

Someone Has to Be First

THE POWER of PRECEDENT and PROMISE

Steve Smith

Precedent and Promise

As a CPM trainer, I often get requests from missionaries to send them CPM case studies. Their preference is for a study that exactly matches their situation. I get requests like this:

Do you have an example of a CPM among educated, post-modern Middle-Eastern Arabs living in Western Europe?

I check my files. Nope. No case study for such a group. Their response seems to say:

Well, that proves it! A CPM can't happen in my people group!

Their logic makes no sense. The absence of a case study only proves that we don't yet have a CPM among that people group!

So, I send them a few case studies from China. To which they respond: "Don't send me these. Of course CPMs can occur there; that's *China!*"

What they don't realize is that CPM pioneers in China in the late 1990s were told: "It takes an average of four years to win a Chinese atheist to the Lord."

So, I send them a case study from India, of what is perhaps the longest-lived and largest CPM in the world, along with several other Indian case studies. They look at them and reply: "Don't send me these case studies. Of course CPMs can happen there. That's India. So many people speak English there!"

They don't know that the area where this large CPM emerged was historically called the "Graveyard of Missionaries" because of its unresponsiveness.

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So I send them case studies from several urban CPMs. And they reply: "Don't send these. Of course CPMs can happen in cities. There's so much anonymity there! You can get away with anything."

They don't realize that just a few years ago, mission leaders were searching for ways to reach cities and lamenting the absence of CPMs in these spiritual deserts!

As I'm beginning to get frustrated, they say what they really want are good case studies for reaching Muslims. So I send them a case study of the largest Muslim-background CPM in the world. But their response is: "Don't give me this. That's in South Asia. It's easy there!"

They don't understand that national believers in that movement gather offerings to rebuild burned down homes of persecuted Christians and assist Christian women who have been raped by their persecutors.

Finally, I send them a confidential case study of a Muslim-background CPM in one of the most restricted countries in the Middle East. The response I finally get on this one is: "Impossible. They must be lying!" (I've actually been told this several times.)

At this point I can see that for some people no amount of case studies will convince them. There is a basic disconnect in their faith in the very nature of God and His heart to reach the nations.

Someone has to be first

There are indeed places where we have no CPMs – yet. The number and diversity of places for which we DO have CPMs increases each year. Just a few years ago, I could count 10-15 CPMs. This past year I felt pretty confident about 30-35. But interactions with other CPM trainers and mission leaders indicate that the number is much, much higher. What we know of is just a fraction of what God is doing.

And there are also many other things which Jesus did, which if they were written in detail, I suppose that even the world itself would not contain the books that would be written. (John 21:25, NASB)

You must live with an assumption that God is doing more than you are aware of even when your heart doubts.

Today, we prepare new missionaries going to Asia to expect *that CPMs will develop*. It's not hard to create this expectation because we have good examples of CPMs in this area. We have precedent.

But there was a time when there were no CPMs in those places.

There was a time when there were no CPMs in China: *someone had to be first*.

There was a time when there were no CPMs in India: *someone had to be first*.

There was a time when there were no CPMs in Southeast Asia: *someone had to be first*.

There may be no CPM where you live — yet. Someone has to be first. Be that first one! In the beginning, when there is no *precedent*, *someone* has to be *first*.

Precedent

Fortunately, in some places in the world, we *do* have precedent for CPMs. These precedents are a great encouragement to believe that a CPM is possible and to provide a model for what it can look like. This is illustrated well in 2 Samuel.

15 Now when the Philistines were at war again with Israel, David went down and his servants with him; and as they fought against the Philistines, David became weary. 16 Then Ishbi-benob, who was among the descendants of the giant, the weight of whose spear was three hundred shekels of bronze in weight, was girded with a new sword, and he intended to kill David. 17 But Abishai the son of Zeruiah helped him, and struck the Philistine and killed him. . . . 18. . . after this that there was war again with the Philistines at Gob; then Sibbecai the Hushathite struck down Saph, who was among the descendants of the giant.

19 There was war with the Philistines again at Gob, and Elhanan the son of Jaare-oregim the Bethlehemite killed Goliath the Gittite, the shaft of whose spear was like a weaver's beam.

20 There was war at Gath again, where there was a man of great stature who had six fingers on each hand and six toes on each foot, twenty-four in number; and he also had been born to the giant. 21 When he defied Israel, Jonathan the son of Shimei, David's brother, struck him down.

22 These four were born to the giant in Gath, and they fell by the hand of David and by the hand of his servants. (2 Sam. 21:15-22, NASB, emphasis added)

This is a remarkable record: four giants killed by the hand of David's followers. Imagine the situation with the first one Ishbi-benob. The text says he was a descendant of "the giant" — most likely Goliath. David is

in battle against one of Goliath's sons. The giant has payback in mind. He spots David in the battle and rushes toward him with a new sword, intending to kill David and avenge his father's death.

But David is not the one who slays him. Instead, Abishai, one of the army commanders does.

Shortly thereafter, another descendant of Goliath, Saph, fights against the Philistines. David doesn't slay him either. Sibbecai does.

Later, a descendant of Goliath, bearing Goliath's name, fights Israel. David doesn't slay him either. Elhanan, son of Jaare-oregim does.

Finally, the greatest of the descendants who remains nameless fights against Israel. But David doesn't slay him. His nephew Jonathan does.

What's happening here? How can four men in succession slay vengeful giants when, less than a generation earlier, the entire nation of Israel cowered in fear? How did they learn to slay giants?

They had precedent.

David showed them how to slay giants; now they had a model and the faith to reproduce it. They knew how to beat giants! One after another, these men slew giants that only a generation before stopped an entire army.

That's the power of precedent. When you have precedent, you know how to find victory. The precedent gives you a model and the courage to attempt the same thing.

What seems radical today will be commonplace tomorrow. There was a time when CPMs were unusual. Now it seems like everyone is talking about them. That's the power of precedent.

But what do you do when you have no precedent?

Promise

There was a time in Israel when there was no precedent for killing giants. Less than a generation earlier, Israel was paralyzed at the very thought of approaching a giant in hand-to-hand combat. 1 Samuel 17 describes Goliath as a giant of a man who stood over nine feet tall (v.4)!

Saul stood head and shoulders above the men of Israel (1 Sam. 9:2), yet in his own strength he cowered in fear. For weeks, the Israelites camping in the Valley of Elah followed Saul's example, frozen with fear (1 Sam 17:10-11, 23-24). Each day Goliath taunted them. Each day they fled from the battle. They lived a *lifestyle* of fear and lack of faith.

When David saw this scene unfold he was appalled. David believed the promise that God would overcome

this giant because he understood the heart of God. God had promised to give His people the land and to give them victory over their enemies. In David's mind, it was Goliath against God. Goliath didn't stand a chance.

What do you do when you have no precedent? All you have is a promise. The promise is enough!

What's going through David's mind? We are not told, but he begins to shout the promise out loud to the enemy:

"You come to me with a sword, a spear, and a javelin, but I come to you in the name of the LORD of hosts..." (1 Sam. 17:45, NASB)

Whether fear was creeping in to David's heart or not, we don't know. But his heart meditated on the promise of God in the face of the enemy.

The promise is enough

At the end of the day, if you have no precedent for a church-planting movement, and all you have is a promise, it is enough. David acted on the promise and became a giant killer. His example served as a precedent (model) for others to follow. What's radical today is commonplace tomorrow.

Fifteen years ago, CPMs were only a dream. Today, CPMs are almost taken for granted in many places around the world. Why? That's the power of precedent.

But when you don't yet have a precedent, the promise of Scripture is still clear. God will harvest a great multitude from every people group and He will launch discipleship revolutions that will rock the world (e.g. Matt. 24:14, Rev. 7:9, John 4:35, Matt. 9:37-38, Mark 1:15-17, Matt. 13:23, Matt. 13:31-32, Mark 4:26-29; Acts 19:10). Live your life based on His promise. He wants to fulfill it in your place, at this time, through you!

Epilogue: Forgotten Precedent

Sometimes there *is* precedent from history but we have forgotten it. CPMs are not simply a modern-day phenomenon. Throughout church history, there have been CPM-like movements.

Sometimes, there *is* precedent from history but we have forgotten it. Such was the case with the story of David and Goliath.

According to Joshua 15:14, 400 years earlier, Caleb, at the age of 85, drove out three giants from the mountain God had promised him. The ancient record indicates the race of giants Caleb defeated were even larger than those that David and his men encountered.

Forty years before that, Moses and his army defeated Og of Bashan (Num. 21:33-35). According to Scripture, Og was even bigger still. The Bible says Og slept in a 13-foot bed (Deut. 3:11); remember Goliath was *only* nine feet tall! Og was so frightening that God appeared to Moses personally to promise his deliverance, announcing:

Do not fear him, for I have given him into your hand, and all his people and his land; and you shall do to him as you did to Sihon, king of the Amorites, who lived at Heshbon. (Num. 21:34, NASB)

AT THE END OF THE DAY, IF YOU HAVE NO PRECEDENT FOR A CHURCH-PLANTING MOVEMENT, AND ALL YOU HAVE IS A PROMISE, IT IS ENOUGH. DAVID ACTED ON THE PROMISE AND BECAME A GIANT KILLER. HIS EXAMPLE SERVED AS A PRECEDENT (MODEL) FOR OTHERS TO FOLLOW. WHAT'S RADICAL TODAY IS COMMONPLACE TOMORROW.

Moses had a promise from God. And he had personal precedent on a smaller scale (Sihon). It was enough.

Did the army of Israel, camped in the Valley of Elah, taunted by the giant Goliath remember these stories?

If they did, they apparently dismissed them as irrelevant:

- That can't happen here. *Our situation is different.*
- That can't happen through us. *Moses and Caleb were special.*
- That can't happen today. *It's ancient history; God no longer works that way.*

If they had forgotten them, it was their loss. It was a precedent they could have used.

Did David know those stories? We don't know. If so, then perhaps they inspired him as he ran toward the battle line. He had precedent.

If they were forgotten stories, stored in musty scrolls in a tabernacle, unavailable to a common shepherd boy, it didn't matter. He knew his God. The promise was enough.

This article is adapted from the final chapter of Steve Smith with Ying Kai's new book *T4T: A Discipleship Re-Revolution* (Richmond: WIGTake Resources, 2011), the inside story of the world's fastest growing church-planting movement. Steve Smith is a veteran CPM trainer living in Asia; Ying Kai is at the forefront of a CPM in Asia that has seen more than 1.7 million baptisms and 150,000 new church starts in less than a decade.†