

THE INTANGIBLES OF URGENCY AND GRIT

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Jack¹ grasped the bars of his cell door and peered down the hallway. His heart raced as sweat beaded down his forehead. Should he speak or not? As a former soldier, he recalled the cruel horrors inflicted in military prisons. Arrested for preaching the gospel, he was now on the wrong side of the bars.

Should he speak? How could he not? His Lord had commanded him.

Gripping the bars more tightly, he spoke in a low voice to any guards stationed nearby. “If you don’t let me go, the blood of 50,000 people will be on your heads!” He darted back to the corner of the cell, awaiting a beating. But it never came. I did it! I witnessed in the face of my captors.

The next day, grasping the bars, he spoke more loudly. “If you don’t let me go, the blood of 50,000 people will be on your heads!” But again no retribution came.

Each day he repeated this encounter with his captors, his voice growing louder with each declaration. The jailers admonished him to be quiet, but to no avail.

At the end of the week, Jack shouted so all could hear, “IF YOU DON’T LET ME GO, THE BLOOD OF 50,000 PEOPLE WILL BE ON YOUR

HEADS!” For hours this went on until finally several soldiers grabbed Jack and loaded him on to a military truck.

Jack looked around in apprehension expecting the end to come shortly. After a couple of hours, the truck rolled to a stop. The soldiers escorted him to the side of the road. “We can’t stand your constant shouting! You are at the border of the county. Leave here and never preach in this place again!”

As the truck rambled back down the dusty road, Jack blinked in surprise. He had been faithful to the call to preach the good news in a country that had never heard of Jesus. The Lord had called him and the Lord had protected him. A few weeks later, filled with a sense of urgency and emboldened with spiritual grit, Jack and another brother slipped back into the county under cover of darkness to obey the great King’s command. Soon they led the first man to faith—a man through whom a Church-Planting Movement would be birthed.

THE INTANGIBLE ELEMENTS OF FRUITFUL CPM CATALYSTS

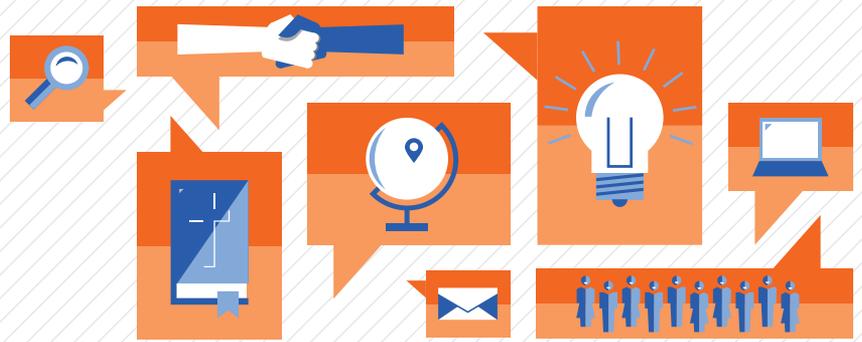
Two intangible characteristics rise to the top over and over again that seem to separate the most fruitful Church-

Planting Movement (CPM) catalysts from many other laborers. Like Jack in that Asian prison, these elements are evident in the life of Christ and in the lives of the Acts disciples. They are the accelerants that seem to spur on a spiritually abiding servant of Christ to fruitfulness. Though it is hard to define them, I will refer to them as “urgency” and “grit.” For this purpose, I define urgency as purposefully living on mission with the awareness that time is limited. Grit is a tenacious determination and staying power toward that mission, often in the face of insurmountable odds.

These are not normally the first characteristics we look for in church planters and missionaries, usually because of negative connotations:

- Urgency: “He is too driven!”
- Grit: “She is too stubborn!”

It is becoming less common to find laborers in the kingdom (at least in the Western world) who face their mission with gritted teeth and a sense of urgency that often keeps them awake at night. We much prefer people who have “margin.” Yet Jesus and Paul would probably not fit our definitions of people with appropriate margin. Today we might counsel them to “slow down,”



spend more time on non-work interests and adjust their work-life balance.

Yet, the men and women through whom God is birthing kingdom movements seem remarkably blind to the idea of margin as we define it. Rather, the mission of God consumes their lives like it did with Jesus.

His disciples remembered that it was written: “Zeal for your house will consume me.” (John 2:17, ESV)

Zeal was a defining characteristic that the disciples recalled about Jesus. Did John Wesley, writing sermons on horseback as he traveled from meeting to meeting, have such margin? Would a movement have emerged if he had? As William Carey chafed in England to be set loose to fulfill the Great Commission, would we characterize his life as a margin-filled life? Would Hudson Taylor, Mother Teresa or Martin Luther King, Jr. fit such definitions?

Jim Elliot, the martyr, said:

“He makes His ministers a flame of fire. Am I ignitable? God deliver me from the dread asbestos ‘other things.’ Saturate me with the oil of the Spirit that I may be a flame. But flame is transient, often short-lived. Canst thou bear this my soul—in me there dwells the Spirit of the Great Short-Lived, whose zeal for God’s house consumed Him. ‘Make me thy fuel, Flame of God. God, I pray thee, light these idle sticks of my life and may I burn for Thee. Consume my life, my God, for it is Thine. I seek not a long life, but a full one, like you, Lord Jesus.’”

An encounter with CPM catalysts today evokes similar descriptions: passion, tenacity, determination, restlessness, driven-ness, zeal, faith, unwillingness to quit or take “no” for an answer. It is time

to re-elevate the intangible elements of urgency and grit to the level we see them in the New Testament.

Can they become out of balance? Undoubtedly. But the pendulum has swung too far in the opposite direction.

URGENCY

Urgency: purposefully living on mission with the awareness that time is limited

Jesus lived with a sense of urgency knowing his time of ministry (three years) was short. From the beginning to the end of John, Jesus frequently references his “hour” of departure from the world (e.g. Jn. 2:4, 8:20, 12:27, 13:1). Jesus knew in his spirit that the days were short and he must redeem each one for the mission his Father sent him on.

“We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work.” (Jn. 9:4, ESV)

For example, while the disciples were ready to camp out in Capernaum after the prior day’s amazing success, Jesus decided exactly the opposite. Knowing his mission was to get through all of Israel before his departure, he left to begin the next stage of the journey.

“And he said to them, ‘Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out.’ And he went throughout all Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out demons.” (Mk. 1:38-39, ESV; see also Lk. 4:43-44)

A colleague describes this mentality as “one-term urgency” referring to the common length of a missionary term of service (3-4 years).

Today’s experts might warn Jesus about “burn-out.” But Jesus’ desire was not to burn out but to “flame out” or “burn up” at exactly the time the Father chose for him. Flaming out describes living with the urgency and intensity of the Father’s pace (his voice) toward the Father’s mission (his goal) for the Father’s pleasure (joy derived from knowing we are pleasing him and doing his will—Jn. 4:34, 5:30).

Burn-out has little to do with margin or lack of margin but rather with lack of fulfillment of a life spent well. Everyone today is busy; not everyone is purposeful. A busy existence lived aimlessly totters toward burn-out. But one rooted in the Father’s presence and for his purposes is life-giving. We end each day receiving God’s commendation: “Well done, my good and faithful servant.” Flaming out is letting our lives be completely used up by God at his pace and in response to His promptings and letting him end our lives in his good timing.

Jesus implores his disciples to live in a similar way. Urgency marked a common theme of the parables Jesus taught them. In the parable of the wedding feast (Mt. 24:1-14) the servants are to compel people to come to the feast before it is too late. There is no time to lose. In the parable of ready servants, the servants are to stay “dressed for action” to keep alert for the Master’s return (Lk. 12:35-48).

Urgency means that we don’t know how much time we have, so our lives are to be lived on purpose, redeeming the days.

The disciples carried this sense of urgency with them in the mission efforts of Acts. Paul’s three journeys of thousands of miles (at the pace of foot traffic) and dozens of places squeezed into the span of 10-12 years has a dizzying effect. Paul had a mission (preaching to all of the Gentiles) and not much time to fulfill it. It is why he hoped not to linger in Rome but to be propelled by them toward Spain so that there would be no place left to lay a foundation for the gospel (Rom. 15:22-24).

Urgency to fulfill the stewardship given them by God has always driven the most fruitful servants of God:

“This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful.” (1 Co. 4:1-2, ESV)

GRIT

Grit: tenacious determination and staying power toward a mission, often in the face of insurmountable odds

Rooster Cogburn (epitomized by John Wayne in *True Grit*), guns ablazin’, conjures up images of someone staring down insurmountable odds to achieve a mission. But in the spiritual realm, tenacious grit has always characterized men and women God has called to launch movements.

Jesus’ one-term mission could not be stopped. His face was set like a flint toward the troubles that awaited him in Jerusalem (Lk. 9:51-53). Along the way, many declared their desire to follow him. But one by one, he challenged their willingness to count the cost and their determination to stay the course (Lk. 9:57-62). Grit.

Grit characterized our Lord’s wrestling in the wilderness temptations and in Gethsemane’s final hour—the determined staying-power to walk through insurmountable odds to reach the goal the Father had set.

Jesus implored his disciples to live with similar grit—an unwillingness to take “no” for an answer. Rather, like the widow beseeching the unrighteous judge, they “ought always to pray and not lose heart” (Lk. 18:1-8, ESV).

Thus, the disciples throughout Acts continued their outward kingdom push in the face of amazing odds. When Stephen was stoned and fellow believers were dragged off to prison (Acts 8:3), what did they do? They preached the word as they were scattered! Paul, stoned in Lystra, got right back up to re-enter the city before moving on to the next destination. Paul and Silas bound fast in a Philippian jail sang praises to the Most High when circumstances were the most low. Spiritual grit kept them at the mission.

What circumstances can arise that would cause you to quit the mission of God? What is your grit level?

We have within our ability the means to overcome every obstacle to fulfillment of the Great Commission and the Lord's return. But such a generation will only rise up when it is resolved to finish the task with a renewed sense of urgency, steeled by grit to push through every obstacle.

Secrets of grit can be found in Jesus' determination to face the cross: "Jesus... who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising [lit. counting it as nothing] the shame." (Heb. 12:2, ESV)

The joy of what was before him—pleasing his Father, fulfilling his mission, providing redemption—led him to count the shame of the cross as nothing. The upside far outweighed the downside.

Paul expressed similar sentiments: "Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory." (2 Tm. 2:10, ESV)

The upside for Paul—that God's chosen people in each place might find salvation—far outweighed the downside of enduring ridicule, beatings, imprisonment, shipwrecks and stoning. Only a vision of the upside of the mission will steel us with the grit we need to endure the downside of difficulty to achieve it.

Our generation has within its means the ability to engage every remaining unreached people group and place with fruitful CPM approaches. We have within our ability the means to overcome every obstacle to fulfillment of the Great Commission and the Lord's return. But such a generation will only rise up when

it is resolved to finish the task with a renewed sense of urgency, steeled by grit to push through every obstacle.

Moses, the man of God, prayed in Psalm 90:12: "So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom."

What would happen if the global church recognized that time is limited? What if we set a date for completion of engaging every people group with an effective CPM strategy by a year such as 2025 or

2030? Perhaps we might live with wiser hearts, filled with a sense of urgency making whatever sacrifices are needed to fulfill the mission objective.

Let us live with a sense of urgency and endure with grit till the end is at hand. 

¹ A pseudonym for a Southeast Asian disciple of Christ

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