

Church Growth And Its Implications For The Use Of The Means Of Grace In A Confessional Liturgical Church

[Presented at the Free Lutheran Conference of the Peninsula at Grace Lutheran Church (LC-MS) in San Mateo, California on February 2, 1989]

By Charles L. Cortright

The Church Growth movement has knocked at the door of every church serious about doing mission work in the past decade. The proponents of Church Growth have presented themselves to the church as people who can provide insight and know-how in aiding the church in fulfilling its call to evangelize. Most have received their offer with thanks and enthusiasm. Among the various Lutheran bodies, the Church Growth movement has also found widespread acceptance. Names like Donald McCavran, C. Peter Wagner, Win Arn and Lyle Schaller are well-known to most Lutheran pastors; many will have read from the many books and articles published by them; many have been and will be experimenting with what they have read.

Plainly, the great appeal of the Church Growth movement is that it presents definite strategies, plans and programs for church growth: it is eminently practical. It supports its findings and programs with exhaustive data and research. It presents its programs in a popular, no-nonsense fashion. And it purports to do so in a “theologically neutral” package. In view of its claims, the enthusiasm, persuasiveness and charm of its spokesmen, its practicality and purported neutrality, it is hardly any wonder that Church Growth has become a major influence in American Christianity, including the Lutheran Church.

But the confessional nature of the Lutheran Church requires that the Church Growth movement pass a deeper, more serious litmus test than mere appeal and practicality. Claims of theological neutrality aside, Church Growth thinking and practice must prove to be theologically sound when measured against the canon of Holy Scripture and their exposition in the Lutheran Confessions. The life and practice of the Lutheran Church flow from faithful adherence to the rule of Scripture; they are expressed in her Confessions. Compromise or substitutions in the theological underpinnings of the Lutheran Church (including those undertaken for “practical considerations”) erode the church’s life. And what is at stake is not the preservation of *reine Lehre* for its own sake, or the maintenance of Lutheran character for its sake, but faithfulness for Christ’s sake to the mission he gives his Church precisely because that mission is bound inextricably to the preaching and teaching of the pure Word and the administration of the Sacraments.

Thus, the timely focus of this first presentation of this conference is on the implications the Church Growth movement holds for the use of the means of grace in the confessional Lutheran Church. And because the administration of the Sacraments and the public preaching and teaching of the Word are cradled in the liturgical worship of the Lutheran Church our focus will also be on the implications Church Growth thinking holds towards Lutheranism’s liturgical character.

THE PRINCIPLES AND CHARACTER OF CLASSICAL CHURCH GROWTH

With the proliferation and increasing popularity of the Church Growth movement has come a generalizing of what is meant by the term “church growth.” Originally coined by Donald McCavran as a technical term to isolate and identify a specific set of principles for evangelizing, “church growth” has become an umbrella term used to identify any and everything involved with the growth of the church from analyzing communities to identifying spiritual gifts to group

dynamics. Yet despite the diversity, a common thread still runs back to the principles of what might be called “classical” Church Growth as the movement was originally shaped and defined.

McCavran, a one-time foreign missionary, developed the principles of Church Growth in response to his experiences overseas. Challenged by the slow growth of the mission he served, he tried to identify the problem. In 1955 he published his findings in his book, *The Bridges of God*. He continued to refine his thought throughout the 1960’s bringing out his definitive work on Church Growth, *Understanding Church Growth*, in 1970. By this time he was working as the founding Dean of Fuller Theological Seminary’s School of World Missions. He was joined at Fuller by C. Peter Wagner and together they taught the gospel of Church Growth to Win Arn. Arn went on to found the Institute for American Church Growth.

These men, with the addition of Lyle Schaller of the Yokefellow Institute, Richmond, Indiana, form the core of Church Growth’s “movers and shakers.” One analyst of Church Growth categorizes their contributions:

Donald McCauran is the father of the movement. C. Peter Wagner is its systematician. Win Arn has introduced America to church growth principles. And Lyle Schaller, not really connected with the roots of the movement, is a guru of church planking whose advice is respected by those who are at the root of the movement. 1

In his role as “systematician,” Wagner offers a “simple and helpful definition of church growth”:

Church growth means all that is involved in bringing men and women who do not have a personal relationship to Jesus Christ into fellowship with Him and into responsible church membership. 2

The Church Growth movement rests on certain principles rather than on any certain methodology as it pursues the goals implied by the definition above. These principles have been summarized in 5 points.

The first principle of **Church Growth is Church growth is the will of God**. This is the point of beginning and “overriding principle” for all Church Growth thinking: God desires that people be gained for his church. Churches fail that do not recognize this and seek to carry it out.

The second principle, **God endorses harvest theology, not search theology**, means God desires results and churches should concentrate their efforts where results are most promising in terms of growth. According to McCavran, “search” theology is a protective rationalization against being concerned with and seeking for the largest possible numerical growth in a mission. But God wants a large number of people “harvested”! Therefore, “harvest” theology will lead the church to concentrate on numbers.

It is unfair to construe this as simply engaging in a “numbers game.” The point of harvest theology is utilizing resources where they may best be used. If a particular field has shown greater promise than another, Church Growth analysts would urge concentration—even at the expense of the other field—on the more promising field.

Thirdly, **The world consists of sociologically homogeneous units**. The fabric of human society is actually a “mosaic of ethnic groups surrounded by cultural boundaries.” Thus, a “homogeneous unit” is a “section of society in which all the members have some characteristic in common.”³ The unifying factors that give a homogeneous unit its identity (obviously) keep it separate from other homogeneous units.

The homogeneous unit concept is a key principle in Church Growth thinking. It is so, because according to Church Growth theory, growth occurs when evangelization proceeds along the lines of “least resistance.” According to McCavran, “Men like to become Christian without

crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers.”⁴ Through its unifying features of common culture, ethnic identity, or shared interests, the homogeneous unit uniquely provides the line of least resistance.

Principle four is really a corollary to the previous principle: **The church grows through people movements.** A people movement is the rapid spread of the gospel along lines within a certain homogeneous unit. McCavran calls these lines the “bridges of Cod”; Win Arn has labeled them as “webs.” When these bridges or webs are utilized for evangelization resulting in “explosive growth,” then a people movement is considered to have begun. Church Growth seeks to exploit such a movement to its fullest, that is, until the entire homogeneous unit in a locale is Christianized. Evangelization carried on by Church Growth proponents will always seek to start a people movement. In this regard, a fifth principle is posited.

“Discipling” is primary; “perfecting” is secondary. What this means is that a people movement is not to be slowed or hindered by undue concern for indoctrination of new converts; there is time for that work later. The emphasis must remain on the bringing of new people to the church and incorporating them as rapidly as possible into the body.

God wants people won in large numbers...homogeneous units provide the lines of least resistance...people movements are the goal. Within the frame work of these principles Church Growth research seeks to identify the homogeneous units of society and to analyze just what starts a people movement. Data is collected, analyzed, compared and banked. McCavran is enthusiastically convinced that such research holds the key for opening more and more doors for the growth of the church.

How does one know whether a population is responsive? Eventually measurements may be worked out which will tell in advance how ready for new things a given population is. The science of anthropology has learned much about societal conditions in which men are restless for change. The experience of the Church indicates that immigrants in a new country, migrants to a city, societies suffering from deprivation or shock, and the oppressed, hear and obey the Gospel more readily than contented beneficiaries of the social order.⁵

According to Church Growth’s father: “The great obstacles to conversion are social, not theological.”⁶

A concrete, working example of these principles is in the book, *The Master’s Plan for Making Disciples*, by Win and Charles Arn. This book presents a strategy for outreach based on Church Growth theory and research for American Christianity. The book’s presentation of Church Growth thinking is couched in describing the experiences of a fictional church member, Chuck Bradley, with the strategy of the Master’s Plan. Incidentally, the book and corresponding film (*For the Love of Pete*) are a good example of the appealing and winsome character of much of what has been produced and published by Church Growth authors. Chuck Bradley is a sincere but hesitant church member who is skeptical about being able to “do evangelism,” both in terms of his abilities and the viability of any particular method. The Master’s Plan does not present him with “three new methods of buttonholing people for Jesus,” but the early church’s “strategy for disciple-making.” This is the exploitation of the “webs” of personal relationships as the lines through which the Gospel is best communicated. In the book, Chuck is tutored in utilizing his personal web (extended family) for evangelization by means of a definite program of prayer, congregational support and inter-personal contact. In answering the question, why do people respond so positively to the Gospel through these “webs” of relationships?, Arn(s) lists 7 reasons:

- 1) Webs provide a natural network of sharing;
- 2) web members are receptive to the witness of a trusted friend, relative, etc.;
- 3) web relationships allow for an unhurried witness;
- 4) web relationships provide natural support when conversion occurs;
- 5) web relationships result in effective assimilation into the church;
- 6) web relationships tend to win entire families;
- 7) web relationships provide a constantly enlarging source of new contacts.

In examining his extended family (defined more specifically by Arn as the unchurched individuals of any web), Chuck is encouraged to focus his efforts on one or two. He is counseled to make a profile of each member of his extended family to aid him in this. Of particular importance in choosing what members to concentrate on is identifying “receptive periods” in their lives. Individuals in transition situations such as grief, divorce, crisis, injury, etc., are more receptive, according to Arn. A “Receptivity-rating Scale” indicating various such transitional events together with a number indicating relative receptivity on the scale is adduced by Arn. “The higher the number, the more receptive the person to the Gospel.” The transition predisposes the extended family member for reception of the Gospel; “our disciple-making plans need to begin meeting people at their point of need.”

If Church Growth principles espouse any particular method of evangelization, it is ministering to people “at their point of need.” It is not surprising as a result that Robert Schuller is often considered by Church Growth to be an example of someone “on the right track.” His famous phrase, “Find a need and fill it,” encapsulates exactly what Church Growth strategy advocates as correct, “on target” evangelism. An evangelism strategy book, *The Contagious Congregation*, by George Hunter of the United Methodists uses Schuller’s dictum as its point of beginning. One needs to find where people “hurt” as Schuller did when he began in Orange County by asking people why they didn’t attend a church. To ascertain the needs of people, Hunter advocates using the “Hierarchy of Human Motives” developed by Abraham Maslow:

I believe that the Hierarchy of Human Motives as fashioned by Abraham Maslow provides great help for people who use motivational appeals in evangelism. The Hierarchy can be gridded as follows:

7. Aesthetic needs
6. Desire to know and understand
5. Need for self-actualization
4. Esteem needs
 - a. self esteem
 - b. esteem from others
3. Love and belongingness needs
2. Safety needs
1. Physiological needs

Maslow’s basic point in his theory and model is that *all* seven of these needs are intrinsic to human personality — but not all of them are center stage, in the forefront of consciousness, and currently motivating a person’s life. The need that is in the forefront of consciousness and that is currently motivating the individual will be the *lowest* need that is basically unfulfilled. 7

The strategy of the evangelist, according to Hunter, is to discover some particular need the “prospect” has for which...

...the gospel is relevant. 2) The witnesser then shares a particular point or *facet* of the

gospel that is relevant to the need. 3) The witnesser appeals to the person for a commitment — *response to the facet* that has been shared. 4) The witnesser knows that God *will be involved* in the process of evangelization. Knowing that everything does not depend on him — that God promises to do his part in evangelization — he has faith that after the prospect has had one or two particular experiences in Christian commitment, he will “taste” what Christianity has to offer human beings. As a result of the witness, the prospect now has a beachhead of experience from which he can decide whether to respond to a more general explanation of the gospel and to a more general appeal for commitment at some later point, say days or weeks later.⁸

Hunter calls this strategy “Inductive-grace” and is convinced that “the great mandate for modern evangelism is to find people where they now are on the hierarchy of motives and to engage them at the appropriate level.” That his strategy carries Church Growth’s imprimatur is evident in McGavran’s comments in the foreword to *The Contagious Congregation*: “John Wesley would have rejoiced in it. Dr. Hunter has given us the tools for the task. Let us use them.”⁹

What kind of picture emerges for us of the Church Growth movement in view of Church Growth’s principles and this sampling of its strategies?

Certainly there are positive aspects! The Church Growth movement has succeeded in imbuing a sense of mission in the church-at-large. Some have criticized the Church Growth movement as being a reaction against the missiology (or lack of it) of the 60’s and early 70’s. And while Church Growth proponents may not appreciate the title “reactionary,” their achievement is hardly a negative contribution. Mission work is a major thrust again among mainline American Christianity.

In this regard, the seriousness of purpose, earnestness and creativity of the movement should also be mentioned. The Church Growth movement has provided the first integrated analysis of mission-work Christianity has had both in terms of world and American fields.

The positive input Church Growth writers have made toward sensitizing pastors and congregations to the impressions, needs and expectations of the unchurched should be noted. There is much to be learned in terms of sanctification, the “third use of the Law,” and our interaction with people from Church Growth materials.

Yet despite these and other positive aspects, the principles and strategies of Church Growth also present a very disturbing picture. The whole role of sociology in the movement ought to have serious implications for any Lutheran worth his confessional salt.

It is the role of sociology that disturbs the Rev. Glenn Huebel in his 1986 article for the *Concordia Theological Quarterly* entitled, “The Church Growth Movement: A Word of Caution.” Pastor Huebel, a Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod pastor in Texas, participated in his district’s two-year “church growth project” held under the direction of the Church Growth Institute of America. He states that the avoidance of any “distinctive theology” in the movement was the “seed” of his desire to look into things more carefully, concluding that “a movement which finds universal appeal across denominations must be based on some other foundation than theology.”⁹ His conclusion is that Church Growth is applied sociology that poses certain threats to confessional Lutheranism, particularly with respect to the use of the means of grace. Huebel examines the Church Growth movement on three “fronts.”

The first front is that of Church Growth’s goal. Quoting C. Peter Wagner, the goal of the Church Growth movement is discipleship in keeping with the Great Commission:

Those who have chosen to identify with McCavran’s movement, and I include myself among them, have chosen as their biblical rallying point, Jesus’ Great Commission to ‘go

and make disciples of all the nations.’”¹⁰

The difficulty, however, Huebel states, is that Church Growth leaders do not mean—at least in practice—what confessional Lutheranism hears in those words of the Savior with regard to “discipleship.” Again quoting Wagner, Huebel observes: “The chief fruit upon which the church growth movement focuses is stated in Wagner’s words: ‘The fruit that church growth has selected as the validating criterion for discipleship is responsible church membership’”¹¹ This criterion shifts discipleship from being primarily faith (an unmeasurable) to the fruits of faith (something quantifiable), specifically, “the outward incorporation of a person into a congregational institution and the production of a Christian lifestyle (witnessing, praying, attendance, service, etc.).”¹² The problem with this is that such “fruits” can be “artificially produced.”

Unfortunately, the outward “fruit” can be artificially produced. People can be behaviorally “changed” or “reformed” by outward manipulation of one form or another. People can be drawn into and become active members of an institution—even a religious institution—through other motives than faith in Christ and by other means than His voice. For instance, people can become regular, active members of a congregation because their “belonging needs” are satisfied...By making “responsible church congregation membership” the goal of the great commission, church growth teachers are reducing the mission of the church to the sociologically defined and measurable “form of godliness.” It should be noted at this point that I am not entering upon the “quality versus quantity” argument against church growth. I am convinced that church growth principles foster even “quality” church members as that term describes outward behavior. As history and the cults prove, however, even “quality” or “responsive church members” can be sociologically or psychologically produced.”¹³

Huebel’s conclusion is that while Church Growth rhetoric may speak about rebirth and regeneration—matters of the spirit—, the practical goal of “responsible church members” is “a goal pragmatically defined in institutional, measurable, behavioral terms.”¹⁴ The disparity this signals with the true intent of the Great Commission means “The goal of the church growth movement is sociological rather than theological.”¹⁵

The second front of Huebel’s evaluation looks at the standards of evaluation utilized by Church Growth. Here again, Huebel concludes that sociology, not theology guides Church Growth thinking detrimentally. Huebel focuses on the fact that Church Growth consistently analyzes and evaluates congregations on the basis of statistics dealing with attendance, number of visitors, age distribution among members, groups within the congregation (e.g., ladies’ groups, youth organizations, etc.), growth and decline statistics, community profiles and demographics, etc. The point is not whether or not such things are relevant or irrelevant to the congregation **as a social organism**; Huebel notes in regard to the study done in his own congregation: “I found it helpful in the performance of my ministry.” The point he makes rather is this:

This approach...is problematic because the kingdom of grace (the true object of the great commission) is not necessarily flourishing in every healthy, vibrant, growing religious social unit or congregation. Organizational health is certainly an important consideration which we cannot neglect, but we cannot identify organizational health with the health and vitality of the kingdom of God.¹⁶

Distinct from Church Growth standards, the church is evaluated on the basis of its faithfulness to the marks of the church, the pure Word and Sacraments. “Church growth standards have no way

to distinguish the real temple of God from the wood, hay, and stubble which will be burned on the last day. It should be noted that the church growth movement has found no correlation between the content of doctrine and the ability of a church to grow and flourish.”¹⁷ The threat this poses is the temptation (particularly during times of doctrinal stress) to substitute the sociological standards of church growth for the standard of doctrinal integrity and biblical practice in assessing the well-being of the church.

Huebel’s third front is the means the Church Growth movement employs in accomplishing the great commission. In a word, Huebel says, they are “shallow.” Because doctrine is presented as an inconsequential variable in Church Growth thinking, the focus turns to sociological means for keeping the church on the move. A “Growing Church” will be consistently identified as one that utilizes good group dynamics, pays special attention to the convenience of the worshipper, has adequate parking, an “upbeat service,” etc., etc. “All of this activity is helpful and very practical, but it is also primarily sociology.”¹⁸

Tandem with the shallow character of these means for growth is the shallow treatment of the Word in Church Growth usage. The New Testament’s emphasis on Word and Sacrament as **the** means of grace is ignored in favor of exegesis that upholds the sociological principles of Church Growth. “Church growth teachers can find the **oikos** or “household” evangelism principle at work in the New Testament to defend their “web evangelism” principle. This is a valid observation. Why do they not also emphasize what is abundantly more evident in the New Testament, that the growth of the church is specifically attributed, not to the **oikos** principle, but to the Word and the Sacraments?”¹⁹ To expand on this point for a moment, it needs to be stated plainly that the “web principle” as a principle at all is biblically inaccurate. Church Growth has identified a commonly occurring circumstance that attends many of the conversion accounts relayed in the New Testament. But no where can the web principle be adduced as a cause for conversion. Nor can it be maintained that it “predisposes” one for the Gospel. To attribute causality in any way to the coincidental circumstances surrounding a conversion account is untenable biblically. Psychology may suggest otherwise, but the Scriptures leave the matter as *sola gratia* as do the Lutheran Confessions.

CHURCH GROWTH AND THE GOSPEL

I spent time in the previous section reviewing Pastor Huebel’s analysis of the Church Growth movement for a couple of reasons. First, I believe he presents a valuable assessment of the sociological character of the movement: Judged on an outward basis, Church Growth *is*, in the main, so much applied sociology. As a result, I believe the “word of caution” Huebel desires to convey is well taken. Secondly, however, Huebel’s analysis, as valid as it is, is also “typical” of the scrutiny confessional Lutheranism has given the Church Growth movement in the main. Put plainly, it has not probed deep enough. As a result, I do not believe the implications the Church Growth movement holds for confessional Lutherans have been thoroughly explored, or at least, broadcast.

The Church Growth movement is more than sociology with a Christian veneer. Although the characterization that it deals with “shallow” means is true, especially when the movement is viewed by those who treasure the depth of God’s grace, it would be a mistake to think that this shallowness is the result of “half-baked” thinking, or some myopia born of zeal for an idea. One cannot simply write off McCavran and Company as salesmen obsessed with their “product” as some have. To the contrary, Church Growth is the fruit of the theological position of its proponents, and its principles, methods and strategies are consistent with those positions.

This may seem strange in view of Church Growth’s avowed “neutrality” towards doctrine

and the observed indifference toward doctrine by the movement on the part of analysts like Huebel. Remember, it was the fact that “the movement studiously avoids any distinctive theology” that spoke warning to Quebec in the first place. But this “neutrality” is itself a theological statement. The Church Growth movement is closely allied to evangelicalism, specifically what Richard Quebedeaux has called “New Evangelicalism” in his book, *The Young Evangelicals*. He describes this emerging group and their distinctive characteristics:

First, there is emerging a fresh understanding of the reliability and authority of Scripture. The New Evangelicals are firm in their acceptance of the principle of historical criticism. They acknowledge that the Bible is the word of man as well as the Word of God...Second, the New Evangelicals are again emphasizing the necessity of meaningful sanctification following regeneration...Third, there is in the New Evangelicalism a marked aversion to Dispensationalism and its inherent apocalyptic speculations...Fourth, the New Evangelicals are, in fact, displaying a fresh interest in the social dimension of the Gospel. Their emphasis is still on spiritual rebirth, but a strong effort is being made to relate the inward change of heart to the demands of a more righteous society...Fifth, the New Evangelicalism has reopened dialogue with mainstream Ecumenical Liberalism.²⁰

Quebedeaux is describing the Church Growth movement’s place and orientation within the spectrum of American Christianity with these words:

More important than being able to label and file Church Growth under any particular heading is what the Church Growth movement may be seen to share in as a result of this orientation. Most critical in this regard is Church Growth’s understanding of the Gospel it wants to serve in the Great Commission.

As a Lutheran looks through Church Growth material he will find constant reference to the Gospel, of course. The word “Gospel” will appear over and over again, but there is little or no effort expended in explaining what the word means in any explicit manner. What does receive treatment is what Church Growth material describes as “discipling.” Discipling, the work of the Gospel, is delineated by McCavran and Arn this way:

What does it mean to believe in the Name of Jesus Christ? To believe in the Name of Jesus Christ means at least three acts. First, intellectual acceptance. We move from ignorance or doubt to an acceptance of truth: that “Jesus” is the mighty Name—the only Name. That God has willed to reveal himself through Jesus Christ his Word made flesh, Jesus who upholds “the universe by his Word of power.” Second, since Jesus is Lord, and I accept this intellectually, I submit my entire life to him. I obey him in every command he gives me. He is *my* Lord. I subject all my actions, thoughts, attitudes and values, expenditure of time and money to Jesus Christ. I treat my fellow men as Christ commands...In short, the Christian’s whole life must be brought into harmony with the revealed will of God. The third meaning of belief is that I must share the good news with others. ²¹

This kind of discussion of “belief” and “discipling” ought to be very revealing to the Lutheran reader of these words. First, it should sound familiar. As a discussion of faith, it is nothing more, nothing less than Reformed theology’s long-held conception of faith as obedience. Secondly, the Lutheran reader ought to be aware that Church Growth thus shares in an inadequate theology, and moreover, that the theology it shares in is inimical to the Lutheran doctrine of faith, and by extension, the Gospel.

Although the Lutheran and Reformed Churches have shared the *sola scripture, sola gratia, sola fide* “motto” of the Reformation, there has always been a profound difference

between their understanding of the Gospel as the sinner's Justification. The apparent agreement in language between the two is quite unfortunate. The essential character of the Lutheran Reformation consists in the rediscovery of the Gospel as the gracious declaration of the sinner's justification. Moreover, Lutherans, following Luther, have always maintained that the Scriptures cannot be understood properly except in the light of this Gospel proclamation. The Reformed Church has consistently repudiated this. Hermann Sasse, discussing this point in *Here We Stand*, quotes Karl Barth (the Basel Barth, not St. Louis!) in this regard:

According to this conception [de, the Lutheran view of the Gospel as pure proclamation]...the Law has a place before and after the Gospel—before it in order to terrify the unbelieving sinner, after it in order to guide the believing sinner—and hence it is only for the sake of understanding the Gospel that the Law has any place at all in revelation. Accordingly the real and primary attitude of man toward revelation, according to the Lutheran view, is an attitude of faith which confidently appropriates the divine response to human need. **One might go so far as to say that this is an over-emphasis made with that kind of impetuous willfulness which is at once the secret and danger of Lutheran teaching** in more than one place—an over-emphasis which cannot be substantiated either by the facts or by the Biblical testimony to the facts. 22

In contrast, Sasse continues, Barth holds out the Reformed view of the nature and purpose of Scripture to declare God's sovereignty, his majesty, his lordship, and covenant with men. The Reformed look, thus, upon the Lutheran isolation of the Gospel as pure invention and assert:

When God speaks to us in His Revelation, He does not simply declare that our sins are forgiven; "the Law takes its place alongside the Gospel (without in any way detracting from the latter as gospel), on the same footing and as a part of the selfsame treasure. The demand for repentance stands on the same level as absolution, sanctification with justification harmonizing in the same act of revelation and reconciliation.²³

This is not mere quibbling! The Lutheran insistence that the "doctrine of Justification alone opens the door to the entire Bible" is not simply an "optional theologoumenon" which may be discarded or not: **it was and remains the "theological presupposition of the Reformation, and consequently of the evangelical church."**²⁴ Here is why Luther spoke of the ability to distinguish between Law and Gospel as the mark of a consummate theologian. While both the Lutherans and Reformed do distinguish Law and Gospel as separate doctrines, the Reformed see the Law not as the "strange work" of Christ and his cross, but an essential and equal part of that work. To again quote Dr. Sasse:

At first glance these differences [de, between the Lutheran view of the functions of Law and Gospel and the Reformed view] seem to be insignificant. To the layman they must appear to be theological distinctions which are of no particular consequence. In fact, the two views are so close to each other that the difference, at this point, between the two evangelical churches was frequently not observed at all in the Age of the Reformation. But the nearness is only an apparent one. These views of the relation of Law and Gospel stand side by side at first, like two railroad tracks that lie next to each other and seem to be headed toward the same place, until it turns out, later they are going in entirely different directions. 25

Sasse's assessment is borne out by the Reformed view of faith as obedience.

It is axiomatic that when the proper distinctions between the Law and the Gospel are confused, the correct view of faith will also be confused. Instead of being "trust and confidence in the promises of God for the forgiveness of sins" it will take on the aspect of also being a

response to the Law. This is, in fact, the way the Westminster Confession of 1647 defines faith: “an acceptance as true of whatsoever is revealed in the Word, and a conduct which conforms to each particular passage thereof.” Compare these words with the description of faith given by McGavran and Arn! The same confusion is apparent. And faith must be defined this way if the Gospel is made to include anything in addition to God’s promise of free grace in Christ. If the Law is included as part of the “real work” of Christ, if the Savior is also Law-Giver, obedience to his command is also part of faith that responds to him.

Church history is littered with the results of this confusion: the Enthusiasts of Luther’s day and their “obedience;” Thomas Muentzer and the Peasant’s Revolt; Calvin’s Geneva; all the reductions of Christianity to a moral system. The Church Growth movement is theologically part of this same “heritage.” It has “advanced” in its progression down the rails of Reformed thought in that it has cut out the specific Gospel almost entirely, leaving its emphasis on “right living” (moralism) instead of true sanctification. The Law has similarly been reduced to correspond to the emphasis on hurts and aches and the desire to cure them “by the Gospel.” As this has happened, as the emphasis of even classic Reformed thinking of sin and damnation has been lost, and the emphasis has turned to the moral perfectibility of man, it is hardly any surprise that sociology is the tool Church Growth has turned to. Pastor Robert Koester, a WELS pastor and analyst of Church Growth writes in this regard:

Once a departure has been made from a Biblical concept of ministry to a ministry that is more in tune with the moral perfecting of natural man, sociology becomes more and more **the** tool for developing mission strategy. What should be the Spirit’s work using the proclamation of the Gospel, becomes man’s working through the channel of human relationships using little or no proclamation of God’s universal justification. Church **Growth** claims that use of the social sciences, good principles of group dynamics, and increased relational skills are only bringing Christianity to the much sought after position where the offense of the cross is the only thing remaining that might keep a person from becoming a Christian. Yet Church Growth theology, which has to a certain extent removed the offense of the cross already (as testified to its absence in their literature), leaves the door wide open for social science to play a role it was never intended to play in the church. In short, it (social science) becomes the reason people join the church, and not the message of the Gospel. 26

CHURCH GROWTH AND THE MEANS OF GRACE

It is useful at the start of this section to be refreshed in (some of) the statements contained in the Lutheran Confessions regarding the Means of Grace:

Augsburg Confession, Article V [Trig., p. 45] + Of the Ministry

That we may obtain this faith, the Ministry of Teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments was instituted. For through the Word and Sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Ghost is given, who works faith, where and when it pleases God, in them that hear the Gospel, to wit, that God, not for our own merits, but for Christ’s sake, justifies those who believe that they are received into grace for Christ’s sake.

Smalcald Articles, Part III, Article VIII [Trig., p. 497] + Of Confession

Therefore we ought and must constantly maintain this point, that God does not wish to deal with us otherwise than through the spoken Word and Sacraments. It is the devil himself whatsoever is extolled as Spirit without Word and Sacraments.

Formula of Concord, Thorough Declaration, Article XI [Trig., p. 1087] + Of God’s Eternal Election

The declaration, John 6:44, that no one can come to Christ except the Father draw him, is right and true. However, the Father will not do this without means, but has ordained for this purpose His Word and Sacraments as ordinary means and instruments.

The constant and faithful confession of the Lutheran Church has been that these “ordinary means and instruments”—the Word, Holy Baptism and the Lord’s Supper—are truly means by which God’s grace in the Gospel is brought to sinners and through which the Holy Spirit creates and strengthens trust in Jesus Christ for forgiveness, life and salvation. It has also been the constant and faithful confession of the Lutheran Church to reject the false notion that the Spirit works apart from these means (cf. FC, Ep, Art II:4—Of Free Will, Trig., p787; FC ThD, Art XII:2-4 —Of Other Factions and Sects, Trig., p1101.)

What are the implications for the use of the means of grace Church Growth holds for those who stand on this confession? It is very significant in this regard to note that the Church Growth movement does not deal with the Sacraments in any real sense. Church Growth simply does not enter into any aspect of the significance or use of the Sacraments in its principles, its strategies, or its materials. Baptism is mentioned, for instance, in Arn’s *The Master’s Plan* as something “disciples” will do, but solely and purely as an expression of commitment to “discipleship,” but there is total silence about the Lord’s Supper. In fact, I cannot recall reading a single reference to the Lord’s Supper in any Church Growth material. (This is not proof that there is none, but it must be rare if there is.)

This is not oversight or benign neglect or “theological neutrality.” Quite the opposite. Church Growth must necessarily reject the Sacraments as means of grace because of its conception of the Gospel. The theological roots of the movement, Reformed theology, are evident in this. The enthronement of the social sciences to obtain “obedience of faith” a la Church Growth thinking is also in line with the history of Reformed thought. The Church Growth movement has found its greatest acceptance among evangelicalism because it expresses what they believe so well—in these areas.

Can the confessional Lutheran Church participate in the Church Growth movement, adopt its principles, utilize its—strategies and—still remain faithful to its confession of the means of grace? Many are saying, “Yes,” at least with some qualifications. Hopefully all will recognize this the tension between the Lutheran view of the means of grace and Church Growth poses serious questions. I offer these observations and questions for consideration:

First, the place to begin for a Lutheran orientation toward the Church Growth movement is reaffirming our confessional position. The words of the Lutheran Confessions with respect to the means of grace need to be “re-won” as the personal possession of each generation of the Lutheran Church. I have used the word “confessional” frequently in this presentation. I mean it in this sense: subscription to the historic Lutheran Confessions as a correct exposition of the Word of God, the Holy Bible. Subscription is not mere assent, but a solemn promise to, in the words of *The Lutheran Agenda* of the Synodical Conference, “perform the duties of the [Office of the Holy Ministry] in accordance with these Confessions and to conform all thy teaching and thy administration of the Sacraments with the Holy Scriptures and with the aforementioned Confessions.”

If we believe what we confess; if we trust in the efficacy of the means of grace; if we are in earnest about the pure Gospel in Word and Sacrament as the sole means given to the Church to accomplish its goal of evangelization, it needs to be asked: what good can come for that goal from a movement that substitutes principles based on the social sciences rather than the Scriptures for the true means of grace? No confessional Lutheran can live with

McCavran's dictum that "the great obstacles to conversion are social, not theological."

A historical observation is pertinent at this point: whenever in history the Lutheran Church has been courted by the Reformed Church, tempted to imitate their ways, or forced into union, the Lutheran Church has lost her soul. The confessional forefathers of many here chose to leave hearth and homeland and move to this country because they understood this. The Church Growth movement is rooted in Reformed thinking and approach; to "buy in" wholesale to its ways is to tap into its well-spring. At the 1988 Exegetical Theology Symposium held at Concordia Seminary, Dr. Wayne Stumme of the Lutheran Theological Seminary, Columbus, Ohio, commented in his presentation titled "A Lutheran Critique of the Church Growth Movement":

The Church Growth movement, generally speaking, was developed by conservative Evangelicals. And it is my tentative observation that the movement itself tends to produce that type of church: a 'conservative Evangelical' church in terms of piety, in terms of theology, in terms of social attitudes, also in terms of congregational life. What does this mean for a confessional church like the Lutheran Church? Not every method is equally appropriate; not every method can be domesticated or 'Lutheranized' or sanitized or whatever else...What kind of transformation would occur if, say, the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod went completely into the Church Growth movement and adopted its assumptions? That's an interesting question for you to deal with. You may have a more hopeful and positive answer than I am prepared to offer at this time.²⁷

Dr. Stumme's comments raise a further observation: methods are not "neutral." They cannot be disassociated from the presuppositions that led to their contrivance. It is true that "what one sows, one will reap." But *how* one sows will also determine what is reaped. Every method has certain presuppositions that will make themselves known in the end result. Quoting again from Dr. Stumme: "Certainly the way we encourage people to be a part of the church leads them to expect certain things in that church." The "felt needs" emphasis in so much of Church Growth strategy—coming to people on the basis of their hurts and problems, "relating the 'Gospel' to those problems"—can so easily lead to a distorted Gospel. Usually one hears from apologists for the felt-needs approach that they can use this strategy to obtain a hearing for the "prospect's" real need for the forgiveness of sins later on. What is actually happening is attempting to gain people for the church via the Reformed/Church Growth "gospel," a gospel aimed at man's moral betterment, and then attempting "later on" to shift the "prospect" to an understanding and appreciation of the Gospel of God's gracious proclamation of forgiveness. The Reformed/Church Growth gospel is much easier to utilize because of its obvious appeal to human nature: let the Lutheran Church exploit this for its "nobler purpose." Recalling Dr. Stumme's observation above, this strategy is highly problematic in terms of successfully "shifting gears" for the prospect and for the evangelist. I wonder if those proponents of the strategy are as successful at it as they might think.

This sparks a question in my mind: how has the adoption of Church Growth principles and strategies improved true, evangelical outreach over what has been happening in the past? Due credit, at this point, might be again given to those aspects of Church Growth's emphasis on courtesy, sensitivity, etc., toward the unchurched and visitors. Due credit, also, to the reawakening of mission priorities that the movement has engendered. But in terms of the substance of our outreach, its message and means, what

truly evangelical contribution can be cited? What improvement? The Gospel, the precious proclamation of the birth, life, death and resurrection of Christ Jesus for the forgiveness of sin; the precious news of reconciliation between the holy God and sinful man; the gracious message of forgiveness freely won, freely extended that asks only to be believed for Christ's sake: where is the proclamation of this treasure understood and served pure and bright and clearly by the principles, the strategies, the activities of this movement that the Lutheran Church is enriched in her ministry of that Gospel better or more effectively than through the God-given means of grace she possesses? How can the Church Growth movement's inadequate treatment of sin, its confusion of Law and Gospel, its dependence and confidence in applied social science rather than the means of grace, etc., tempt confessional Lutheranism as being the more excellent way? Indeed, "you may have a more hopeful and positive answer than I am prepared to offer at this time."

THE LITURGICAL CHARACTER OF LUTHERAN WORSHIP AND CHURCH GROWTH

I am hoping that this last portion may not appear simply as an after thought. The discussion of the implications Church Growth has for our liturgical character as Lutherans is an issue of importance. Why? First, because as mentioned at the outset, the use of the means of grace is cradled in the liturgical worship of the church. Secondly, there is no greater forum the church has for speaking its message to people than in its corporate worship. It is significant in view of this that the Lutheran Church is liturgical.

It is important to be precise in defining our subject: what is under consideration is a characteristic of the Lutheran Church, not the particular form being used in any of the various branches of the Lutheran Church. Moreover, as I use the word "liturgical" I am not meaning simply that the Lutheran Church uses a liturgy, but that that use is favored, that liturgy is truly "celebrated", and that the church views its liturgy as a God-pleasing means of worship and proclamation of the Gospel.

There is an essential link between the liturgical worship of the Lutheran Church and the central doctrine of Justification. The evangelical (Gospel-centered) character of the Lutheran Church is expressed uniquely by the fact that the church's corporate worship as defined by the liturgy focuses on God's gracious proclamation in Word and Sacrament. From start to finish, the worship service directs the worshiper to God and his grace, then to the response of faith. "A theology of worship shaped by the doctrine of Justification exalts and magnifies God as the actor and donor in the liturgy; the worshiper is the recipient."²⁸

The freedom from rigid formalism in regard to the liturgy declared by Article VII of the Augsburg Confession—"It is not necessary for the true unity of the Christian church that ceremonies, instituted by men, should be observed uniformly in all places." (AC VII:3, Tappert, p32)—cannot be used to relegate all questions of form in the liturgy to the status of an adiaphoron. Above the many measures used in judging liturgical propriety and practice, the measure of the *Hauptartikel* must be applied. It is not enough simply that provision for the Word and Sacraments is made, but that the worship service be constructed for true, evangelical proclamation of the Word and the proper administration of the Sacraments. In other words, the theocentric character of liturgical worship must be maintained for the sake of proclaiming the pure Gospel through the

means of grace.

It is more than just historically interesting in this regard that Luther and his co-workers “retained the Mass,” celebrating it “with the highest reverence” (AC XXIV:1, Trig., p65). The purification of the Roman liturgy by the Lutherans was not inertia seeking to retain the familiar for its own sake; Lutheranism has, rather, always treasured the historic liturgy for its ties with the early church, but especially as a vehicle that, once purified of Rome’s leaven, has served the cause of the Gospel well. While rightly upholding Christian freedom against the stifling legalism of Rome’s liturgical regimentation, the Reformers in that freedom and with great concern for true piety and evangelical worship retained the liturgical heritage of the church.

It is a matter of historical record and common knowledge that the Reformed churches, in the main, rejected the liturgy wholesale. Out of this tradition has come the various forms utilized by American Protestantism, forms characterized by an unbiblical aversion to ceremony, “catholicophobia,” and especially, an emphasis on the individual. In contrast to theocentric worship engendered by the doctrine of Justification by faith, the Reformed rejection of the “ordinary means and instruments” of the means of grace, coupled with their confusion of Law and Gospel has led to a worship style that is fairly characterized as being man-centered. Altar calls, decisions for Christ, subjectivism, and emotionalism are among the traits cultivated by the Reformed view of Christian faith in worship. This is also part of the mould from which germinated the Church Growth movement.

It is unquestionably the case that Church Growth emphasizes the individual in the worship service. Again, in keeping with the statement made at the beginning of this section, our focus is not on forms, but on a characteristic. Exactly in what ways Church Growth thinking is translated into actual worship practices is beyond this focus. In general, Church Growth materials do not concern themselves with specifics, but with general admonitions that worship be kept “relevant,” “upbeat,” “positive,” and “uplifting.” Perhaps more telling is the kind of services by actual churches that are approved of as reflecting “right track” thinking. But by its very nature and purpose, Church Growth is focused squarely on the individual and meeting his needs in worship.

This is detrimental to Lutheran worship in several ways. First, and most germane to our discussion, is that the disregard for the Sacraments in general in Church Growth leads to specific disregard for their place in worship. The Rev. John Pless comments in his “Six Theses on Liturgy and Evangelism”:

The revivalism of the last century has its heir in present day forms of church growth and evangelism with focus on “technique” and “methodology” rather than on the power of the Gospel which God Himself has packaged in His Word and sacraments. Man with his “decision for Christ,” his “felt needs,” his thoughts, emotions and experiences is the focal point. God’s Word, baptism, absolution, the Body and Blood of Christ become incidental and perhaps even a stumbling block to an effective evangelism program. 29

The warning that Church Growth thinking leads to a subordination of the means of grace to the social sciences is especially pertinent to the area of Lutheran worship.

A second area of concern is that the Church Growth emphasis on evangelism as the overriding and goal of all of church life impacts the liturgical character of Lutheran worship negatively by imposing a foreign purpose on it. Worship is for believers.

Church Growth stresses it as another outreach tool. Certainly where the means of grace are so prominent and (prayerfully) purely proclaimed as in the liturgy, outreach is being done. God's promise in Isaiah 55:11 ("My word shall not return to me empty...") is true. But to borrow from my brother, Pastor Bryan Gerlach, our Worship Coordinator in my district:

Lutheran worship (traditionally, historically, confessionally) has been the act and event of the "already converted;" **Christians** gather to worship. Lutheran churches do not have altar calls partly because Lutheran worship is not meant to be the forum in which unbelievers are converted.³⁰

In this regard, the pressure to simplify the liturgy, or remove parts that are not "understandable" to the visitor betray the purpose of our corporate worship.

It needs to be maintained that the depth of character of Lutheran liturgical worship— cannot, nor should be expected to be transparent to the visitor. Let me quickly add that here again, there is a salutary reminder via Church Growth strategy that encourages us to make every effort to make the liturgy understandable; the key is raising people to a level of understanding, not pulling the liturgical plug to drop the level!

Not to get too far afield, but it is interesting to note the "discovery" of the depth and meaning of liturgical worship among some evangelicals. Robert Webber's "pilgrimage" toward liturgical worship, and his encouragement to evangelicals to walk the same path are an interesting phenomenon.

The liturgical character of the Lutheran Church expressed in its worship forms, in its use of the liturgical year, in its rites and ceremonies has served the Lutheran Church and Christianity well. It is a heritage of real worth, not mere historical interest. Rather than being viewed as a liability or a hindrance to outreach, by its very nature of stressing the precious Gospel in the means of grace, it should be commended for faithful, thoughtful celebration to Lutherans serious about missions. That is because it deals with eternal truth and real grace; it proclaims a real and living Savior; it invites response and participation in the mysteries of God. I cannot think of a greater asset to personal motivation for outreach or place to celebrate it.

+ + +

By way of some concluding thoughts, the criticism here of Church Growth is not an impugning of the motives of the movement's leaders or those who see it as a desirable phenomenon in American Christianity. It is meant to be a serious critique of the movement's theology, principles, strategies and methods as they have impact on the means of grace. If I may anticipate a question that may be fairly posed: what alternative do you propose? I would answer, perhaps simplistically in the minds of some, that the Lutheran Church possesses what she needs for effective outreach in her confessional, liturgical heritage that proclaims the Gospel so clearly and purely. Whatever method may be adopted for outreach, it must have that at its base. But more important, to this gathering I would encourage faithful preaching of the Word and administration of the Sacraments. In practical terms, I believe our outreach will "enhanced" much more by time wrestling with the Word in sermon preparation, by careful and prayerful planning and leading of our congregation's worship services than by involving ourselves in a movement that cannot match God's promise for blessing on these things, however

enthusiastically undertaken.

Finally, it would be my overall observation that while the Church Growth movement says it is interested in the growth of the church, of Christianity, it is my impression that in practice it is largely devoted to the spread of a “Christianity” built on man, his desires, his needs, etc. The issue is not supplying people with the church they want, but with the Church Jesus wants. In this regard, the letters to the seven churches in Revelation should be reread by those charged with serving that Church. There the risen, ascended Lord of the Church stresses faithfulness and steadfastness to him for the love of him. There we find confidence and competence to do his bidding.

The Church’s one foundation

Is Jesus Christ, her Lord;

She is His new creation

By water and the Word.

From heav ‘n He came and sought her

To be His holy bride;

With His own blood he bought her,

And for her life He died.

(TLH 473:1)

ENDNOTES

1. Robert Koester, “Law and Gospel in the Church Growth Movement,” (Conference essay, WELS Dakota-Montana District, September 18, 19, 1984) p4.
2. Bert Owen, “Church Growth,” *The Cumberland Seminarian*, (Spring, 1980) pp6,7.
3. Donald McCavean, *Understanding Church Growth*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970) p89.
4. *ibid*, p223.
5. *ibid*, p183.
6. *ibid*, p215.
7. George Hunter, *The Contagious Congregation*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1978) phi.
8. *ibid*, p45.
9. *ibid*, pl6.
- 9.(p8) Glenn Huebel, “The. Church Growth Movement: A Word of Caution,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, (vol. 50, no. 2) pl65.
10. *ibid*, p167.
11. *ibid*, p167.
12. *ibid*, p168.
13. *ibid*, p169.
14. *ibid*, p170.
15. *ibid*, p166.
16. *ibid*, p171.
17. *ibid*, p173.
18. *ibid*, p175.
19. *ibid*, p176.
20. Richard Quebedeaux, *The Young Evangelicals*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1974) pp37-39.

21. Donald McCavean and Win Arn, *Back to Basics in Church Growth*, (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1981) p11.
22. Hermann Sasse, *Here We Stand*, (St. Louis: Concordia, 1966) p12.
23. *ibid*, pp112,113.
24. *ibid*, p116.
25. *ibid*, p121.
26. Robert Koester, *op cit*. p18.
27. Wayne Stumme, "A Lutheran Critique of the Church Growth Movement," taped lecture from the 1988 Lutheran Exegetical Theology Symposium.
28. John Pless, "Six Theses on Liturgy and Evangelism," *CTQ*, (vol. 52, no. 1) p42.
29. *ibid*, p48.
30. Bryan Gerlach, "Our Lutheran Heritage in Worship," (Conference essay, WELS Northern California Delegate Conference, May 2, 1987) p12