



BIBLICAL CONTENT FOR A MOVEMENT

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MY FIRST TWO VISITS to a small group that was trying to multiply disciples in a diverse international city were filled with anticipation. My heart thrilled to see them organize their time into **looking back** for worship, encouragement, celebration and accountability and **looking ahead** to be purposeful in their mission. But to my dismay, I discovered that their meeting structure included most of the essential elements of reproducing groups, except for one: the content. They left out **looking up** to hear from the Father through His Word—the Bible!

We can so assume that groups will study the Word of God together that we forget to emphasize the centrality of the Word. In three and a half decades of ministry, I have learned to never assume that any basic expectations are in place – daily devotional life, personal holiness, loving relationships, etc. Now I add this: never assume that studying the Word of God is in place.

FORGETTING THE BASICS OF A MEETING

In order to help small group meetings adequately prepare believers to make disciples, we often emphasize elements that lead to reproduction:

- **Loving accountability** – Does the group lovingly and mutually help one another live out what God has been putting on their hearts in previous meetings?
- **Vision-casting, encouraging and inspiring** – Does the group try to build a sense of God’s heart and encourage disciples to keep believing God for His promises?
- **Practice** – Does the group adequately practice what they have learned that week so that they have confidence and competence to share it with others?
- **Setting goals with prayer** – Does the group help believers hear from God and make plans to obey what He

has said? Does the group pray for Him to empower them in their faithfulness?

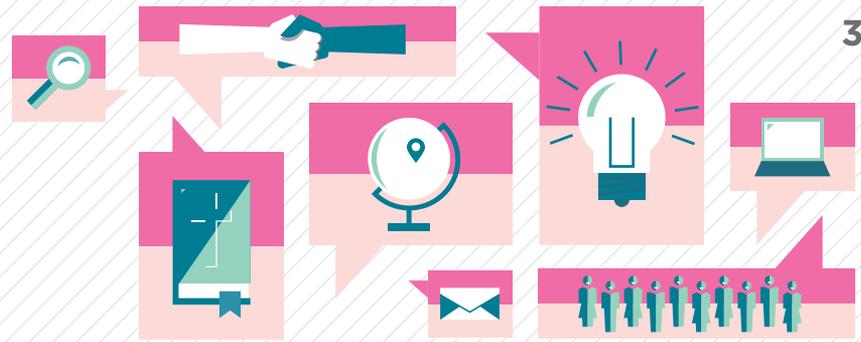
These are basic elements of a meeting that enable disciples to move **from** being inspired, fed and cared for **to** inspiring, feeding and caring for others. They help us give life to others.

Our *assumption* is that the group will **worship** the Lord in their praises, listen to and personally **care** for each other (body life) and study the **Word** of God. These are the basics of almost every small group meeting and church worship service. They have been in place for centuries because they give life to us spiritually.

But beware of assuming that even these most basic life-giving elements are in place—especially the Word of God.

VALUES OF A MOVEMENT: OBEDIENCE TO THE WORD OF GOD

In Church-Planting Movements (CPMs), one of the most misunderstood



aspects of weekly discipleship is the role of the Bible and how to rightly handle it. Perhaps the central tenet of why CPMs emerge is that they emphasize returning to biblical norms of discipleship.

¹⁵If you love me, you will keep my commandments....²¹Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him....

²³If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. (John 14:15, 21, 23, ESV)

A central characteristic of movements is the radical abandon of disciples to love their Master through doing whatever He says. Such love overcomes old sinful lifestyles, extra-biblical traditions and movement-threatening persecution. **Jesus made it clear: if we love Him, we will obey Him.** This is not a slavish works-based religion, but obedience empowered by the grace of God and inspired by gratitude that we are loved. When believers lovingly obey Jesus' commands, the promise is that the presence of God will be palpably real. Obedient disciples experience Jesus.

The corollary of Jesus' statement is this: If we don't obey Jesus, we demonstrate that we don't love Him! And the result is that we fail to sense His presence. Could this be why many churches have so many lifeless Christians? **We have members who know the Word but fail to obey it.**

CONTENT FOR A MOVEMENT: DELIVERING THE WORD OF GOD SO THAT IT CAN BE OBEYED AND PASSED ON

Movements of God emerge from disciples surrendered to the Word. To foster that, we have to equip them to obey it in a manageable and systematic way and then to help others do the same.

We want to help believers learn how to be doers of the Word, not hearers only (James 1:22). *The Word of God obeyed by disciples is the core of a movement.*

Everyone then who hears these words of mine and *does* them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. (Matt. 7:24, ESV, emphasis added)

Building on the Word inappropriately can cripple a budding movement. Building on it appropriately, however, can engender a movement that lasts. One of the core ingredients of the Wesleyan revival was the emphasis small groups made on radically obeying the Word of God in a methodical way.

Catalyzing a movement involves building a pathway of biblical content for the path the movement to travel along. In the January-February 2016 issue of *Mission Frontiers*, I outlined a path that disciples learn to walk generation by generation: 1) finding God-prepared people, 2) reproducing evangelism, 3) reproducing discipleship (short term and long term), and 4) reproducing churches. Each of these areas must be built on biblical content that can be applied and passed on.

When new believers know how to obey the Word in an orderly way and train other newer believers to do the same, a movement spreads from generation to generation. Digestible biblical content tied together in an orderly way is foundational to Spirit-empowered disciples.

As you build the content for a healthy movement, you must pay attention to three intertwined characteristics: Complete, Contextual and Can-do.

COMPLETE

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. (Matt. 13:44, ESV)

I rejoice at your word like one who finds great spoil. (Psa. 119:162, ESV)

A hallmark of movements is that believers discover the value of the King and His kingdom and joyfully give up all to have Him. The foundation is that the content comes from the Word of God. It is all too easy to pass on extra-biblical ideas or cultural assumptions in our training rather than what the Word actually says. This was a danger Jesus warned against with the religious legalists of His day (Matt. 15:3-9).

We must point believers to the authority of the Bible to enable them to discover its richness and apply it to their lives afresh. Believers must find the completeness of the whole Word of God to transform their lives.



Photo Credit: Melissa Vacek

To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ. (Eph. 3:8, ESV)

One mistake made in building biblical content is that it is biblical, but just not complete in its scope. It fails to reveal the unsearchable riches of Christ. For example, a gospel presentation may explain the good news in its essence – Jesus lived a perfect life, died to pay for sin, rose on the third day and provides forgiveness for all who repent (Luke 24:45ff). But if the hearer in his culture does not have enough context to understand the richness of what this means, the treasure of Christ is diminished in his mind. His response may be a shallow one.

Instead, biblical content must show the amazing value of Christ and His Word. It must elevate the King and call for joyful, surrendered responses to His Lordship. Until the treasure is understood, responses remain half-hearted.

As you build content, ask yourself if the way a Bible study or lesson is crafted gives a complete enough understanding to call for a complete and appropriate response. When the content is complete enough, the response is like that of the amazing love and devotion of a five-hundred denarii sinner:

Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little. (Luke 7:47, ESV)

CONTEXTUAL

Not only must the content be biblical, but the manner in which it is passed on must enable a believer from that context to grow in Christlikeness.

First, evangelism and discipleship content must address the context or culture adequately to call for a five-hundred denarii response. This is especially true in the first few months. Each culture has its unique worldview, problematic false gods, and particular sin strongholds. Rather than skirt around these, the gospel and short-term discipleship must address these so that real life transformation takes place.

A co-worker in an Arab context grieved that unforgiveness and bitterness drove wedges between relationships. It was

endemic to the culture. His short-term discipleship of eight or ten biblical lessons dealt with the basic milk of helping a new-born Christian grow (1 Cor. 3:2). Yet a major sin stronghold was preventing believers from growing in Christ. To correct this, he added a lesson on forgiveness to the early discipleship curriculum. In his context, it was essential content for the early Christian life.

What manner of presenting the gospel and what eight to ten short-term discipleship lessons would most help believers in your context surrender to the King and grow in their love for Him?

Second, content must be passed on in a contextually-appropriate way.

The content of CPM training must be passed on in a way that our target audience learns best not the ways we prefer. If people need oral methods, use them. If they need literate methods, use them. If they need stories, use them. If they need linear reasoning approaches, use them.

A great mistake we make is using the methods we prefer rather than the ones that are most essential. We must adapt our ways to our audience and not vice versa. Find the model of learning in your context which is most effective and use that. Do not change the content of the Bible, just the *manner* of passing it on.

Appropriate short-term biblical content is essential to help new believers grow in Christ-likeness and be able to help others do the same. Keep in mind that this content is not all of the Bible they will get during the first few months. They will be reading or listening to it each day in their devotional time. In addition, after the eight to ten short-term lessons/studies, you will guide believers to study the Bible for the long-term so that they can eventually get through the whole counsel of God's Word.

When building short-term discipleship lessons for CPMs strive for a *being* and *doing* balance. It is easy to skew all 8-10 short-term lessons or applications to be evangelistic in nature. A very important balance must be achieved between the **following Jesus** (growing in Christlikeness) and **fishing for men** (outward focus) aspects of the discipleship walk (Mark 1:17).

CAN DO

A final characteristic of effective CPM content is that it is reproducing—third or fourth generation new believers can do it. If a new believer three generations out cannot share the gospel, apply the discipleship lessons and pass them on to others, then the content is too difficult, and a movement cannot proceed generation by generation.

The content *we* build for a movement may be something *we* can reproduce due to our education and longevity in the Christian faith. But can a new third generation believer do it? If so, then fourth generation disciples and beyond will likely emerge, which is a key marker of Church-Planting Movements.

A colleague of mine held up a Bible and asked a group of missionaries how they could fit it through a drinking straw. It was obviously impossible. But then he took a sheet of paper, tore off a small piece, rolled it up and sent it down the straw. He declared, "You can fit the whole Bible down through a movement, but you have to send it down in very small bits."

The *law of the straw* is an essential discipline to building reproducing biblical content for movements. The most effective content is simple to learn, obey and pass on. Each lesson has one or two applications, not five. Five application points are too difficult

for most people to obey. The content of a lesson is from a short passage or short list of verses, not several chapters or a catalog of Bible verses. As you help believers learn how to study the Bible for the long term, they can eventually work their way through learning and obeying all of God's Word a little bit at a time.

In movements, remember that discipling and training relationships last for a long time. You continue to have opportunities to help them grow just as Jesus did with His disciples over three years. So use the law of the straw and trust God's Word to begin bringing life transformation in the months and years that follow. You will find that disciples will actually obey *more* when they receive a little at a time and can concentrate on it, than when they receive a lot. As you build biblical lessons that are reproducible and connected, then disciple-makers know how to take each new step in following Jesus and discipling others to follow Jesus.

Movements are built upon the shoulders of men and women who are radically surrendered in their love for the King and His Word. Let's help them get the Word in a manner that they can understand, obey and pass on. Such a movement, founded on the rock of the Word, can never be shaken by the storms that will assault it. 

¹ Steve Smith, Kingdom Kernels, *Mission Frontiers*, January-February 2016, p. 38