

World Missions Conference
East Fork, Arizona

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A BRIEF LOOK AT THE CHURCH GROWTH MOVEMENT

I. What Is the Church Growth Movement?

A. Definition

1. North American Society for Church Growth:

"Church growth is that discipline which investigates the nature, expansion, planting, multiplication, function, and health of Christian churches as they relate specifically to the effective implementation of God's Commission to 'make disciples of all nations.' Students of church growth strive to combine the eternal theological principles of God's Word concerning the expansion of the Church with the best insights of contemporary social and behavioral sciences, employing as the initial frame of reference the foundational work done by Donald McGavran."

2. Simplified: An investigation into what makes churches grow

B. People

1. Donald McGavran (d. 1990 at 92)

a. "Father" of the Church Growth Movement

b. Disciples of Christ missionary to India (28 years)

c. "Why some, not others?"

d. "Bridges of God" (1955)
"Understanding Church Growth" (1970, 1980, 1990)

e. Fuller Theological Seminary School of World Mission (1965)

f. World mission emphasis

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2. C. Peter Wagner
 - a. Missionary to Bolivia for 16 years
 - b. Courses at Fuller under McGavran; then teacher
 - c. Gathered class of local pastors and church executives (1972)
 - d. From that point main thrust is domestic

C. Principles

Definition: "A universal truth which, when properly interpreted and applied, contributes significantly to the growth of churches and denominations"

1. Harvest Principle: "God wants his lost people found"
2. Receptive People: People "friendly to the idea of becoming Christians"
3. Testing the Soil
 - a. Observing where churches are already growing
 - b. Observing where people's life patterns are being seriously disrupted
4. Homogeneous Units: "A section of society in which all the members have some characteristics in common"

"Men like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers"

"In most cases of arrested growth of the Church, men are deterred not so much by the offence of the cross as by non-biblical offenses"
5. New Church Planting: "Requiring converts to join conglomerate congregations will hinder the Church from rapidly spreading to panta ta ethne"

6. Others
 - a. Analysis, planning, goal-setting
 - b. Assimilation
 - c. Pastoral leadership
 - d. Worship
 - e. Every member involvement
 - f. "Church growth consciousness"
 - g. Power evangelism

II. What Are the Dangers of the Church Growth Movement?

- A. Springs from a flawed theological foundation
 1. The Scriptures on
 - a. Justification
 - b. Law and Gospel
 - c. Means of Grace
 2. Reformed theology, the theological foundation of the Church Growth Movement, on
 - a. Justification
 - b. Law and Gospel
 - c. Means of Grace
- B. How Reformed theology is reflected in the principles of the Church Growth Movement
 1. Harvest Principle
 2. Receptive People

3. Testing the Soil
 4. Homogeneous Unit/New church planting
- C. The Church Growth Movement aims at a faulty goal
1. The Great Commission: "Make disciples"
 2. Making disciples in the Church Growth Movement equated with making church members
 3. Leads to emphasis on wrong means: Do what it takes to get people into the church
 4. But are they being brought into the Church?

III. Can We Learn Anything From the Church Growth Movement?

- A. Something of God's truth can be ascertained even by the unbeliever
1. Luther in the 1st Article
 2. Even unbelieving man, through the use of God-given reason, flawed by sin as it may be, can ascertain certain truths about God's creation
 3. Examples
- B. Something of God's truth can also be ascertained by the heterodox
1. Though the Holy Spirit doesn't work through error, he does work through whatever of the truth of the Word that is present
 2. One of the geniuses of Luther: Though quick to expose and condemn error, he also appreciated truth wherever it was found
 3. A contemporary example
- C. What of value can be derived from the Church Growth Movement?
1. Don't look for theological insights
 2. Some helpful hints can be gleaned in the area of the social and behavioral sciences

A Word of Caution

- + Not always easy to separate the wheat from the chaff
- + Too easy to lose sight of what evangelism is all about

Summarizing Theses

The Church is to make disciples by using the means of grace (Mt 28:19,20; Mk 16:15-16; Lk 24:47-48).

Through the law, God reveals to the world its sin and convicts it of its lostness (Ro 3:20; 7:7).

Through the gospel in Word and Sacrament, God brings to the world the message of the finished work of Christ (2 Cor 5:18-19).

Only the gospel produces true growth of the Church. The gospel in Word and Sacrament is the living, powerful means of grace by which God saves lost and condemned people (Ro 1:16; He 4:12; 1 Pt 1:23; Tt 3:5; 1 Pt 3:21).

The primary concern of Christians toward non-Christians must always be for their eternal salvation (Mt 16:26). Hence the greatest need is to bring unbelievers to repentance and faith in Jesus through the gospel and thus into the Holy Christian Church. Making disciples is more important than making church members (Mt 28:19; Lk 24:46; Jn 14:6).

The social sciences, which make observations about people and societies in God's creation, may assist Christians in their work of making disciples, especially by apprising them of possible points of contact with the unchurched and by alerting them to possible external barriers which may keep people from being willing to listen to a Christian's testimony. Thus the social sciences can help the Christian in his quest to become all things to all people so that by all possible means he might win some (1 Cor 9:22).

Since God causes his Church to grow through the means of grace, use of the social sciences must, therefore, always be subservient to the use of the means of grace (Ro 1:16).

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