

T4T Discipleship Model¹

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Abstract

In recent years many discipleship models emerged on the Christian global scene. One discipleship model that has garnered attention in theological seminaries, mission organizations, and churches is the T4T discipleship model (Training for Trainers). The T4T discipleship model is a part of Church Planting Movements (CPMs) and Disciple Making Movements (DMMs). This article provides information about the T4T discipleship model - what it is, what it does, and how is it applied. Further, this article considers its strengths and weaknesses regarding the use of it in the Croatian context. This article concludes that the T4T discipleship model is not suitable for use in local churches in Croatia unless there are substantial adaptations to its teaching and practices.

Keywords: *discipleship, discipleship model, evangelism, disciple*

Introduction

Over the church's history, there have been many attempts to develop discipleship materials or discipleship models to help a church in its discipleship efforts. One of the reasons that churches want to practice discipleship is because Jesus Christ commanded it. The most quoted passage when referring to discipleship comes

1 This article was written as part of the Zagreb Biblical Institute research project: "The Concept of Discipleship Among Evangelical Churches in Croatia."

from, Matthew 28:18-20, also known as the Great Commission passage, which says: “And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age’” (ESV²). Jesus gave this command to the original 11 disciples who were present at the mountain in Galilee (Matt 28:16) yet it applies to all churches, to all believers at all times. All followers of Christ are called to make disciples.

In the attempt for different churches and Christian organizations to create different models of discipleship, in the last several decades, a few discipleship models emerged. Missional Discipleship, Family Discipleship, and Life-to-Life Discipleship to name a few. However, the evangelism/discipleship model that has drawn special attention to some churches and some seminaries in recent years is T4T (Training for Trainers). T4T is a part of “Disciple Making Movements” (DMMs) and “Church Planting Movements” (CPM). The idea behind these movements is: “a vision of church planting that is capable of ‘rapid multiplication’ primarily because it does not require people to be converted to become part of the church or even part of its leadership” (Morrell 2018). There are certainly pros and cons to these movements. However, these movements have (rightly so) received some pushback in recent years. This article will not focus on DMMs and CPMs but will focus on T4T. DMMs and CPMs movements do have parallels with T4T because they are all a part of similar movements.

1. Definitions

Before we go any further it is important to define several terms that this author will be using in this article. We need to define a disciple of Jesus Christ, discipleship, evangelism, and what is the relationship between evangelism and discipleship. We need to acknowledge that not all theologians have the same definitions of these terms. There are different thoughts and approaches to these important terms. However, this article focuses on one model of discipleship and not on various definitions of the above-mentioned terms. Consequently, this author will define these terms according to his position toward them.

Regarding the definition of discipleship, that is, what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, we will follow the definition offered by Michael Wilkins. Wilkins (1992, 40) says: “In the specific sense, a disciple of Jesus is one who has come to Jesus for eternal life, has claimed Jesus as Savior and God, and has embarked upon the life of following Jesus.” Further, Wilkins (1992, 40) defines discipleship as follows: “Discipleship means living a fully human life in this world in union with

2 Unless stated otherwise, in this article the author will use an ESV translation of the Bible.

Jesus Christ, growing in conformity to his image as the Spirit transforms us from the inside-out, being nurtured within a community of disciples who are engaged in that lifelong process, and helping others to know and become like Jesus.” Next, we need to ask ourselves what is evangelism. Lewis Drummond (1992, 9) defined evangelism as: “A concerted effort in the power of the Holy Spirit to confront unbelievers with the truth about Jesus Christ and the claims of our Lord with a view to leading unbelievers into repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ and thus into the fellowship of his church so they may grow in the Spirit.”

Finally, what is the relationship between evangelism and discipleship? The relationship between evangelism and discipleship comes directly from the missionary nature of the triune God who desires to see forming congregations to embody the gospel and to equip Christians to participate in the restorative and redemptive mission of God in the world (Akkerman and Maddix 2013, 16). In the passage already quoted (Matt 28:18-20), the text presumes that nations do not have the gospel and thus disciples are called to go and proclaim the gospel to the lost, lead them to Christ, then baptize them, and finally teach them everything our Lord has commended. Discipleship, evident in this passage, is this whole process that was just described, and evangelism is the first part of the discipleship process. In a parallel passage to Matthew 28:18-20, in Mark 16:15³, also considered the Great Commission passage, Jesus explicitly calls his disciples to proclaim the gospel. Hence, evangelism takes different forms (how people go about doing it): It can be done by proclaiming the gospel on streets and squares (Luke 6:17-49; Mark 16:16; Acts 17:17), through building relationships with the lost over time (John 1:40-51; 4:28-42; Acts 10:24), and any other way that a believer chooses to do. However, evangelism at some point requires the proclamation of the Word. The Gospel must be preached for people to come to Christ (Mark 16:15; 2 Tim 4:2, Rom 10:14-17). As we already mentioned, all believers are called to make disciples, which includes evangelizing the lost and investing in believers (the second part of the discipleship process). Some believers are more gifted in the first part of discipleship (evangelism) and some believers are more gifted in the second part of discipleship (investing, mentoring, walking alongside a believer). But regardless of the giftedness, all believers are called to do both, that is the whole process of discipleship.

2. T4T Discipleship

“T4T,” which stands for “Training for Trainers” is one particular model of discipleship. One of the creators of T4T, Steve Smith, explains in his own words what

3 “And he said to them, ‘Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation.’”

it is. “T4T is an all-inclusive process of training believers over the course of 12-18 months to witness to the lost and train new believers to form reproducing discipleship communities generation by generation” (Smith 2011, 36). Additionally, T4T seeks to provide missionaries and pastors globally with practical principles for multiplying churches and trainers.

T4T was developed by Southern Baptist missionaries Ying Kai and Steve Smith in South Asia. Since 2001, according to the authors, when the T4T program started, it documented 1.7 million baptisms and 150,000 new churches. When leaders attempted to randomly sample this process, they found generations of believers who came to Christ in a 4–5-year time span (Garrison 2014, 3).

In the book *T4T: A Discipleship Revolution*, Steve Smith articulated the content of this discipleship movement. Smith wrote that “T4T is an all-in-one process that God uses to take a person from lostness to maturing disciple who can start new groups and train others to reproduce the process” (Smith 2011, 75). Essentially, T4T is an evangelism and discipleship strategy to reach the world with the gospel.

Smith, in his book, provided an inside look at why and how the Church Planting Movement is moving very rapidly around the world using the T4T process. Smith provided lessons in how a new believer or existing believer goes through a process to become a maturing disciple who then leads other participants to do the same. In the T4T process, a believer is encouraged to immediately implement lessons he is learning with those he led to Christ or with those who wish to be trained. This process is primarily done in a group setting.

T4T gives any reader who desires to implement discipleship movement step-by-step principles to follow. This book is full of content that one can utilize in the ministry. One of the most important principles in this training, Smith noted is the following: “If you want real obedience-based discipleship, avoid one of the chief traps: Never give an assignment or goal unless you plan to ask about it at the next meeting. Failing to ask about it is the fastest way to kill obedience-based discipleship” (Smith 2011, 112). T4T is structured to be multiplied and it is important to keep trainees accountable.

How does T4T work? T4T has 9 lessons that every potential leader or new believer needs to go through to be fully equipped to pass on lessons to the next generation of trainers. The goal of the process is that groups multiply every 9 weeks. The T4T manual is available free online, and it has 161 pages on how to go through the whole process (Garrison 2014, 3).

A typical lesson in T4T has several steps: (1) Look back, (2) Look up, and (3) Look Ahead. In Look Back – “the goal of this time is to evaluate how the trainers did while apart, celebrate together, and encourage them that God can build a movement through them” (Smith 2011, 107). In Look Up – “the goal of this time is to look up to God for a new direction by studying a new lesson or Bible study” (Smith 2011, 107). In Look Ahead – “the goal of this time is to prepare the trainers

to implement the things God has been teaching them – evangelism, discipleship, training others, starting a group, etc” (Smith 2011, 107).

T4T has a lot of good content that can be utilized in evangelism and discipleship. Smith throughout the book emphasizes that the lessons must be biblical. Smith highlights that the content is valuable and that a person must get through it, however, the most important part is to develop a trainer.

2.1. Evaluation of T4T Model

Because this article is written as a part of a discipleship research project in evangelical churches in Croatia, we need to consider a few strengths and weaknesses regarding using T4T discipleship training as a tool to help churches practice discipleship well in Croatia. One of the biggest strengths of T4T discipleship training is that it encourages believers to fulfill the Great Commission. There seems to be a lack of emphasis in Croatia to fulfill the Great Commission. Also, there seems to be a lack of strategy to make disciples.⁴ Stanko Jambreč said that the most vital problem of churches in Croatia has been disobedience to the Lord’s command to make disciples (Bohall 2018, 1). In his most recent book on discipleship for Croatian readers *Učeništvo na Isusov način (Discipleship in Jesus’ Way)*, Ervin Budiselić believes that there is a crisis in discipleship, if not in all evangelical churches in Croatia, then in some part of evangelical churches in Croatia (Budiselić 2023, 13–14; 19).⁵ T4T discipleship training encourages making disciples a priority. Jesus gave the Great Commission to a church. In his ministry, Jesus emphasized on numerous occasions that he must preach the gospel to the lost. He said that is why he came (Luke 21:10). Jesus told his disciples to go to the whole world and to preach the gospel to all creation (Matt 16:15; 28:18-20). There is an urgency to proclaim the gospel in Croatia and to the rest of the world. T4T encourages that aspect of Christianity.

A second strength of the T4T discipleship training is that it keeps those churches and believers who signed up for training accountable to continue the process of evangelism and discipleship. After every training session during T4T

4 In 2021, this author interviewed a former missionary in Croatia for 25 years, Eric Maroney, and a research professor from the Biblical Institute in Zagreb, Ervin Budiselić. Both Maroney and Budiselić said that very few Croatian churches have a strategy for discipleship.

5 In his book, Budiselić uses the research by Barna Group made in the USA. He believes that evangelical Christianity in the USA greatly influences evangelical Christianity in Croatia. Although Budiselić acknowledges that the context and cultures are different between evangelical Christianity in the USA and Croatia, he is convinced that if a similar survey was done in Croatia, the results would indicate that there is a crisis in discipleship in evangelical churches in Croatia. I, the author of this article, am a part of the research project about discipleship in evangelical churches in Croatia. A much better picture of the state of discipleship in evangelical churches will be evident after the completion of the discipleship survey, sometime this year, 2024.

training participants are being followed up next week if they have fulfilled or met the agreed agenda from the previous week. It is well-known in sports that coaches need to keep players accountable. In schooling systems there is accountability. After a period of lectures comes a test to see how much content students have acquired. In any field, there is a process of accountability for goals to be achieved. We see that practice in the Bible as well. Paul told Timothy in 2 Timothy 4:1⁶ that Jesus will judge the living and the dead. Believers will be accountable for how they lived their lives certainly, but they will (also) be judged whether they proclaimed the gospel to the lost or not. Every believer will give an account of his life at some point. The T4T discipleship training keeps participants accountable to fulfill its objective.

While the T4T from the outside looking seems to be an effective evangelism and discipleship method, it does have several significant weaknesses. One of the weaknesses of T4T discipleship training is that it moves way too quickly through discipleship training steps. One reason for this might be because it appears to measure its results on obedience to evangelize rather than a long process of discipleship. T4T discipleship training presumes that new converts are ready to immediately start sharing/teaching training lessons to the next person. This process presumes that these new converts grasped the material well. T4T discipleship training encourages these new converts to immediately proclaim/teach other non-believers the gospel.

As already mentioned, T4T is designed to start churches with these new converts. I would argue that for the most part, we do not see this urgent and questionable practice in Scripture. We do see the spirit of God moving in the book of Acts. The question is what is prescriptive text and what is descriptive text in the book of Acts? If someone uses the book of Acts as a model of what we should do today, can they provide evidence that the Lord commands it? I would argue that a lot of what the author in the book of Acts writes is a narrative report (descriptive text) of what the Lord did through the Apostles at that time, and not necessarily what Christians should do today.⁷

We observe in the practices of our Lord that, he, Jesus did not choose to take the shortest route possible in equipping his disciples. He could have sent them out right after he first called them to start planting and leading new churches. Although Jesus occasionally sent disciples to evangelize, he spent three years

6 “I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.”

7 Descriptive text in the book of Acts or general in the Bible describes what took place. The Bible describes something in the past. Prescriptive text in the Bible is associated with a command of God, or imperatives in the Bible. Things that the Bible commands us to do.

training them. Jesus assured them that when he departed this world, they would be ready for the task he called them to fulfill.

The Apostle Paul was also concerned about the long-term consequences of the churches he helped to establish. Although in a general sense, all Christians are called to make disciples, Paul admonished Timothy (who was a delegate of Timothy, but served as a current pastor in the church in Ephesus) in 2 Timothy 2:1-2, the following, “You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus, and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also.” We do not have time to look deeper in this passage, but Paul urged Timothy to find faithful men. Why is Paul encouraging his disciple Timothy to be careful when selecting who he will train? Paul was aware that he was close to the end of his life, and he wanted Timothy to continue the work that he (Paul) had begun. Paul communicated that it was essential for Timothy to find men of character who would continue to teach the true gospel, the same gospel Timothy had learned from Paul. Timothy was admonished by Paul to find these men, to entrust the gospel to them, and to ensure the integrity of the gospel message (Mounce 2000, 503).

Jesus’s discipleship approach provided the knowledge of the Scripture, teaching, and learning through example and imitation, an approach that is evident in the discipleship example between Paul and Timothy (Gracin and Budiselić 2020, 40). The T4T discipleship training is much more concerned with rapid multiplication rather than taking time to train participants or look for faithful men (leaders). The T4T training method does not consider the consequences of rapidly training participants in discipleship/evangelism methods (Rhodes 2022, 40).

A second weakness of the T4T method is the issue of authority. The author of the T4T method, Ying Kai developed this method of discipleship for an authority-based Chinese society. In a society such as China and other similar countries, students and people in general tend to obey their teacher’s suggestions. Having completed eleven mission trips to Latin American countries, with a few instances of stays that extended to a month, I have gained personal experience that leads me to confidently assert that pastors and missionaries are accorded greater authority in Latin American countries than in Western countries. While this elevated status may seem advantageous, it can sometimes result in questionable practices by these leaders.⁸

8 While on my travels, I found myself in a position of influence, despite not being a local resident. I observed pastors and missionaries pressuring individuals to raise their hands and recite the sinner’s prayer, even when it made them feel uneasy. These leaders were misusing their authority by resorting to tactics of urgency without properly explaining the gospel message. Such methods are frequently utilized in regions where those in positions of power are highly respected, and it is not customary to challenge visiting missionaries or authority figures.

On the other hand, this is not true in other cultures. In the United States of America, almost the whole of Europe, and for our purposes Croatia, some would possibly agree to witness to five people a week and then would not go through with it. Generally, Croatian people are very suspicious about connecting to new people or exploring new things. In Croatia, leaders do not have such high authority as leaders in countries such as China, or regions such as Latin America. Further, in Croatia, most people are opposed to going out on the streets and proclaiming the gospel thus this model is very difficult to apply in this country.

The third weakness of the T4T discipleship training method is that it creates churches that do not have adequately trained leadership. John David Massey correctly pointed out that in the T4T training model, new believers are quickly elevated to the office of pastor without adequate theological training. Massey (2014, 9) emphasized that the “T4T lacks a robust articulation of a New Testament church or what constitutes church leadership. Church Planting Movements strategy and T4T training is opposed to deep-level theological training for leaders because it allegedly slows down the movement.”

Quite frankly, leaders of such a movement find preaching and teaching new believers scripture impediment to the movement’s spread. You might find this very hard to believe. Listen to what leaders of such movements (Disciple Making Movement) David and Paul Watson (2014, 52) emphasized: “When working with lost people, we have to avoid failing into the role of explaining Scripture.” Leaders of these movements think that direct teaching and pastoring new believers by experienced missionaries and disciple-makers is dangerous. They believe the lost and new converts should study scripture together without experienced missionaries guiding that process. Rather, they emphasize that only one new convert/leader should be coached by an experienced missionary or disciple-maker (Rhodes 2020, 81).

This model goes against the model from scripture where we see Jesus and the Apostles teaching the Word regularly. New converts should not be put in a leadership position in a local church (1 Tim 3:6), the very things that DMMs and the T4T method encourage to practice. What we see from Paul instructing Timothy and Titus in those respective epistles is that those who lead a church (elders and deacons) need to pass certain qualifications to be in leadership roles in a local church. Furthermore, Paul is calling Timothy, Titus, or any leader to exercise biblical leadership in his ministry. Timothy or any leader is responsible for creating a healthy discipleship environment in his church (Allen and Monroe 2023, 52).

Conclusion

We need to acknowledge that the movement of the Holy Spirit worked in marvelous ways in different places and at different times throughout church history.

China is no exception. We can affirm that it is highly possible that the Holy Spirit has been moving and is still especially moving in China. We need to acknowledge that in that process, God used the T4T discipleship training method in China. However, we need to consider the validity of some of the methods used today to reach people for Christ, the T4T is no exception.

It is quite natural and human to desire rapid success in any endeavor a person or a group tries to achieve. However, this is generally not a reality of how things work in the world we live in. As we consider the T4T method of discipleship and evangelism in the context of evangelical Christianity in Croatia, some of the methods that T4T does are commendable. All of us as believers should aspire to see many people come to the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ here in Croatia and beyond. However, we should aspire that those who do not know Christ come to Him with the understanding that there is a cost to pay and that there are consequences to following and serving Jesus Christ (Luke 14:26-33). Croatian people who are presented with the gospel are often aware of the fact that it would cost them to follow Christ because of the stigma of Evangelical Christianity in Croatia.

I would conclude that it is not wise to implement the T4T discipleship training method in evangelical churches in Croatia under the current method of practice in T4T. However, if there is an extensive adaptation to the T4T discipleship training method addressing some of my concerns (certainly there are more), then I would consider changing that position. Considering the context of Croatia, any person who lived and served in this country in a missionary role (or any ministry position) for an extended period is aware that Christianity grows slowly, and it grows through relationships. Without extensive adaptation, T4T discipleship training in my opinion is not suitable for the Croatian context.

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Model učenja T4T

Sažetak

U posljednjih su se nekoliko godina na kršćanskoj globalnoj sceni pojavili mnogi modeli učenja. Među njima je jedan privukao pažnju teoloških fakulteta, misijskih organizacija i crkava, a to je model učenja T4T (*Training for Trainers*). Model učenja T4T dio je Pokreta za osnivanje crkava (*Church Planting Movements* – CPM) i Pokreta za stvaranje učenika (*Disciple Making Movements* – DMM). Ovaj članak pruža informacije o modelu učenja T4T – što je, što postiže i kako se primjenjuje. Nadalje, članak propituje njegove prednosti i mane u pogledu upotrebe u hrvatskom kontekstu. Na kraju, članak zaključuje da model učenja T4T nije prikladan za upotrebu u lokalnim crkvama u Hrvatskoj osim u slučaju da se naprave znatne preinake njegova učenja i prakse.