

## Review

### ***REACHING AND TEACHING: A CALL TO GREAT COMMISSION OBEDIENCE***

M. David Sills

#### **Reviewed by J. Snodgrass**

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In 1997, the Foreign Mission Board (now International Mission Board) of the Southern Baptist Convention made a radical shift in the way it carried out its work around the world. One part of that shift was to begin to transition out of seminaries, many of which had been staffed and funded by the FMB for generations. The rationale behind these moves was a re-allocation of manpower and resources toward the “Unreached.” Older models of established, institutional mission work gave way to new methods that pursued “Church-Planting Movements” (CPMs)—rapid, reproducing waves of indigenous churches planting churches. Depending on whom you ask this was either a great step forward or an ill-conceived mistake.

Dr. David Sills, as is clear from his book *Reaching and Teaching: a Call to Great Commission Obedience*, would place himself in the latter category. A former professor at one of those very seminaries in Ecuador, he has written a book detailing the perils of abandoning theological education in world missions. The problem, he says, is not unique to the IMB. According to Sills, the state of missions around the world is characterized by a desire to “reach, preach to, and leave as many people groups as possible as fast as possible” (12). Theological education is being neglected on a massive scale in favor of rapid methods that reach new people groups. The result, Sills warns, will be a tidal wave of anemic, syncretistic churches throughout the world. Sills’ stated aim, then, is to bring us back to a “biblically balanced missiology” (6). The obsessive “need for speed” he critiques must be balanced by a Biblically-driven method of instructing and equipping new believers and churches in the foundations of the faith.

Sills’ critique has some warrant. A desire for rapid growth and multiplication has, in some cases, led to the neglect of solid theological training. There is a great need for CPM methodology to be wedded to a responsible, Biblical approach to pastoral training. With regard specifically to Sills’ book, however, the question is whether he actually presents a “balanced missiology” as opposed to simply a wholesale repudiation of current church-planting methodology. Full disclosure: I am no objective observer in this debate. As one who cut his missionary teeth under the leadership of the author of the book on CPM, I have some obvious biases and history that I bring to the table. The same, of course, is true of Dr. Sills.

To begin with, Sills’ assessment of rapid-reproducing models of church-planting is consistently negative. He repeatedly refers to the pattern of “reaching, preaching, and leaving” as the defining

mode of missions today. The language used to describe current practices—getting people to “raise their hands,” “calling them churches,” and “the dust from the missionary’s vehicle”—is rather flippant. The “need for speed has led missionaries to preach a simple gospel message through an interpreter, get a show of hands, call them a church, and move on” (126). Sills calls this type of behavior “irresponsible” and—given the way it is described throughout the book—there are few who would disagree. Missionaries in church-planting work themselves are described variously as those who “are attracted to the excitement of living and working on creative access platforms that require security procedures as if they were international secret agents” (133); who “have left harvest fields through the years to follow the direction of their financial supporters’ and candidates’ interest” (148); who “give in to the need for speed and are enamored with missiological methodologies that are devoid of theological reflection” (157). Despite caveats and qualifiers like “some” or “many,” the cumulative effect is to paint modern-day missions and missionaries in a very poor light. Sills’ Preface notwithstanding (“Missionaries are my heroes...”), it seems that there is little in the world of CPM work that he would find commendable.

The question is whether this is an accurate portrayal of field realities. As one with some hands-on experience in the region where CPM methodology came home to roost, I can say that much of Sills’ assessment is a caricature of how the work is taught and carried out. For each example he offers of the dearth of Biblical teaching on the field, there is an equally salient counter-example of church-planting practitioners taking great pains to equip and train national leaders in the faith. While it could be argued that this is simply anecdotal, the same criticism could be made of many of his references (“One missionary reports that...” (45); “I have seen a common thread...”(18); “I recently met a number of Nigerian students...” (20)). That is not to say that his wealth of experience and the testimonies of others are not valid, it is simply to say that the sweeping scope (and strong critique) of his book calls for a correspondingly deep engagement with the documentary evidence. For instance, Sills refers to this testimonial twice in describing the current state of the Church in China: “One missionary reports that Chinese churches know how to do evangelism, but they do not know much more than that (45, see also 163).” Perhaps we should ask for a bit more than the testimony of a single missionary to describe a movement of upwards of 100 million believers.

Sills’ treatment of the motivation behind the rapid church-planting approach shows a similar tendency toward over-simplification. In his conclusion, Sills explains what he takes to be the primary motivation for the skewed approach to missions: “the belief that Jesus provided the formula for facilitating His return [*in Matthew 24:14*]. Therefore they have redefined the task of missions to be that of reaching and leaving as many as possible as fast as possible in order to complete the task...they justify this by the belief that if they can hasten His return, the untaught will not remain so for long; Jesus will be coming soon.” (215). Sills’ conclusion here is simply overstated. None of the major treatments of CPM-type methodology (David Garrison’s CPM [book](#), Steve Smith’s T4T [book](#), the IMB’s *Strategic Directions for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*) even

reference Matt. 24:14. The “need for speed” he consistently denounces is founded not upon a “Left Behind” approach to missions but upon this simple fact: millions upon millions of people are without Christ and are on their way to a Godless eternity. Matthew 24:14 theology does play a role in the UPG-driven missiology of some, but it has never been a major part of IMB frontier methodology. Unreached missiology is more driven by Matthew 28, Romans 10, Romans 15, 1 Peter 3:9, and Revelation 5 & 7. It can be summed up in this: a commitment to take the Gospel to those who have no access to it.

UPG-focused missiology flows from this concern for overwhelming populations of lostness, hence the “need for speed.” This reality of incomprehensible lostness is given short shrift in Sills’ treatment of the Unreached movement. The speed issue is the focus of most critiques of CPM and I must admit that I, too, would be very skeptical of CPM methodology were it not for a very important source—the many New Testament accounts of the rapid advance of the Gospel. There we see thousands coming to Christ in a single day (Acts 2 & 4), a church being started over the course of a few weeks (Acts 17), elders being appointed after 1-2 years of intermittent contact with a church planter (Acts 14), and the “completion” of an apostolic calling in a specific area over the course of 15-20 years (Romans 15). The urgency of rapid-reproduction approaches is therefore not without strong Biblical precedent. That is not to say that CPMs are above reproach. As Sills points out, evaluation of some CPMs has revealed some considerable shortcomings (though it should be noted that CPM assessment is inherently problematic).

Some CPMs do suffer from an uncomfortably high church/believer attrition rate and some tend to de-emphasize Biblical patterns of church leadership. A quick look at the Apostle Paul’s “results,” however, could yield a similarly unfavorable assessment. Many of the new churches he started became hotbeds of sin (1 Cor. 5:1-2), syncretism (Gal. 4:8-11) and outright heresy (1 Cor. 15:12-19). This issue of church health assessment is a recurring one in the CPM discussion and one that Sills returns to frequently throughout the book. He says that “the most frequent consequence [of rapid-reproduction models] is that churches left in the wake of such efforts either fall apart rapidly and disappear or degenerate into dysfunctional gatherings with unbiblical doctrine and practice” (12).

First of all, this sweeping indictment calls for some supporting evidence. The IMB has conducted many [assessments](#) of CPMs and resulting church health throughout the years, the details of which are available to those who are interested. Secondly, there is something to be said for the difference in working in pioneer fields and in more established regions. We should expect significant growing pains as the church takes root in new environments. This very real difference is often overlooked by those who come from and minister in more established church settings. The tendency is to evaluate work in pioneer regions by the same standards of maturity used in “harvest” settings, which often leads to an overly-critical assessment. For that matter, how many “true” churches would be found in America if church discipline is really one of the “marks of the true church” (56)? This is not an appeal to lower the standards for Biblical church; it is simply to say that we should allow new churches to grow into Biblical maturity. As we have

seen, Paul struggled consistently to nurture infant churches and believers into adulthood. And yet in his work he did not dampen the sense of urgency by calling for his partners or churches to “slow down their breakneck pace of ever-increasing speeds (171).” Instead, he sought to provide ways for teaching and training to keep pace with the growth and expansion of the church so that he could continue to take the Gospel where Christ had not been named.

A truly “biblically balanced missiology” will seek to integrate Paul’s urgency for reaching the lost (Rom. 15:20) with his equally-vibrant passion to see new believers and churches instructed in right doctrine (Gal. 4:19). This is Sills’ stated aim as well, though as we have seen his line of argument serves rather to pit current church-planting practices against theological education. The issue is not whether we need more and better theological training. I think we can all agree that we do. The real question is how will we provide it? The key ingredients that CPM thinking brings to the discussion on theological training are a focus on lostness and, consequently, a commitment to multiplication and reproduction. There must be a new way forward in missiology that brings these formidable and thoroughly Biblical ideas into the realm of theological education. While lamenting the abandonment of national seminaries, Sills himself affirms the need for non-residential, contextually-appropriate methods of supplying field-based theological training that produces trainers who can train others (as per 2 Tim. 2:2). In many places—even here in CPM Central—these types of training are already being implemented. To name just a few: many CPM practitioners teach through the Baptist Faith and Message 2000 and have their church planters develop their own doctrinal statement; David Garrison’s [teaching](#) on Healthy Church has become a staple in many CP training curricula in South Asia; and many teams are using a valuable tool to help new churches assess their health. These are just the start of what will hopefully be a burgeoning movement of reproducing, field-based theological training models.

Providing good, biblical training that can undergird mass movements of the Gospel is absolutely vital in Great Commission work. The history of Baptist churches in America is instructive here as their early—and remarkable—growth came largely through the labors of those with minimal formal theological training. In fact, the recent book [The Churching of America](#) shows that growth of the Baptists occurred in inverse proportion to the percentage of pastors who had formal theological education (see particularly pp. 76-84). Again, the issue is not to downplay theological training; but we must be clear about the type of training we are talking about. Theological training that can be carried out at the edges of the work is the great need of the day. Many seminaries are in the process of pushing forward [programs](#) that do just that. These are necessary because, even in the face of the dire global need for theological education, the biblical answer—based on the example of Paul and the NT church—is still not to “slow down.” I would argue that Paul’s answer would be for those who have the calling for doctrinal teaching and training to “catch up.” The glory of God and the darkness of lost billions demand that we do so.