Addressing Theological and Missiological Objections to CPM/DMM

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In recent decades, many great works have been reported under the names “Church Planting Movements” (CPM) and/or “Disciple Making Movements” (DMM). Responses to these reports have ranged from great excitement to significant theological and missiological objections. In distilling a thorough review of articles and other discussion on the subject, I identified eight primary types of objections to the paradigms of CPM and DMM. To assess which types of objections seemed most widely and strongly felt, I surveyed four networks of missionaries and missiologists, covering a wide range of theological and missiological perspectives. Respondents gave their opinion about each of the objections as stated below, based on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = No opinion, 4 = Agree, and 5 = Strongly agree. Responses from 102 individuals yielded these results:

1. “Rapid reproduction is never promised in Scripture and often results in shallow discipleship. Targeting rapid growth may frustrate workers and tempt them to exaggerate numbers.” *Mean score – 2.9/5*
2. “The CPM/DMM paradigm does not adequately include the biblical role of teaching by spiritually mature teachers.” *Mean score – 2.7/5*
3. “CPMs leave open a door for false teaching because of inadequate theological training for leaders.” *Mean score – 2.6/5*
4. “CPMs have inadequate ecclesiology. (Their ‘churches’ may not be real churches.)” *Mean score – 2.5/5*
5. “The ‘Person of Peace’ strategy is not really taught in the texts of Matthew, Luke or Acts.” *Mean score – 2.28/5*
6. “’Obedience-based discipleship’ is a dangerous paradigm, running the risk of bypassing grace and teaching legalism.” *Mean score – 2.22/5*
7. “Discovery Bible Study (DBS) is not a biblical approach to evangelism. The biblical pattern is proclamation.” *Mean score – 2.2/5*
8. “It is missiologically unwise, even dangerous, to have unbelievers studying the Bible without any mature Christian present to guide their study.” *Mean score – 2.18/5*

As I address each of these objections, I will use the most generic term, CPM, to mean “a multiplication of disciples making disciples, and leaders developing leaders, resulting in indigenous churches (usually house churches) planting more churches….When consistent, multiple-stream 4th generation reproduction of churches occurs, church planting has crossed a threshold to becoming a sustainable movement” (Coles and Parks 2019, 315). DMM is sometimes used as synonymous with CPM but is more accurately understood as one of a number of *processes leading toward* a CPM.[[1]](#footnote-2) Since objections often use the terms CPM and DMM somewhat interchangeably, this response will likewise minimize the distinction between the two, preferring the broader term: CPM. God is also working in other movements to Christ (including some described in this book) that do not fit the above definitions of CPM or DMM. This chapter will focus only on CPMs/DMMs and objections aimed at those paradigms.

# Objection 1. Rapid reproduction is never promised in Scripture and often results in shallow discipleship. Targeting rapid growth may frustrate workers and tempt them to exaggerate numbers.

This concern includes four significant elements. I will address each in turn. First, “Rapid reproduction is never promised in Scripture.” This is true. We do a disservice if we promise (or give the impression) that if anyone just does the right activities, a rapidly growing movement will result. The promises of Scripture (such as John 15:5,7-8; Matt 13:23) focus on abundant fruit more than rapid fruit. Yet God’s Spirit inspired Luke to report positively: “The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith” (Acts 6:7). The Apostle Paul not only reported rapid growth among the Thessalonians but also commanded them to *ask God for rapid growth* in other locations as well. “Pray for us that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honored, just as it was with you” (2 Thess 3:1b). Thus, rapid reproduction comes to us not as a promise, but as a positive value in New Testament kingdom advance. Whatever else we say about rapid reproduction, we do well to reflect the *positive* view portrayed by New Testament writers.

Second, “Rapid reproduction…often results in shallow discipleship.” Shallow discipleship constitutes a sad reality throughout Christian history and in many parts of the Christian world today. A number of factors often contribute to inadequate discipleship. Among them could be named:

1. Weak initial commitment, with little or no connection to the lordship of Christ.
2. Profession of faith based on mere intellectual assent rather than true repentance.
3. Holding on to patterns of one’s sinful nature or culture incompatible with biblical commands.
4. Inadequate ongoing relationship with active and growing believers.

These factors have plagued the church in a wide range of cultures and contexts. Many disciple makers easily overlook the ways one or more of these factors may have influenced churches in their own home context. Yet they see all too clearly ways these factors impact some churches in the majority world (the fruit of past missionary labors). In the vast majority of such cases, the rapid growth that led to shallow discipleship was not the fruit of rapid *reproduction*. It was not spiritual generations of disciples reproducing disciples and churches reproducing churches.

The cases cited of rapid growth resulting in shallow discipleship tend to be first generation believers and churches, reached in great numbers with inadequate discipleship (generally involving one or more of the problems named above). Biological reproduction then yields second and third generation biological Christians with average discipleship similar to or less than that of the first generation. In contrast, rapid growth in the context of a healthy movement (4+ generations of churches reproducing churches) consistently produces disciples with a very passionate and contagious faith. This may contrast somewhat with discipleship produced by the slow growth to which most of us are accustomed.

CPMs generally have values that tend to address each of the four factors mentioned above. Discipleship through inductive Bible study establishes a pattern of regular study of God’s word, obedience to God’s word, and growing together with others. It also brings faith commitment based on a substantial process of grappling with foundational biblical truths and the need to turn from one’s old life to embrace the new.

CPMs normally have some pattern for follow-up and discipleship. Many have thorough curricula designed to equip believers with firm doctrinal foundations for their life in Christ. The rapid generational reproduction often seen in movements results naturally from healthy disciples reproducing healthy disciples. As already mentioned, shallow disciples tend to rarely reproduce (except biologically).

Third, “Targeting rapid growth may frustrate workers.” Rapid growth is not and should not be a goal *per se*. As Craig Ott writes, “Our concern is not so much for speed as for locally reproducible methods that in the long run can launch a self-sustaining movement” (Ott and Wilson 2010, 99). 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), abundant prayer, consistent evangelism by all believers, involvement of all believers in studying and applying God’s word, and empowering local leaders. The application of these means does not guarantee a resulting movement. God doesn’t promise a direct cause and effect in these matters, and neither should we. But faithful use of appropriate means concretely welcomes God’s Spirit to sovereignly do the work that only he can do, according to the Father’s good pleasure.

Simple low-cost approaches can multiply much more quickly than approaches requiring a 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. Things like learning a new language and culture, finding a person of peace, investing in leaders, then having a Discovery Group continue to the point of 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:* immediatelyobeying the Lord’s word, as did Jesus’ first disciples when he called them, saying: *"‘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). Disciples in CPMs frequently obey God’s word without delay or reservations. This results in rapid life transformation and rapid multiplication of believers and churches. In CPMs such Christianity is normal.

One mission leader claimed that CPM trainers caused people to labor under “unrealistic expectations.” However, CPM training normally encourages people to do their best to follow biblical patterns, while acknowledging that only God decides if and when a movement happens. As long as we don’t *promise* rapid growth, we need not fear disappointing workers. Prayer and effort toward a large, aspirational vision inspires more progress than a small, easy-to-achieve vision. Jesus encourages faith that moves mountains, so even if a particular ministry *doesn’t* end up yielding a rapidly multiplying movement, God is likely pleased with such faith, prayer, and effort.

Fourth, “Targeting rapid growth may tempt [workers] to exaggerate numbers.” The temptation to exaggerate numbers exists among *all* workers around the world, no matter what approach they use in their ministry: CPM, traditional, or otherwise. This problem looms largest any time funding is connected with reported numbers. This would include arrangements by which donors in a Western nation send funds to support a “national” church planter (Zylstra 2019; Throckmorton 2020). Although there are exceptions, CPMs generally avoid using outside funds to pay church planters. And many CPMs aim to prevent reporting problems through use of independent verifiers, asking when groups meet, and then occasionally making surprise visits.

# Objection 2. The CPM/DMM paradigm does not adequately include the biblical role of teaching by spiritually mature teachers.

To address this concern, we need to first ask: “How would God have us measure what constitutes “adequate” teaching by spiritually mature teachers?

I suggest the adequacy of biblical teaching can be measured by five factors:

1. Are people coming to true saving faith?
2. Are people maturing as disciples, rooted and established in Christ?
3. Does the teaching lead people to obey everything Jesus commanded?
4. Does the teaching raise up leaders equipped to teach others, as a solid foundation for generational growth and multiplication?
5. Are the churches becoming healthy biblical *ekklēsia*?

To the extent that trusted people have investigated the CPMs recognized by the 24:14 Coalition ([www.2414now.net](http://www.2414now.net/)), I believe the answer (to all five factors above) is “yes.” The teaching is adequate if the fruit is soundly biblical. Yet this leaves a few questions still remaining.

First: *Do movements have a role for teaching by spiritually mature teachers?* Yes, especially for teaching believers. Many CPMs have intensive teaching of new believers and leaders at all levels. For example, in answer to the question: “What is the role of teaching and preaching in the movement?” Bhojpuri movement leaders responded: “Teaching and preaching of the Word is a regular part of the believers’ gatherings. Teaching also takes place every month in the advanced leadership training, which gets passed on through the generations of the movement. Conferences and seminars also include teaching and preaching” (John and Coles 2019, 189). They also describe this consistent pattern of training: “We do teaching in different zones across North India. The training happens first in the zone office a few days a month, then the state office, then by areas, then by districts, then in sub-districts, then in villages. So everyone receives training” (2019, 163).

Second: *Is a human mediator always biblically required for people to be effectively taught by Scripture?* Most Protestants through the centuries have agreed with the Westminster Confession of Faith (Chapter 1.7) concerning the perspicuity (clarity) of Scripture: “...those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed, for salvation, are so clearly propounded and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them.”

We believe God’s Spirit can speak directly to his people by illuminating Scripture (when appropriately translated from the original languages). Human teachers can be helpful, but a human priesthood of intermediaries *is not required*. The Reformers strongly asserted this biblical principle against the claims of the Roman Catholic Church. Yet in some cases their modern followers have quietly established their own denominationally approved intermediaries. Misapplication of biblical examples has exalted the use of ancient communication models and produced suspicion of more reproducible models of hearing from God’s written word.

For example, when Ezra ascended his high wooden platform to instruct God’s people in the Law (Neh 8:1–8), most people were illiterate and written biblical text was extremely rare. When the Apostles did the teaching and preaching recorded in Acts, most people were still illiterate and most of the New Testament had not yet been written, much less compiled and made available to God’s people individually. Mass printing of the Bible was 1400 years in the future, and electronic distribution of Scripture was 1900 years in the future. The most effective method available for conveying God’s truth to a maximum number of people was one well-trained literate person speaking to an audience.

Preaching as structured monologue still has value in our day, but we now have incredibly reproducible means to put millions of people in direct personal contact with God’s word. Serious intent to proclaim God’s message to *all* the world’s peoples calls us to maximize “all possible means” (1 Cor 9:22) to make known the news of salvation. The goal of ongoing spiritual maturity also calls us to prefer approaches that do not encourage dependency on certain experts for spiritual feeding. The DBS approach used in many CPMs prioritizes learning from and applying the word of God, which is living and active to accomplish his purposes.

The emphasis of Scripture points us toward maximizing all people’s access to God’s word rather than worrying lest that word be insufficiently mediated through certain people. Our first priority should be Spirit-led application of Scripture by as many people as possible. Interpretation by mature teachers has great value, but we should not turn mature teachers into a bottleneck hindering the delivery of God’s word to those who need to hear it.

Third: *What is the biblical standard of spiritual maturity for teaching others?* Because of space limitations, I suggest the two most foundational texts: the criteria for elders found in 1 Timothy 3:2–7 and Titus 1:5–9. Titus 1:5 and Acts 14:21–23 describe identifying local people who meet these criteria as a next stage after initial entrance of the gospel among a group, and as part of the process of establishing a mature church. The requirement: “He must not be a recent convert” (1 Tim. 3:6) applies contextually within each local setting as the gospel enters new groups and places. When *all* local believers are relatively recent converts, this criterion takes a back seat to others, as Philip Towner notes in Paul’s instruction to Titus for the Cretans: “Titus's task of appointing elders from among recent converts (notice that in this case Paul cannot rule out recent converts…) must not have been easy” (2010, 229). In CPMs, the local believers showing most spiritual maturity are identified for spiritual leadership.

Fourth: *What do we mean by teaching?* Some of this second objection might arise from CPM proponents’ own use of the word “teach.” In explaining the importance of *discovery* in the DBS approach, trainers often say something like “outsiders facilitate rather than teach.”[[2]](#footnote-3) In that context, the intent is clearly to eschew the common approach of “authoritatively explaining the meaning of a text.” However facilitating a DBS also constitutes a form of non-directive biblical “teaching.”

The Greek word *ginōskō*, used over 200 times in the NT, involves *experiential* knowledge, not just accumulation of facts. Teaching means “to cause a person to know something….Teach, instruct, and train mean to cause to gain knowledge or skill….Teach can be used of any method of passing on information or skill so that others may learn” (Merriam-Webster 2020).

How does that happen? Based on personal experience in classrooms and church, most of us tend to assume that “teach” means a one-way lecture: one person talks and everyone else listens quietly and absorbs more or less of what they hear. But people learn in many ways, and one-way lecture turns out to be among the least effective – both for retention and for life change. Much of the teaching described in the New Testament was interactive. We see this in Jesus’ interaction with his disciples and in the 13 New Testament uses of the word *dialegomai* (discuss, dialogue). We find 10 of *dialegomai*’s occurrences in Acts, describing Paul’s approach to proclamation (i.e. Acts 17:2, 17; 18:4, 19; 19:8, 9).

CPMs employ a variety of teaching methods. Many movements use inductive Bible study patterns. Some use more directive teaching, but still in an interactive format. Most movements gather leaders in coaching groups for peer coaching and mutual learning. All have various levels of specific curricula they use in discipleship.

Fifth: *Is there no role for teachers in CPM?* Yes, there is a role, but it needs to be relationally grappling with everyday life, empowering local people from start to finish. Our criteria for choosing teacher’s roles needs to be what most advances God’s kingdom, not what most satisfies the desires of those who like to teach. We certainly see in Scripture numerous descriptions and examples of teachers and teaching. CPMs aim to apply this gift in the ways that will best produce mature, active, and reproducing disciples.

# Objection 3. CPMs leave open a door for false teaching because of inadequate theological training for leaders.

This objection hangs on two key concepts. First, one’s definition of adequate vs. inadequate theological training. Second, the assumption that the primary or only prevention for false teaching is theological training.

What is our standard or criterion for adequate theological training? For some from an institutional church background, the obvious answer would be: “An official degree from a recognized and biblically sound seminary.” Or perhaps: “At least a diploma or certificate from a recognized and biblically sound Bible school.” Yet these traditional answers fall short in at least three vital ways.

First, none of these criteria are mentioned anywhere in the Bible. That doesn’t make them *wrong* answers, but it calls us to think well beyond our first gut reaction if we intend to find God’s answer. Adequate training in the New Testament took place in a variety of ways and contexts. Unlike the modern academic model of training, heavily dependent on voluminous books and resources, the Apostle Paul described his training model as easily reproducible to multiple generations. “*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 Tim 2:2).

The criteria Paul listed for church leaders in 1 Timothy 3 included “*able to teach*” along with over a dozen other criteria. And the characteristics given to Titus include: “*He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it*” (Titus 1:9). These abilities can be nurtured in numerous ways, through interaction with mature teachers and God’s Word. The leaders of movements value biblical education. But they do not wait for disciples to complete a degree before equipping them to entrust God’s truth to reliable people. And those reliable people in turn convey the trustworthy message of the gospel to others also.

For example, Victor John says: “We also teach through everyday life lessons. Deuteronomy 6:7….This teaching happens through being together in everyday life, not just sitting in a classroom” (John and Coles, 161). He adds:

Many ministries do a lot of theoretical training, with Bible college and so on, but they don’t give people a chance to practice what they learn. We teach one thing then say, ‘Go and do it.’ So whatever they learn, they immediately apply in their lives. That’s why they learn more. We teach a little, then they do it and learn from their experience as well as from our teaching. That enables them to really work effectively. When they learn from us, that starts the process. When they start implementing what they learned, they learn many more things, because God is teaching them. (John and Coles, 165)

CPMs aim for theology (knowledge of God’s truth) to consistently lead to life application. Orthodoxy consistently links to orthopraxy. Ott notes: “Church multiplication occurs most rapidly where church planting does not require theologically trained and ordained pastors but is led by teams of lay or bivocational workers….this is the New Testament pattern” (Ott and Wilson, 385).

Second, most CPMs have a “pattern of sound teaching” passed on to believers in the movement. Disciples’ eagerness to study the Bible often leads to development of increasingly substantial organic theological training. For example, Shodankeh Johnson (Forthcoming) describes how the training process in their CPM in Sierra Leone developed into a four-year college. It started as a Bible study in 1998, which grew into a one-year certificate course. Within a few years the government approved the course curriculum for four-year degrees. The school now offers four-year degrees in theology and numerous other subjects. Extended biblical training plays an important role in many CPMs.

Third, brief reflection demonstrates that theological education does not necessarily prevent false teaching. In the Protestant denomination in which I was raised, for example, I heard numerous sad stories of (and sermons from) pastors whose faith was, in my opinion, *less* biblically sound *after* seminary than before. Abundance of theological knowledge can be very useful but doesn’t *guarantee* ability to stimulate healthy biblical faith in others. Many modern heresies come from theologians with doctorates from seminaries. Heretical movements often arise from a teacher so talented that his or her followers develop the habit of uncritically accepting and repeating whatever he or she says. Notable examples would include Jehovah’s Witnesses, Christian Science, and Mormonism. Historically, many heretical groups have been named after the gifted teacher who effectively taught erroneous interpretations. Examples would include Apollinarism, Arianism, Sabellianism, Marcionism, Montanism, Henricians, and Pelagianism.

The leaders of movements nurture sound biblical faith through interactive study and application of God’s Word. Every disciple is trained to grapple with the Scripture and its application for themselves. They are also trained to ask one another “Where do you see that in the Bible?” This constitutes one of the best preventions for heresy. Movement leaders also generally have some connection with the global and historical body of Christ. This provides points of comparison and safety in the broad interpretation and application of Scripture within the movement.

To avoid false teaching, disciples in CPMs also consistently apply the “one anothers” of Scripture, providing mutual accountability in the way of the Lord. They make a regular practice of living out verses such as: “Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another” (Col 3:16); “Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing” (1 Thess 5:11); and “But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called ‘Today,’ so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness” (Heb 3:13).

Many Christian leaders assume correct preaching becomes correct theology of listeners. However studies show that to be false (Weber 2018). Listeners in the pew never have to confront their wrong theology. In CPMs, believers wrestle with God’s word at a deeper level than just hearing it. In small group discussion about the Bible, issues tend to rise to the surface more quickly. People either grow in sanctification or they leave. One research project concluded: “No significant patterns of heresy were found among those dozen movements” (Sergeant, Loc 2730–41).

We must acknowledge that in the fallen world of this age, God’s people will always be subject to the temptation of false teaching. No amount or caliber of theological training can “error-proof” the people of God. We see in the New Testament that the very best of teaching didn’t prevent all false teaching. Paul’s approach included his “pattern of sound teaching” (cf. 2 Tim 1:13, also Rom 6:17). It also involved ongoing relationship – albeit from a distance (through letters) – to address various issues as they arose. And Paul depended heavily on local pastoral leaders guarding the flock (cf. Acts 20:28–31; Titus 1:9). Leaders of movements commonly apply similar preventative measures to guard against false teaching.

# Objection 4. CPMs have inadequate ecclesiology. (Their "churches" may not be real churches.)

Interestingly, “Many of the churches planted by Paul would not meet what many today might consider a minimal standard for being an established church. Nevertheless, he addressed even the most problematical congregations as ‘the church.’ This forces us to consider more carefully what genuinely constitutes a local church in the biblical sense” (Ott and Wilson, 4). This objection (“Their ‘churches’ may not be real churches”) reflects a shortage of accurate information about the realities of CPMs. In no case have I seen analysis of an actual CPM paired with criteria for a “real church” which yielded a negative conclusion. The objection appears to be based on one or more of three factors:

1. Lack of information about actual CPMs
2. Criteria for “church” inordinately dependent on Western church traditions
3. Confusion of CPMs with “Insider Movements,” many of which *do*, in my opinion, have inadequate ecclesiology. See Waterman’s critique of Insider Movement paradigm’s ecclesiology and characteristics of biblical *ekklēsia* (Waterman 2011, 460–67; Waterman 2016).

A pattern used by many movements has become known as “church circles” (Smith 2012,22–26). This tool enables leaders to track the development and maturing of groups into churches, using the biblical descriptions in Acts 2:36–47 and other relevant New Testament texts. These circles commonly include elements such as: baptism, God’s Word, the Lord’s Supper, fellowship, giving and ministry, prayer, praise, evangelism, and leadership.[[3]](#footnote-4)

Throughout the NT and the first 200 years of church history, Jesus’ followers most commonly gathered for worship in homes. So although this gathering pattern is no longer the most common, hopefully no one (explicitly or implicitly) views house churches as “not real churches.”

A survey of various criteria or marks of the church has yielded only one major “mark” that some could well argue as lacking in CPMs. The Belgic Confession, for example, lists the first of the “marks by which the true Church is known” as “If the pure doctrine of the gospel is preached therein.” This could provide critics with a reason to exclude CPM ecclesiology from their reckoning as churches – if they interpret “preached” in the traditional sense of an ordained male pastor standing behind a pulpit, delivering a one-way message to a passive congregation of lay people. In its context, this would have been the intent of those who crafted the Belgic confession. We do well to ask whether some modern leaders are (consciously or unconsciously) applying this criterion when then they accuse CPMs of inadequate ecclesiology. Some might say CPMs don’t have “preaching” of the Word, because there’s no pulpit, no expert on a stage with a microphone giving a long monologue, and no passive listeners.

The presentation of God’s Word in CPMs often follows a different pattern. On some occasions a leader may expound biblical truth to a mostly silent audience. However, deeper engagement with Scripture more often happens in an interactive fashion (as, for example, in DBS), with everyone actively involved in thinking, discussing and applying the truths of Scripture. They likely don’t have a pulpit, and they don’t assume one person has all the right answers. They focus on applying God’s Word, often with clear accountability to one another for obeying what they have received. Movements prefer to have disciples who consistently *apply* God’s Word rather than passive listeners to weekly polished monologues. But I suspect that the shortage of weekly Sunday “preaching” in many CPMs leads some, whether implicitly or explicitly, to conclude that the weekly (or more frequent) gatherings in CPMs are not “real churches.”

One version of this objection can be found in the article “9 Marks of a Healthy Church,” (9Marks 2020) the first of which is “Preaching,” defined as “An expositional sermon takes the main point of a passage of Scripture, makes it the main point of the sermon, and applies it to life today.” Expository sermons are my own preferred preaching style. However, what if this definition of “preaching” were considered the only proper presentation of Scripture to God’s people? Not only a great many CPMs, but the vast majority of traditional churches (including evangelical churches) worldwide might not meet the criteria of “healthy churches.” I suggest we do better to focus on God’s goal (his word understood and applied in life) rather than just one specific and limited means to that goal.

One respondent to my survey of these eight objections commented: “Serious Bible students…would probably ask if the attributes of early church evident in Acts 2 and Acts 4 and Paul’s many one another commands are occurring in a given movement. And undoubtedly the answer they would find is yes. Then they would ask if there were elders, and find the answer is yes. And they would ask about a good grasp on the truth, and the answer would be yes. Then they would ask if they are building unity with other segments of the body of Christ, and the answer would be yes. . . Yes that is, where sufficient time on each of these has allowed development of them, I would estimate 1-2 years sometimes.”[[4]](#footnote-5)

As noted by this respondent, the process of groups becoming churches takes some time. Yet each CPM has a concept of what they consider to be a church (*ekklēsia*), and they use criteria generally consistent with the characteristics found in the New Testament (Waterman 2011).

# Objection 5. The “Person of Peace”[[5]](#footnote-6) strategy is not really taught in the texts of Matthew, Luke or Acts.

Granted, some advocates of CPM have claimed more clarity of *detail* for the “person of peace” strategy than is explicitly taught in the Gospel texts. Evidence for this may be seen in the slightly varying descriptions of (or criteria for) a person of peace given by various CPM trainers. However, a consideration of relevant biblical texts together does reveal a distinct pattern often used for apostolic entrance into new places. When Jesus sent out the 12, he commanded them: “search there for some worthy person and stay at their house until you leave” (Matt 10:11).

New Testament scholar D.A. Carson, in his commentary on Matthew, remarks on this sending: “It is surely not unnatural for Jesus to treat this commission of the Twelve as both explicit short-term itinerary and a paradigm of the longer mission stretching into the years ahead….the Twelve become a paradigm for other disciples in their post-Pentecost witness” (Carson 1984, 242). We see a very similar instruction in Jesus’ sending of the 72 in Luke 10: “Whatever house you enter, first say, ‘Peace be to this house!’ And if a son of peace is there, your peace will rest upon him. But if not, it will return to you. And remain in the same house…” (Luke 10:5–7a, ESV). This pattern shows up again in many stories in Acts as well, for example Cornelius (Acts 10), Lydia (Acts 16:14–15), and the Philippian jailer (Acts 16:31-32). Over and over an open-hearted person of influence opens the doors to bring their family into faith in Christ.

The New Testament does not present this as the *only* way to reach people in a new area, but it does portray this approach both in divine command and apostolic example. Throughout church history, God has used key people to effectively open doors for the gospel to those within their sphere of influence. Thousands of everyday examples are lost in the mists of history, but we have records of numerous high-level key people whose conversions led their sphere of influence (in some fashion) to Christ. Among those could be mentioned Ezana of Axum (northern Ethiopia and parts of four other nations in the fourth century A.D.), Mirian III of Iberia, Sigeberht of East Anglia, Peada of Mercia, Olof Skötkonung (King of Sweden), Ranavalona II (Queen of Madagascar), and Pōmare II (king of Tahiti).[[6]](#footnote-7)

God is now using the growth of movements, especially in the majority world, to remind individualistically-oriented Westerners of a biblical truth. People from non-Christian backgrounds don’t always come to faith as an isolated individual, standing against everyone else they know. People often come to faith along with family members or significant others who connect with their faith journey. We see this in New Testament descriptions (note frequent use of the word *oikos*) as well as in majority-world contexts of the twenty-first century. The most notable exception to this globally common pattern of faith journeys is Western culture in recent centuries.[[7]](#footnote-8)

Sadly, this individualistic exception seems to have strongly flavored the experience and purview of most critics of CPM. I posit that we need not quibble about details of the description of a person of peace. Neither should we claim that finding a person of peace constitutes the *only* right way to begin apostolic work in an unreached place or group. However, given Jesus’ teaching and the examples in Acts, plus historical and contemporary evidence of the strategic importance of a “key person,” it seems unhelpful and counterproductive to object to movement catalysts being trained and encouraged to look for a person of peace in pioneer locations.

# Objection 6. “Obedience-based discipleship” is a dangerous paradigm, running the risk of bypassing grace and teaching legalism.

If “obedience-based discipleship” meant attempting salvation through obedience, that would be deeply problematic. However, the phrase is intended to simply reflect one foundational element of Jesus’ command to “make disciples,” namely: “teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matt 28:19–20). Warrick Farah comments:

Much of contemporary forms of discipleship are based on a Western education model of church, where people were seen as lacking the right doctrine and theology. This is certainly important, but it is also incomplete. The focus of Jesus in Matthew 28 seems to put the emphasis on behavior. Learning to do all that Jesus ‘has commanded’ necessarily entails a biblical outlook on life, where word and deed, plus the spiritual and the social, are combined into one coherent unity. (2020, 6)

CPMs commonly lay a foundation for faith through chronological study of “Creation to Christ” passages.[[8]](#footnote-9) This imitates (in abbreviated form) the pattern God used through thousands of years of Old Testament history. We know that: “God…announced the gospel in advance to Abraham” (Gal 3:8) and God’s grace received by faith undergirded the law (Gen 15:6; Ex 19:4–8). Also, “the law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith” (Gal 3:24). New Testament proclamation of the gospel built solidly on centuries of calls for obedience. God spent thousands of years calling people to obedience before giving a *clear* revelation of salvation through Christ and command to be baptized in his name.

Taking a few weeks (or months) for a brief chronological study through Creation to Christ passages lays a vital foundational understanding of the true nature of God, of sin, of the need for the blood sacrifice to forgive sin, etc. I hope we all agree that whenever *anyone* reads the Bible and seeks to obey God based on what they have read, that’s a good thing. Granted, only the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit makes consistent God-pleasing obedience possible. An unbeliever’s attempts at obedience can never bring or earn salvation. Yet from a biblical vantage point, it seems advantageous if people learn from the start that the appropriate response to God’s word is to *apply* its teaching. This stands in stark contrast to the too-common pattern suggesting that the proper response to God’s word is simply to analyze, explain, and intellectually comprehend it. Accurate comprehension is exceedingly valuable when it leads to obedience. But as an end in itself it falls far short of the discipleship to which Jesus calls us.

The phrase “obedience-based discipleship” is never presented as a substitute for “grace-based discipleship” or “love-based discipleship.” In fact, David and Paul Watson extensively expound Jesus’ teaching on the essential connection between love and obedience (Watson and Watson 2014, 39–45). They note the clear relationship: “If you love me, you will obey what I command” (John 14:15) and interact with Jesus’ exposition of this theme in John 14:16–25 and John’s reiteration of it in 1 John 5:3–4). However, contrary to Watsons’ unhelpful phrasing: “Jesus equated ‘obedience’ to ‘love’ in the Gospel of John” (Watson and Watson, 39), I would clarify that Jesus presented obedience as a *result* of love (not equal to it). The Watsons themselves reflect this more accurate connection a few pages later when they explain: “Our motives for being obedient determine if we are doing so out of love or legalism” (Watson and Watson, 45).

The phrase “obedience-based discipleship” is intended to underline a contrast between discipleship characterized by active obedience versus discipleship characterized by *mere knowledge* or cognitive assent. Christians too often treat religious knowledge as an end in itself rather than embracing the fact that greater knowledge of God’s truth should consistently lead to greater obedience. Scripture gives a stark warning that simply adding knowledge runs the risk of *increasing* sin! “If anyone, then, knows the good they ought to do and doesn’t do it, it is sin for them” (Jas 4:17). For this reason, DMMs stress the importance of obedience in discipleship, not mere knowledge.

Does obedience-based discipleship, despite good intentions, bypass grace and teach legalism? As nearly as I can discern, this concern does not stem from any research among DMMs, finding evidence of disciples trying to be justified by obeying laws. Neither does it seem to emerge from evidence that salvation by grace through faith is *not* being taught or applied in DMMs. In fact the story sets chosen for DBS emphasize that we *cannot* please God by obeying the law, thus we need a Savior. One sample set of DBS stories includes studies such as the following – giving clear lessons on commitment and discipleship:

* Who is Jesus? John 1:1-18
* What does Jesus offer you and ask you? John 14:1–7, 23–27
* What is the result of faith in Jesus? John 3:3-21
* What is your response? Acts 2:36–41, Psalm 32:1–5, Romans 10:9–10
* What is baptism? Romans 6:1–4, Galatians 3:26–28, Acts 10:44–48

Objections seem to come primarily from two concerns. First, the truth that God’s grace, rather than obedience, must be the basis (foundation) of discipleship (e.g. Pratt, 9–10). For this reason, I would acknowledge that the wording “obedience-based discipleship” is less than ideal. In its attempts to convey one thing (obedience rather than mere knowledge) it has caused confusion by unintentionally giving the impression of implying something else never intended (obedience rather than grace or love as the foundation of discipleship). It appears the concern has arisen from ambiguous wording of the concept rather than lived reality among CPMs.

Second, objections have arisen from a concern about obedience being presented chronologically as an early step in discipleship, prior to presentation of the gospel of grace (e.g. Kocman). This concern seems to have been exacerbated by use of the phrase “disciple people to conversion” (Trousdale, 43), based on the example of Jesus’ years of interaction with his disciples before they realized his divine nature or knew of his atoning death for their sins. To speak of “discipling” unbelievers can cause misunderstanding, since a person cannot be Jesus’ disciple until they know about Jesus, and commit themselves to *follow* him. For that reason, while I affirm DMM’s Bible-based *process* leading toward commitment, I prefer to avoid the confusing phrase “disciple to conversion.”

The essential point is that, for most people, coming to saving faith involves a process – more than just a momentary decision. The process is especially vital for those lacking prior biblical knowledge or background. We must consider: “What essential ingredients should that process include, to bring a person to saving faith?” Certainly the work of God’s Spirit drawing the person (John 6:44), and certainly God’s word: “Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ” (Romans 10:17). So we ask: “Do we want unbelievers to hear and consider God’s word?” (Yes!) And, “When a not-yet-believer hears and considers God’s word, what response do we hope for?” Do we hope for mere passive listening until God’s Spirit completes the drawing process and the person makes a faith commitment? Or do we hope that God’s word inspires some life response, even during the process, however inadequate it may be?

A Creation to Christ DBS (for example) never offers or promises salvation based on applying God’s word prior to faith. The issue of justification, which comes only by faith in Christ, begins to be addressed (as noted above) when a chronological overview of salvation history arrives at that point. Especially for Westerners who came to faith from some type of Christian-context background, we need to recognize the *process* normally required for those from a non-Christian background to come to faith (however short or long it might be). To the extent we recognize the needed process, we become less worried about the non-salvific steps involved in a person or group’s gradually-growing grasp of the *foundations* of saving grace, prior to its full revelation in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Since for some, the wording “obedience-*based* discipleship” has become a stumbling block, I prefer the phrase “obedience-*normal* discipleship,”[[9]](#footnote-10) highlighting this wonderful characteristic of CPMs. Believers consider obedience to be *normal:* it’s just what (of course!) a person does when they love and follow Jesus as their Lord. It’s not obedience *rather than* *grace* as discipleship’s foundation. It’s obedience to God’s word *rather than mere knowledge* of God’s word as the normal pattern of discipleship.

# Objection 7. Discovery Bible Study is not a biblical approach to evangelism. The biblical pattern is proclamation.

Quite a few respondents commented that this objection contains a false dichotomy. The leader of a movement in SE Asia commented:

The biblical pattern is proclamation, as understood in biblical context. Many of the examples we see in the Bible are not large groups (we tend to associate proclamation with large groups), but there are more discussions with small groups of people, some of which start as dialogs with individuals, than there are large group proclamation.

The fact that we stress DBS does not speak of the proclamation we do in large groups. . . . This is very common but is a different strategic leg outside the DBS groups. . . .

The fact that we stress DBS does not speak of the Transformation Dialogs we do preceding and ramping up to DBS groups. These may start with individuals but we try to move them into dialogs in groupings about spiritual truth and this leads to DBS gatherings.[[10]](#footnote-11)

In other words, the New Testament shows proclamation taking place in a variety of ways and contexts. And in modern-day movements, proclamation can and is happening in many ways. DBS is but one approach. If by “not biblical” one means “not explicitly mentioned in the Bible,” the same accusation would apply to altar calls, tracts, Bible distribution, radio, TV, satellite broadcasts, Jesus film, and designated church buildings. The accusation would reach far wider than probably any objector intends. If by “not biblical” one means *contrary* to biblical teaching, this objection becomes simply another way of stating the following concern.

# Objection 8. It is missiologically unwise, even dangerous, to have unbelievers studying the Bible without any mature Christian present to guide their study.

The first response to this concern must be to reference what has already been said about the perspicuity of Scripture. This concern seems based on the flawed assumption that God’s word and God’s Spirit are insufficient to convey God’s truth; considering a human intermediary essential for accurate communication of God’s message.

Jesus, by contrast, spoke favorably of people being taught directly by God as a doorway to saving faith. “It is written in the Prophets: ‘They will all be taught by God.’ Everyone who has heard the Father and learned from him comes to me” (John 6:45). A prime way the Father draws not-yet-believers to Jesus is for them to listen to and follow God’s Word. Merrill Tenney comments: “Verse 45 indicates that God would do his drawing through Scriptures and that those who were obedient to God’s will as revealed in the Scriptures would come to Jesus” (Tenney 1981, 76). D.A Carson comments on this verse: “Jesus in the Farewell Discourse promises the coming of the Holy Spirit – with a *teaching* role (14:26–27; 1:12–15)”(1991, 293). And the Pulpit Commentary offers this insight on the verse: “Direct teaching by God is the prime requisite of any spiritual apprehension, even of the mysteries of Christ the Revealer . . . Divine teaching by the Spirit of the Father and Son is the preliminary . . . to believing on Christ” (Exell and Spence 1950, page number needed).

This objection seems to reflect too little confidence in God’s ability to speak by his word and his Spirit. It seems, simultaneously, to reflect too *much* confidence in human teachers, and our accuracy in mediating God’s truth. It also reflects a misunderstanding about the DBS process. Perhaps the normal role of a more mature believer in the DBS process has sometimes been insufficiently explained. Unbelievers are not left entirely on their own with no guidance whatsoever in their study of Scripture. Normally a more mature believer plays some role in the group’s interaction with Scripture. This is seen first in the choice of recommended texts to study (such as a Creation to Christ sequence or texts relevant to a specific felt need of the group). It is then normally seen in the regular mentoring (shadow pastoring) of one or two members of the group. In most cases, the believer meets on a regular basis with this person(s) to discuss the next text to be studied and hear any concerns or questions that have arisen from the previous study. In this way, the group’s journey to faith is shepherded by someone more mature in the faith, yet in a way that allows the group to do their own contextualizing of biblical truths while trusting the Holy Spirit to “guide them into all truth.”

# Conclusions and Recommendations

Having discussed all eight of the most common types of objections to CPM, I offer a few conclusions and recommendations.

1. Many problems *attributed* to CPMs have been based on hearsay or observation of ministry that actually does not fit the criteria of a CPM (consistent, multiple-stream 4th generation reproduction of indigenous churches). In some cases, accusations have been multiplied by inappropriately lumping CPM/DMM together with Insider Movements or other non-CPM approaches, as in this example: “The overemphasis on speed and pragmatism in the Church Planting Movement, Disciple-Making Movement, Insider Movement, Short-Cycle Church Planting, and their ilk is a dangerous result of bad theology” (Buser and Vegas 2020).
2. Many objections to the CPM paradigm arise from a shortage of information about what actually happens in CPMs. In many cases, those involved in CPMs have hesitated to share much information with the wider world, lest overzealous Christians or antagonistic non-Christians rush in and damage the ministry. Only in very recent years have security-sensitive reports made accurate information about movement dynamics more widely available. More study is needed, and we all do well to maintain a posture of openness to learn more of what actually is (or isn’t) happening in CPMs.
3. Some objections arise from assumptions based on traditional church patterns in Christendom. We need not argue against or insult those patterns to observe a difference between what Scripture actually says and what we have previously *interpreted* it to say or chosen as contextual *Western applications*. CPMs invite us to see with fresh eyes the simplicity of the gospel message and the stunningly reproducible patterns that allowed it to flourish in early centuries and grow like yeast, and to allow the same kind of flourishing in many places today.
4. The wording of some CPM advocates and trainers has occasionally been less than careful. In some cases, weak exegesis and/or eisegesis has colored the justification of and training for CPMs. In other cases, overzealous advocacy for CPM has yielded statements inaccurately describing movement dynamics or reflecting unhelpful insult toward traditional church and church planting models. However, an inaccurate or unhelpful statement by an advocate does not nullify this verified reality: millions of unbelievers becoming disciples of Christ, in over 1,000 known CPMs globally.

God’s kingdom is greatly advancing through Church Planting Movements and Disciple Making Movements in our day. We see this advance most notably among many least-reached groups: those who had remained mostly untouched by the past “great centuries” of mission outreach. In many places, the harvest field is becoming a harvest force, as obedient disciples reproduce disciples and indigenous churches reproduce indigenous churches. Movements are often misunderstood, but when we place the realities of modern CPMs next to the commands and examples of Scripture, we find great encouragement in these apparent works of God. We look forward to seeing how these movements will endure and manifest God’s kingdom in the years to come.

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1. DMM “focuses on disciples engaging the lost to find persons of peace who will gather their family or circle of influence, to begin a Discovery Group. This is an inductive group Bible study process from Creation to Christ, learning directly from God through His Scripture. The journey toward Christ usually takes several months. During this process, seekers are encouraged to obey what they learn and share the Bible stories with other. When possible, they start new Discovery Groups with their family or friends. At the end of this initial study process, new believers are baptized. They then begin a several-month Discovery Bible Study (DBS) church-planting phase during which they are formed into a church” (Coles and Parks 2019, 315–16). Some other noteworthy processes leading to CPM include T4T, Four Fields, and Zume. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. As, for example, in Watson and Watson, 73. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Different movements might interpret the biblical elements in different ways, but each has commitment to biblical *ekklēsia,* as they apply the NT texts in their various contexts. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Included with response to survey, dated 10/25/2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. According to “Definitions of Key Terms,” “Luke 10 describes a person of peace. This is a person who receives the messenger and the message and opens their family/group/community to the message” (Coles and Parks 2019, 321). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Many of these were mass conversions of pagans into nominal Christians. Yet the influence of a key person undoubtedly brought to those within their sphere of influence a greater *proximity* to the message of Christ. The point of commonality is God’s use of a key person to open for others a door toward the gospel. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Note also that the modern Western pattern of individual conversion has happened primarily in contexts already nominally Christian, with individuals converting from nominal Christian faith to heart-felt Christian faith. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Different groups use different lists of Creation to Christ Bible texts. For two good sample lists of texts, see “Creation to Christ” at <https://www.acceleratetraining.org/index.php/resources/49-creation-to-christ/file> and page 2 of “The Discovery Bible Study Method (DBS)” at <https://intent.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/DBS.pdf>,. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Others have suggested “believing-obedience discipleship,” “love and obey discipleship,” and “love and obedience-based discipleship.” [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Included with response to survey, dated 10/25/2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)