), but then go on to say, "T4T is not a silver bullet" (37) and, "T4T is not a magic solution." (42) I got the feeling that these final two qualifiers were merely placating and that the authors do in fact view the principles within T4T as being the key to success regardless of context. One would certainly get that impression from the way the book starts. By opening the book with such a predictable report card of the *numbers*, skeptical readers might potentially miss some of the later emphasis that is dedicated to the health of the movement using factors that under gird the numerical growth.

I have personally long been cautiously optimistic with regards to rapid church multiplication; in that I not only believe it *can* happen, but that it *does* happen. The caution that tenders my optimism is rooted in a desire to see fruit that remains. But the following statements in the first chapter had me reading skeptically out of the gate: "*Within weeks* of arriving, Ying began to see *results* we could scarcely have imagined." "These *numbers* were logged in faithfully . . . "; "The *numbers* didn't portray the full extent of God's kingdom growth there." "*Within a few months* of the beginning of the movement, *over 12,000 people* had been baptized and 908 small churches formed." (Emphasis mine) Growth is good. Rapid growth can be good . . . or it can be cancer. While I am not saying that the CPM documented herein is cancer, there are substantial

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[1] See David Sills book *Reaching and Teaching* for an example of this type of critique of CPM methodology.

reports that heresies are overtaking some of the churches within the movement in an equally rapid fashion. One respected leader working in the region has estimated that house churches are being overtaken by heretical groups at a rate of up to 1,000 per month.[2] This type of phenomenon beckons those related to the CPM there to question why churches are so susceptible to false teachings, which are a cancer.

To be fair, the goal of a CPM, and I think that the authors would agree (as would Garrison) is to see churches planted as rapidly as possible without altering the DNA of what it means to be a healthy church. And for that reason I believe that it is far better to emphasize the biblical and theological foundations for the principles that *T4T* is espousing, adding personal anecdotes along the way. Instead, I felt as though the book was built upon the "success" of the current movement with frequent references back to the bible, and a less frequent reference to the preservation of sound doctrine as the lifeblood of the church.[3] When they did refer back to biblical foundations, they portrayed a false dichotomy between Jesus' teaching model for discipleship and Paul's training model. (77) The authors insist that in a post-Pentecost era that we are to follow Paul's model. This distinction begs the question of what the original 11 Apostles were to do in light of Jesus' command to "go make disciples" considering they were not often privy to Paul's so-called improved methodology.[4] It is not as though we have nothing to learn from Jesus' earthly interaction with his disciples. His discipleship was both relational and content-oriented, as was Paul's.

Part Two of the book is devoted to emphasizing "The Process of T4T" as a means to achieve rapid church multiplication. This section prominently features the "how" of process rather than the "what" of content. The stated goal of the process is, "To build multiplying generations of trainers." (93) The usual reference to 2 Timothy 2:2 is made emphasizing the four generations of impact through Paul's discipleship. However, Paul's emphasis was not on the process in that verse, but rather on the preservation and faithful passing on of content. Granted, I agree with the authors on many of their processes and took away several helpful things from this section. However, it could be argued that if the content were changed from the gospel to an Amway product, some aspects of the process would look quite similar. Kai's earlier advice regarding evangelism derived from

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[2] One such heretical group that is known to hi-jack evangelical house churches in the region is known as the Eastern Lightning. Time magazine ran a story on this group here: http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,181681,00.html

[3] See Titus 1:5-9 where Paul speaks of the generational effect of new elders/overseers passing on sound doctrine in the churches they lead. Paul then goes on in 1:10-16 to highlight the devastating effects of multiplication of the wrong doctrine. This is why I believe that biblical ecclesiology is so crucial in CPMs and must not be underemphasized.

[4] By this argumentation it seems that the authors would disagree with the premise of Robert Coleman's classic *The Master's Plan of Evangelism*. In that book Coleman asserts that our presence in disciple making is not replaced by the in dwelling of the Holy Spirit. Rather the role of the Spirit is to illumine and apply the word that is passed on to the new believer.

his experience of buying breakfast from a slick salesman was disappointing. (54) Kai's advice to train everyone without selection would not have been true of Jesus' own ministry. (116) And the advice to fill one's calendar with training events reminds me of my post-college experience in multi-level marketing.[5] (121) Activity does not always equate with productivity. In fact, my observation has been that missionaries (and pastors) have an innate tendency to become busybodies and grow spiritually stale having nothing of worth then to pass along. I am appreciative of the "Three-thirds Process" which provides a balanced and healthy approach to training and discipleship by prioritizing time to "look back" for accountability, "look up" for learning, and "look ahead" for application/reproduction. (127) And while I understand that the "bold parts" highlighted in chapter 8 (accountability, vision casting, practice, and set goals & pray) are the ones most likely to be overlooked, I think that the authors may be unintentionally communicating that "doing" is more important than "being". (150)

When it comes to the "church" in church planting movement, it is not entirely clear from the first two-thirds of the book how the authors define the term. If it is not clear what you are aiming to reproduce in your frequent trainings, then how do we know that what is being reported is in reality a healthy biblical church? Emphasis in chapter 9 is placed upon multiplying "groups" that may or may not become churches. The authors claim that focus should be upon continual launching of new groups rather than growth of existing ones. (155) Such a rigid focus would never allow time for ecclesial development and is tantamount to an overreaction to the inward focus of so many western churches in our day. A group that only focuses externally on launching new groups will never be able to obey the myriad "one another" commands or enjoy God's good gift of body life. Granted, the final section of the book answers some of the aforementioned critiques.

In Part Three of T4T the authors get down to the nuts and bolts of application by providing the framework for developing ones own contextualized T4T "package." Maybe its just semantics, but using the word "package" seems to carry on the preoccupation of marketing this approach as a product of sorts. And while I appreciate the clarity with which the authors define the gospel (albeit they overlook the grand narrative context), I was disturbed again by Kai's example: "Congratulations! You are God's child! The problem is that you are lost . . . ". (217) I understand what he's getting at and there may even be a hint of precedent in the parable of the Lost Son, but I find it difficult to "congratulate" someone for being a wicked, rebellious idolater. No matter how you define the gospel, if you are not clear on the sinfulness of sin and that just wrath of God that looms, you wind up providing therapy rather than Providence.

On the other hand I was pleased by the emphasis of the "non-negotiables" of baptism, church, communion, perseverance, and the Great Commission in the 14th chapter and following. (225-6) As the author's understanding of what makes a healthy church comes into clearer view, I found that key aspects of my own cautious skepticism were being addressed. Statements like, "New believers must be gathered into churches"

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[5] I'm obviously not the first one to make this connection because the author states plainly on page 147, "It is not a multi-level marketing sell."

(249) brought balance to prior statements like "Don't be overly concerned about what you call the T4T groups" (162). The insistence of churches being biblically faithful and culturally reproducible as the only two guidelines governing CPM is a good reminder for us all. (250) I was also delighted with, albeit awfully late in a book devoted to facilitating CHURCH planting movements, the 3 C's of church: Covenant, Characteristics, and Caring leaders. Though these 3 are given only brief explanation, the very presence of biblical guidelines for clearly defining "church" stands in stark contrast to the many other books in the field of church planting. (252-3) I was also impressed by the careful exegesis given to Paul's slightly different requirements for elders in his epistles to Timothy (established churches) and Titus (new churches in pioneer areas). (265-272) Looking back, that may very well be one of my best "take away" lessons from *T4T*.

Conclusion

The authors are not claiming to be missiological innovators with *T4T*. Instead, they say that the "re-revolution" that is taking place in East Asia is in many respects reflective of, and built upon the principles modeled by those in the 1st century church. I, for one, believe that we need not sacrifice church health in order to see church growth – even of the rapidly reproducing variety. *T4T* is an attempt to feature some biblical principles that missionaries in our day often overlook. While some of the anecdotal examples and frankly, some of the pragmatically grounded semantics in *T4T* are likely to have detractors moan, "This is just more of the same old CPM rhetoric", there is much about this book that brings the task of establishing healthy reproducing churches more clearly into view. I do believe that the book could have afforded to shed about half of its pages with the remaining parts being organized a bit more strategically, but then again you as the reader are likely to say the same about this review. Overall, I would recommend the book with the caveat that it be read in a different order than the authors have organized the content. I do pray that missionaries will take many of the biblical principles herein and apply them, and God just may birth a movement as they do.