

CONCERNING  
HUMANITY



SOUTHWESTERN  
JOURNAL OF THEOLOGY

*Review Essay:*  
*A Strange Sort of Orthodoxy:*  
*An Analysis of the T4T and*  
*CPM Approach to Missions*

Adam Coker  
International Mission Board

**Introduction**

When I joined the International Mission Board (IMB) over a decade ago, it felt in some ways like entering a foreign culture. I am not referring here to the Russian culture: a new language, different food, unfamiliar social clues, strict rules for standing in line, beginning a conversation, and making friends. This type of culture shock was to be expected and I was—at least intellectually—prepared for this cold and abrupt immersion into the unknown. I was less prepared for the fact that the organization itself had its own culture. Of course this is true of any large organization, but was new to me. Having previously been a public school teacher and bi-vocational minister, I had no experience in corporate business management, and the only Christian organization that I knew much about was the local church. This was something different. There were detailed policies and procedures to be followed, a well-developed structure relegating responsibilities and supervisory relationships, and a glossary full of acronyms to be learned. For an organization efficiently employing thousands of personnel in every region of the globe, it could hardly be otherwise, and this was actually a fascinating part of my entry phase. Before long, I was navigating the system like an old hat and fluently conversing about SCs, FPOs, STAS, and GCCs.<sup>1</sup> To this day, I am amazed by the sheer magnitude of the apparatus, and the caliber of people whom I get to call my colleagues.

There was, however, a third cultural shock that did not pass: a different way of thinking about evangelism, discipleship, and church-planting. The prevailing mentality in the IMB highly valued the rapid multiplication of small groups but seemed to me to disparage thorough, careful attention to doctrine or more traditional forms of evangelism and Bible teaching. While there was much that I appreciated in the new school of thought, there was

<sup>1</sup>These acronyms are commonly used by the International Mission Board. SC stands for Strategy Coordinator, FPO for Field Personnel Orientation, STAS for Stateside Assignment, and GCC for Great Commission Christian.

also much that simply did not sit right with me biblically. At first, I thought this might be nothing more than my own growing-pains as a new missionary, getting past the short-sightedness that comes with being a “preacher-type” (a term I remember hearing during our orientation). Like the taste of borscht, rolling my R’s, sending and copying the right e-mails to the right people, and doing my monthly expense report, I expected that I would grow accustomed to this as well. But I never did. When the fog of other culture-shock lifted, my discomfort with some of the methodologies being advocated remained. If I had known all of this ahead of time, would I have even joined-up? Hence the present article. In it I attempt to narrow what I perceive to be a mis-siological information gap between the foreign mission field and the pew. Whatever else this article may be, it is an invitation to dialogue.

Towards gaining an insider understanding of the church-planting ethos of our foreign mission-field culture over the past twenty years or so, a stateside Southern Baptist could go a long way by reading two books: *Church Planting Movements* by David Garrison and *T4T: a Discipleship ReRevolution* by Steve Smith and Ying Kai.<sup>2</sup> In this article, I review the latter of the two.

### T4T Methodology

It is important to test any ideology or methodology related to the gospel ministry based, first and foremost, on its faithfulness to Scripture, before commending its effectiveness. This is especially true when a method overtly claims to be biblical or, raising the bar further, purports to be a return to the real New-Testament way of doing things, getting back onboard to cooperate with “God’s vision”, etc., which this book does throughout. Such claims are effective in the sense that they demand our attention and obedience, but they also require that the author deliver on his sacred promise that what he is offering is a word from the Lord. (Which is what you are claiming when you say that something is “biblical” or “from God.”)

The book starts with a strong numbers-based appeal, citing the many millions of baptisms and thousands of new churches that have resulted from its approach. There are blanket statements about numbers that were “logged in faithfully and then recorded in the most conservative manner” (20), mention of researchers and their careful work and a table or two of numbers. It would be helpful if there were references to hard data that the reader could verify.

Perhaps I would not be so skeptical of the numbers if I had not spent more than a decade contributing to the system. For years, we turned in the numbers of those baptized by the Russian Baptist churches in our city as we were asked to do each year. I was surprised to hear reports presented to annual gatherings of the Southern Baptist Convention implying that our

<sup>2</sup>David Garrison, *Church Planting Movements: How God is Redeeming a Lost World* (Midlothian: WIGTake Resources, 2004); Steve Smith and Ying Kai, *T4T: a Discipleship ReRevolution* (Bangalore: WIGTake Resources, 2011).

missionaries are responsible for half a million baptisms overseas annually.<sup>3</sup> I remember the stunning moment when I realized the source of those figures. They came from me and from others like me who had been asked to submit the local Baptist Union's numbers around the world. Since then, steps have been taken to ensure that statistics reported by the IMB more clearly reflect the ministry of its own missionaries.<sup>4</sup> This experience cured me, however, of being dazzled by numbers related to overseas church-planting and evangelism.

If one assumes the numbers in T4T are all accurate, what is behind the numbers? To what extent are they actually a result of the approach advocated? What is meant by "church" and what do these churches believe? Surely any approach cannot be correct solely because of its numbers because numbers alone are not convincing. In the right situation, a numerical report can even be an encouraging testimony, but in itself is not a valid approach. Any model should be tested biblically and theologically apart from the numbers. In this case it is especially true since it purports to be the "rerevolution" back to real New Testament missions. If the approach is indeed biblically and theologically sound it should be adopted. If the approach is reasonable, but deals with practices not directly regulated by Scripture, then we may adopt it. If the approach runs contrary to the teachings of Scripture, we must reject it. With this methodological critique set, let us now turn to examine the approach of T4T itself.

## Positives

### Collection of Verses

Throughout the book biblical citations abound, and whether or not you agree with the author's interpretation of the selected texts, the inclusion of God's word is beneficial. I really enjoyed the sections from Acts at the beginning of the book's second chapter the highlighted the spread of the gospel across the Roman Empire. Just reading these selected verses was a joyful, worshipful experience that brought to remembrance how so many came to faith and began worshipping the Savior. Many other important passages related to discipleship and church-planting are included, especially from the Epistles. One of the benefits of this book is that it is written from the perspective of someone who has looked at the New Testament with evangelism and church-planting in mind. This makes the book's scriptural index a helpful tool (345-49).

### Simple Approach to Group Bible-Study

Like many others, this book advocates a simple, discussion-based approach to studying the Bible in the context of small groups. These groups

<sup>3</sup>See, for example, Southern Baptist Convention, *Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention* (Nashville: Southern Baptist Convention, 2005), 195.

<sup>4</sup>David Roach, "IMB addresses baptism numbers," *Baptist Press*, 21 March, 2016.

can be spiritually powerful and life-changing. By reading (or listening to) the Bible, responding to simple questions, and being encouraged actively to participate in informal discussions, believers and not-yet believers are exposed directly to God's Word.

### **Multiplication of Disciples**

The notion of the multiplication of individual disciples as one Christian investing his life in another person is not only beneficial but is also biblical: the Bible speaks of spiritual replication over and over again. The T4T/CPM approach errs, however, when it goes beyond this clear principle and creates derivative principles. For example, the authors seem to state, "Well, logically, if the multiplication of *disciples* is biblical, then so must be the multiplication of *groups* of them, and therefore *churches*, and, while we're at it, God must want the multiplication of *movements*." The derivative aspirations are not clearly delineated in the Bible and possibly could distract from the real task of making disciples (Matt 28:19-20).

### **Gospel Sowing**

Broad sowing of the gospel is advocated. Smith makes an important point that there is no command for soul-winners to prepare the soil before sowing (208). This perspective provides a good counter-balance to so-called "relational evangelism" that never quite gets around to presenting the gospel verbally and eliciting a response.

However, this could potentially neglect another truth. Being culturally sensitive, building relationships, investing time, and not treating people like projects are all good things. Assembly-line approaches to evangelism are problematic in that they typically do not take into account the spiritual process happening in a person's heart as he or she is confronted with the gospel by the Spirit. In light of the individual conversion testimonies actually found in the Bible, simplistic approaches to evangelism are too flippant. The gospel is too sacred and souls are too important for simplistic or flippant evangelism. For a balanced perspective on evangelism consider Sheldon Vanauken who was converted to Christianity after an extended period of long-distance mail correspondence with C.S. Lewis.<sup>5</sup> The timetable of someone's conversion is in the hands of God. Often it seems to have more to do with exposure to Scripture than anything else. The bold-letter exhortation that "you must include a call to commitment" with every single gospel presentation should be tempered with sensitivity to the journey the person is on (219).

### **Baptism as a Profession of Faith**

If there is one thing that does live up to the book's claim to be revolutionary in returning to New Testament norms, it is probably its perspective on baptism (237-47). In contemporary evangelism the outward profession of faith has been incorrectly removed from baptism to a simple act like signing

<sup>5</sup>Sheldon Vanauken, *A Severe Mercy* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980).

a card. Understanding the New Testament practice of baptism as a profession of faith actually helps us make sense of a number of otherwise difficult Bible verses. Salvation is a somewhat mysterious, spiritual act that God performs in an individual human heart. The New Testament authors utilize a variety of language to refer to salvation, such as “when you believed,” (Acts 19:2) or “repent and be baptized,” (Acts 2:38).<sup>6</sup> There is no biblical precedent for training someone to a level of spiritual maturity before allowing them to be baptized. Truth be told, this is a particularly difficult one for those of us serving among Russian Baptists, where events in their history have led to this practice. I appreciated this section of the book and am challenged by it.

### **Problems with T4T**

#### **Making the Method the Message**

Throughout the book the authors have made the method the message. Consider page 94:

2 Timothy 2:2 encourages multi-generational growth of trainers. The Great Commission itself commands us to teach others to obey all that Jesus commanded (which includes the Great Commission). Every generation is to be a training generation (94).

This short paragraph introduces the method of organizing training groups, witnessing to a certain number of people, and meeting for training (about starting more groups). The goal is to “Do whatever it takes to fill your schedule with training groups. This is the highest value activity of CPMs” (119). By contrast, Paul’s concept of multiplication in this text was not about reproducing the model, but about preaching the Word. What he intended for Timothy, Titus, and others to pass along was his teaching. He promised to send Timothy to Corinth to “remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach everywhere in every church.” (1 Cor 4:17). The content of this teaching was not group multiplication. Paul’s content was the gospel: salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ and exhortations to righteous living and right relationships. Paul’s approach was multifaceted but it was not about how to start groups or witness more.

The spiritual power of biblical discipleship is in Scripture, prayer, and the mutual encouragement of fellowship, not a multiplication model. In the T4T model, however, “the content is the most adaptable part of T4T” (92, 135). What is not adaptable in T4T is the mechanism. Each T4T session is divided into three thirds (look back/ look up/ look forward) which include a total of seven parts: pastoral care, worship, accountability (whether or not you witnessed), vision casting (how you are going to witness more), a new lesson from the Bible, practice (how you are going to witness), and setting

<sup>6</sup>Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are from the English Standard Version.

goals and prayer. Of these, accountability, vision casting, practice of the lesson, and setting goals are most integral to T4T (145).

### **Guilt-Based Motivation to Evangelism**

T4T by far is not the only offender of guilt based motivation for evangelism. I recall speakers at evangelism conferences telling stories of people dying with cancer and then adding the punchline: “What if you had the cure for cancer in your pocket and you refused to share it with people. What would that make you?” Or there was the missionary trainer sharing statistics about the miniscule numbers of believers among a certain city or people group where the vast majority are lost. As the speaker’s voice rose in a crescendo, he pointed his finger in the face of a startled trainee and shouted “and it’s your fault!” On the mission field guilt-trip appeals are plentiful. Guilt does not provide boldness and it certainly does not inspire compassion. It just inspires feelings of guilt. T4T is not different in this regard. One case study gives the example of Little Moe, a fourteen-year-old boy who shamed the older members of his family for not being bold about evangelism and this was just “the breakthrough needed for a movement” (117). The New Testament does not present guilt-based appeals for Christians to evangelize. For the T4T model, the “fruitful soil people” are those that go on to become movement catalysts (a category of leadership absent in the New Testament) (111–14).

### **Church Leaders**

T4T advocates a rapid turn-around time for the multiplication of churches and the training of leaders for those churches. “Every believer is empowered to start a new group or church” (155). The “20% principle” says that you train everyone (because anyone can plant and/or pastor a church) and roughly 20% will say “yes.” This should all happen the quicker as quickly as possible, resulting in very new Christians being assigned leadership over churches. This core-value of pursuing rapidity does not grow out of the New Testament, but out of expediency. But what qualifications does Paul give for a pastor?

The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church? *He must not be a recent convert*, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil. (1 Tim 3:1–7, emphasis mine).

Smith deals with this passage by insisting that this is just one possible variation of the necessary qualifications of an elder. He admits that “The prohibition about new converts . . . is very important—for *the right setting*” (266). According to Smith, this is the list of qualifications where there are mature churches, but the list of qualifications that Paul gives to Titus are the ones intended for new churches. This is an implausible treatment of the text. First, Paul makes no distinction between mature and immature churches anywhere in any of his epistles. Second, the two pastoral qualification lists are remarkably similar. Consider Titus:

This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you—if anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination. For an overseer, as God’s steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined. He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it. (Titus 1: 5–9)

In Timothy an elder must not be a novice. In Titus a potential elder “must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.” Clearly a pastor is to be one taught in the Word, holding firm to sound doctrine, and able to defend orthodoxy against heretics. Paul was not providing different qualifications for Ephesus and Crete. He was essentially saying the exact same thing to both Timothy and Titus using different words: an overseer needs to be spiritually mature and able to handle the Word well. In both lists, an exemplary moral life, strong family, and spiritual maturity are necessary prerequisites to pastoral ministry.

Jesus’ earthly ministry is also used in the book as an example of multiplying leaders. He did not call the disciples just to follow him but also to be “fishers of men.” Something important is left out, however. He said “Follow me *and I will make you* fishers of men” (Matt 4:19, emphasis mine). For a long time after the calling of the twelve, the disciples walked with Jesus, saw him preach repentance and heal the sick, listened as he taught publicly, spent special time with him that others did not get (when he explained the parables), and after a significant time of watching Jesus do ministry and listening to him teach, he told them, essentially, “go fish.” But even then, he started with a limited assignment: go into these cities by two’s, heal, preach, come back and report (Luke 10). There was a lot of water under the bridge before he finally said “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations” (Matt



28:19). It is important not to undervalue the significant time investment of real life-on-life discipleship.

In response to the anticipated concern over this teaching, the author writes: “Perhaps the biggest concern about a CPM is that it feels out of control. It IS out of control—out of *your* control. But instead, you have commended it to the *King’s* control” (163). This sounds right at first, but it confuses “relinquishing control to the Lord” with shirking our responsibility to make disciples. Paul got all the way to the appointing of elders before relinquishing, not out of a self-serving desire to be in control, but out of a sense of responsibility to leave the church with mature leaders.

This urgency to make the multiplication happen faster seems to have led to a number of errors, cutting biblical corners, and forcing certain interpretations.

### **Obedience-Based Discipleship**

Among these errors is a false dichotomy in biblical discipleship between knowledge and obedience (71–73, 78–80). True disciples are not those who know, but those who obey. According to this understanding, the important thing is to obey what you know, whether or not you know the whole story. The Bible, however, does not pit knowledge and obedience against each other in this way. Instead, spiritual maturity is described as a continuum of growth in a number of character traits, including knowledge. Here is what Peter wrote about the spiritual growth of the believer in Christ:

But also for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love. For if these things are yours and abound, *you* will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. (2 Pet 1:5–8 NKJV).

There is no competition between the character traits here. They build on one another. One verse that might possibly be misinterpreted that way is 1 Corinthians 8:1: “Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies.” Here, however, the contrast is not between knowing the right thing and doing the right thing, rather, it is a warning against pride. The contrast is between knowledge (in this case about meat sacrificed to idols) and love. At issue in both examples are internal character traits and our attitudes towards one another, not a concern for actions. This kind of discipleship leads to legalism and is man-centered rather than Christ-centered. Genuine spiritual maturity is more about character than performance. Even if doing the right things were key, what are those things? The T4T approach makes it seem like witnessing and starting new groups are the main commands of the New Testament. This simply is not true. Much more often in the New Testament are commands

about our attitudes, our treatment of one another, correct belief about salvation, avoiding moral sin, etc. The exhortation from James (quoted at the end of each chapter of T4T) to be a “doer of the word,” is a general exhortation to righteous living rather than a specific encouragement towards evangelism, group-formation, and training. The specific behaviors that James mentions include helping the poor, taming our tongue, avoiding pride, persevering amidst suffering, and various exhortations about how we believers should treat one another. These behaviors are barely mentioned in T4T. When we are growing in Christ in this way, the fruit will happen naturally. The valuable ones are those 20% who step up and do the right things. Everyone else—those who do not become trainers—are basically compared to the reprobates in the parable of the wheat and the tares. Though it is called “obedience-based discipleship” it really seems more like performance-based acceptance.

### **Starting with Pre-Existing Believers**

An odd issue within the methodology of T4T is the idea of starting with pre-existing believers. The traditional churches are supposedly those that are not doing discipleship correctly and T4T practitioners are going to come and show how it is done. But we begin by using their members and training them to do T4T (186–91, 286–91). (This is accomplished in six steps: Mobilize the saved, finding the lost, evangelism, discipleship, church starting, and leadership development). Everything is supposedly reproducible, except for the first step, which only applies to the missionary (286). Though it might seem to be easier to first lead the lost to Christ and then train new converts, T4T seems to promote starting with pre-existing believers either because lost people are difficult to find for training, or because studies have shown that groups started by the existing churches are the ones that multiply. The biblical justification given for this is Acts 6:7 where a great number of Jewish priests came to faith (72). It is difficult to imagine national believers appreciating this parallel, and it certainly is not good hermeneutics. It is actually a strange sort of compliment that is being payed to these pre-existing churches: their members have a substantive knowledge of the Bible, are committed to the Lord, and are the best hope of starting a movement. Similar traditional churches won missionaries to (or reared us in) the faith, gave them much of our biblical education, sent them to the mission field where they provide financial support (though they do not yet understand the whole CPM thing). And here we missionaries are: the ones with the answers about how to do things the right way, a new way, a way that neither our senders, nor our receivers, nor we ourselves have ever seen in real life. I did not get it when I heard it at Field Personnel Orientation 13 years ago and I still do not get it now. You either partner with the national churches or you do not. This approach seems like nibbling around the edges of the church. If I were the national pastor, I would not appreciate it.

### **General Mishandling of the Scripture**

The parable of the sower and the soils is interpreted to apply to our training of trainers (67–68, 110–11). According to the author, some people will be “good soil” and become trainers; others are not so good and are just workers, etc. This interpretation actually has nothing to do with the parable. The parable of the soils is about different responses to the gospel. Is the author saying that those who do not accept the T4T approach (or are not successful in it) are not saved? He seems to hint at this when citing the wheat and the tares in reference to those who do not become T4T trainers (69–70, 92–93, 159).

Finally, early on he makes the decision that “disciple” and “trainer” can be considered synonyms and used interchangeably (42–43). Explaining the passage in Matthew 10 where Jesus says “a disciple is not above his teacher,” the author writes, “We should use any English term that describes the true essence of the original Greek and Hebrew language of the Bible. In this case, we use the word ‘trainer’ instead of ‘disciple’ to denote that the follower of Jesus should be like his Master and emulate Him in all respects” (43). This is extremely forced. Beyond the fact that there is nothing here to suggest that disciple means “trainer,” this passage is not even talking about emulation. (Though, of course, we *should* emulate Jesus. There are plenty of passages that really do say that. Philippians 2 and Hebrew 13 come to mind). The purpose of the Matthew 10 passage is that we are *no better* than our Master and can expect no better treatment in this world than he received. We can expect to suffer like He suffered; be persecuted as He was persecuted; have our preaching rejected just as His was, etc.

These are some examples of taking verses out of context to support a preconceived point or reading more between the lines than the verse really says. This practice only weakens the overall argument of the book. This is especially true as it purports to be the “re-revolution” back to the New Testament. If this is really the case, it should not be difficult to make a case for the model biblically without doing damage to Scripture.

### **Listening is Not in the Program**

One of the mantras often repeated to new missionaries is this: when engaging a new people-group or coming to the field for the first time, enter as a learner. This does not seem to be part of the T4T ethos. Instead, every person you meet falls into one of two categories—lost or saved. If they are lost you witness to them. If they are saved you offer to train them (35–36). However helpful this sounds it leaves something out. Is it possible that some of those saved people you meet might have something to teach you? For that matter, in our interaction with the unsaved, listening is a good activity. In both scenarios, however, the faithful T4T practitioner is the one who has his say with every person he meets. What about listening? Whether interacting with the lost, partnering with believers, or communicating with other missionary colleagues, an inability or unwillingness to listen is not

only a character flaw, but ultimately a real limitation. I am afraid that this weakness may be fostered by this approach.

### **Conclusion**

T4T is one of the more recent manifestations of a church-planting ideology that has become ingrained in our foreign mission-field culture. I remember learning about CPMs as a new missionary. We were taught about various alternative notions of church. In these closed sessions, challenging questions were promptly shut down, and personnel were instructed that this was the program and they had better get with it. This was after everyone had already been through an appointment process that did not include this new teaching. New missionaries had been appointed by trustees who were largely unaware of this teaching, and had been educated in seminaries where they heard nothing remotely similar. After about a decade of most missionaries not seeing millions of converts and rapidly-reproducing “churches”—a season of significant burnout among the missionary force—the CPM rhetoric was toned down.

There is something vaguely familiar about the pro-T4T ethos today. Despite the fact that other more traditional approaches to evangelism and church-planting are actually seeing more results in Europe and Russia, belief in CPM ideology (of which T4T is a methodology) has become a strange sort of orthodoxy in some mission circles. To doubt the validity of CPMs is treated as an affront to the sacred. By contrast, solid biblical instruction, including pulpit preaching, is considered outdated and unnecessary. Concern for the spiritual maturity of a church’s leaders is undermined, and the concept of *church* itself has become rather fluid. Does this reflect the values or doctrine of the churches that have invested their prayers, members (both volunteer and career missionaries), and material support to the Task? It is only a matter of time before the rift between the senders and the sent surfaces. There is still time, however, for edifying dialogue between the two. Specifically, there is time for our stateside pastors to shepherd us again and speak into our methodology.

