

Law and Gospel in the Church Growth Movement

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Preface

They are sharp. They have a certain charisma, a certain persuasiveness. They have done their homework. And anyone engaged in mission work in the 1980's will sooner or later deal with their ideas.

Their movement has been called the most important mission development of the century. Some call it a fad. I doubt that it is. It is an attempt to get a handle on basic missiological questions. It is the first really unified attempt to wrestle with questions individual churches have been wrestling with on their own. Whether under its present name, or another, it will be around for a long time.

The Church Growth movement, and its founder Donald McGavran, need to be understood and understood well. They are knocking on the door of any church that takes mission work seriously. They claim to have much to offer any church that will take the time to listen. Should we take them up on their offer? It is my hope that this paper will give you some insights into the Church Growth movement and that it might help us make what I believe to be an inevitable decision.

A Basic Definition

Just what is the Church Growth movement? The phrase "Church Growth Movement" would seem to denote something specific. Yet at the same time, taking away the capital letters, "church growth movement" might seem to denote something rather nebulous, something that probably wouldn't be associated with any specific person or principle. Both things are true about the Church Growth Movement. It is both specific and general. This paradox is one we must live with if we are to understand the movement. One analyst writes,

Like any idea whose time has come it is not easy to pin down. Church growth, simple as it may seem it is in fact a diffuse and varied concept. It can mean different things to different people. It can be expressed in very different ways and be found in many different forms. For some the meaning is clear and obvious, containing within it a known package of theological and ecclesiological assumptions. "Church Growth" becomes a rallying call to fall in behind a particular movement with its esoteric vocabulary and mode of working. For others, interest is more eclectic and general, a willingness to draw upon any or all who seem to be able to illuminate the present situation, who can provide ways and means in a task.¹

In this paper, we will deal with the "clear and obvious" meaning of Church Growth, and with the more general meaning. We will begin with Church Growth as a technical term, embracing precisely defined concepts, and then show how Church Growth has come to encompass general ideas about church growth.

The History of the Church Growth Movement

The Church Growth Movement grew out of the struggles of a missionary by the name of Donald McGavran. McGavran was a third generation missionary for the Disciples of Christ and had become overseer of their mission in India by the mid 1930's. His frustration began building when he saw that none of the 17 churches under his care was growing, and that in the mission's 50 years of work only 2000 had been converted. He worked in the mission until 1954, and later lamented the fact that only about 1000 were confirmed through his efforts. He grew in the conviction that God wanted more growth and that it would come if only mission work was done in an "enlightened" way. He writes,

A vast curiosity was born within me. What does make churches grow? More importantly, what makes many churches stop growing? How is it possible for Christians to come out of ripe harvest fields empty-handed? Answering the questions - what are the causes of church growth, and what are the obstacles to church growth became the chief purpose of my life.ⁱⁱ

McGavran did not grow in his concern in a vacuum. He writes,

While God has granted me a part in the process, I neither invented church growth nor am solely responsible for it. Indeed, I owe my interest in church growth to a great Methodist bishop, Jarrell Waskom Pickett. In 1934, he kindled my concern that the Church grow. I lit my candle at his fire.ⁱⁱⁱ

During the 1930's, '40's, and early '50's McGavran was hammering out his principles of church growth. During this period he was also visiting other missionaries and learning from their successes and failures. In 1954 he visited seven African nations and tested his insights under African conditions.

In 1955, McGavran published a book entitled *The Bridges of God*. It was an expansion of an earlier work, *Church Growth and Group Conversion* (1936) and explained the principles he had been developing while a missionary in India. He wrote a second book that year, *How Churches Grow*. Both books were widely read, but had little impact on missions.

Between 1956 and 1960 McGavran worked for the United Christian Missionary Society. He was sent to Latin America, the Philippines, Thailand, and the Caribbean to survey the Society's churches in those lands. He writes,

I had to adjust church growth theory to make it valid in each new population and for all populations. The Indian color was replaced by a global way of thinking. During the years 1960 to 1970, we systematized the concepts and principles of the church growth movement and fitted them to five continents, to all, in fact, except North America.^{iv}

In 1961 McGavran began an "Institute for Church Growth" at Northwest Christian College in Eugene, Oregon. This organization moved to Fuller Theological Seminary, in Pasadena, California, and there McGavran became the Founding Dean of Fuller Theological Seminary School of World Mission. During the 1960's McGavran's ideas were systematized and in 1970 his findings were published in *Understanding Church Growth* "which many regard as the foundation of the church growth movement."^v Today, missionaries from all over the world and from all denominations study at Fuller School of World Missions and learn to apply Church Growth Principles in their particular situation.

The Church Growth Movement was aimed at church growth in foreign countries. But thoughts of applying it to American churches were always on the minds of some. During the late 1950's when McGavran was teaching in Seminaries of the Christian Church, his students preparing for the American ministry frequently said to him, "The principles you teach apply here." He replied, "Yes, they do, but how they apply you will have to work out."^{vi} In 1963 while at the Institute of Church Growth at Eugene, Ore. McGavran planned to add an American Division, headed by an American minister of church growth convictions, but the plan did not mature.

The conscious effort to apply church growth thinking to America was stimulated by a Pastor Charles Miller, a staff member of Pasadena's Lake Avenue Congregational Church. In 1972 he asked a member of his church, C. Peter Wagner, who was teaching with McGavran at Fuller, to organize a course for local Pastors applying church growth principles to American churches. He and McGavran co-taught the course, and what started out as an experiment, led to a whole new movement that could be called "The American Church Growth Movement." One man who attended that first class in 1972 is today the center of the American thrust of Church Growth thinking. He is Win Arn, who founded The Institute for American Church Growth. This Institute, and

its counterpart in Canada, the Institute for Canadian Church Growth, produce films and seminars that reach all areas of the North America.

In addition to organizations that are direct spin-offs from the Fuller group, other independent church growth organizations have sprung up across the country. These groups have allied themselves with the Church Growth movement in general, and their contributions to church growth research also find their way into the large resource pool in Pasadena.. Two of these are the National Church Growth Research Center in Washington, D.C., and the Yokefellow institute of Richmond, Indiana. The latter organization is headed by Lyle Schaller, one of the more prolific writers on church growth and planning.

The four names mentioned so far form the core men of the church growth movement. Donald McGavran 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 planning whose advice is respected by those who are at the root of the Movement.

The Principles of the “Classical” Church Growth Movement

This description of Church Growth will cover the basic principles of the Movement and what is omitted could be placed somewhere in this outline.

First, Church Growth is a technical term,

A very simple and helpful definition of church growth has been given by Peter Wagner. He says that the technical term “church growth” as coined by McGavran is a term used to define what he means by “evangelism” or “missions”. These traditional words have been defined and redefined until they have lost their specific meaning. For many, they have come to mean everything good that the church does and as a result have no meaning. To express his meaning of evangelism or missions, McGavran took two common words and put them together in the technical phrase, “church growth.” This, as a technical phrase, is virtually independent of the two words “church” and “growth.” Its actual definition is, “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.”^{vii}

The writer continues to narrow down the definition,

At first glance, church growth materials do not seem to provide any distinctive or new information about evangelism. It is more a concept or philosophy than it is methods. Its uniqueness is not in a packaged program, but in a commitment to certain basic principles pertaining to what it means to be obedient to the [great commission].^{viii}

What then are the principles of “church growth?”

1. Church growth is the will of God. This is the first and overriding principle. It is God’s will that people be added to his church, and anyone engaged in doing work in the church must operate on this principle if he is to be scriptural. To support this principle, it is pointed out that the book of Acts often speaks about people being added to the church. One critic of church growth said that he felt the movement was reactionary.^{ix} Although the proponents of church growth would disagree and would argue that it was formed from Scriptural concerns, I would agree that on this point it is reactionary, and rightly so. It is a reaction against mission work done by liberal churches where evangelism is replaced by social service, and where growth is viewed as irrelevant.

2. This first principle is connected to a second. God endorses harvest theology, not search theology. Much is made of the distinction between “search” and “harvest” in Church Growth writing. From our standpoint in WELS this distinction might seem to be so much playing with words. But there is substance to the distinction. The two words were chosen to label a proper and an improper mindset. When McGavran speaks of “search” theology, he is speaking about a mindset that many churches have developed over against mission

work. He lists four reasons why churches have developed a “search” mentality. First, there were years when mission work was begun on a large scale in areas where Western influence was weak, and when support from sending denominations was slim,

Christian mission needed a theology which would undergird it during the long years when it was weak at home and hard beset abroad. Search theology did this. It strenuously denied that results had anything to do with mission. Search was God’s will.^x

Second, during the past decades a relativism has engulfed Christianity, making propagation of one specific belief at the expense of others undesirable. Hence, a missionary searched for a few who might find something worthwhile in his Christian message. Third, pressure from the foreign country on missionaries to supply not the message of Christ, but hospitals, schools, etc. was a strong temptation to limit one’s missionary work to “search”. And fourth, missionaries in slow growing areas needed to justify their work, so they developed a rationale for existence that did not depend on numbers.^{xi} McGavran concludes,

At base, the trouble is that mere search, detached witness - without the deep wish to convert, without wholehearted persuasion, and with what amounts to a fear of the he numerical increase 12 se of Christians -is not biblically justified.^{xii}

“Search” theology, then is detached witness. “Harvest” theology can be defined as the opposite. It is doing everything you can to win the most people. Harvest theology means concentrating on numbers of people that are found. God wants a large number of people harvested, and so it is important to count people and determine where and how they are being won.

Church Growth runs into a lot of criticism for its emphasis on numbers. I for one have no trouble with their thinking. They have explained themselves well on this point, and their motivation for gaining numbers is not aggrandizement, but concern that resources are put where needed the most. Their emphasis on numbers would tell our Synod, for example, immediately to send additional men and money to Malawi to capitalize on the Lord’s blessing there even though work in some less fruitful area might suffer. Their plan is to hold unresponsive areas lightly and put money and manpower into those areas where there is the greatest increase. Can we disagree?

3. Once you have come to the point of wanting a harvest, you have to know how that harvesting can best be done. To discover this, you need to see the world with “Church Growth Eyes.” The World is a great Mosaic made up of Homogeneous Units. When Church Growth people look at the world, they don’t see nations with geographical boundaries, but ethnic groups surrounded by cultural boundaries. A homogeneous unit is “simply a section of society in which all members have some characteristic in common.”^{xiii} The world must be viewed as groups of people having various characteristics that group them together, and keep them apart from others. In countries where society is “layered” with castes, the homogeneous unit would stretch across the country but be limited to certain people in any one locale Together, these homogeneous units comprise the great mosaic out of which the picture of human kind emerges.

The homogeneous unit principle has far reaching implications in Church Growth evangelism. One author writes,

Peter Wagner says he has discussed and debated this principle all over the world with many Christian leaders and “...without doubt it is the most controversial of all church growth principles.” However, in spite of its controversial nature, Wagner says that of all the church growth principles, this one most nearly approaches being a law.^{xiv}

Why is it so important? It is important because to church growth proponents effective evangelism can only be done by following the lines of least resistance. McGavran writes, “Men like to become Christian without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers.”^{xv}

A homogeneous unit is the line of least resistance. Continuing the previous quotation, “Research from many cultures around the world indicates that growth is more likely to occur in fellowships that are basically developed around a single homogeneous unit.”^{xvi}

4. To further discuss the homogeneous unit principle, we introduce another principle: The Church grows through People Movements. A people movement is the rapid spread of the Gospel along lines within a specific homogeneous unit. The lines along which the Gospel spreads are called “The Bridges of God” by church growth proponents. (Note the earlier reference to McGavran’s 1955 book by that name.) A bridge is a certain natural relationship, e.g. friend or relative, that is used as a channel for spreading the faith. McGavran writes,

In tightly knit societies, where people consciousness is high, and all marriages take place within the segment of society concerned, the chain of relationship is particularly strong. Once Christianity has been established, once a couple of thousand have become Christian, tens of thousand of bridges become available. The potential for explosive growth is high, because across all such bridges the faith may flow.
^{xvii}

When that explosive growth takes place, a people movement has begun, and it should be allowed to continue until the entire segment is Christianized.

Once a particular people movement has run its course, work must begin “cross-culturally.” People trained as missionaries must plant Christianity in a new people, and then work toward a people movement. Evangelism is classified by type, depending on what cultural distances must be bridged for the evangelism to be done.^{xviii} But once work has begun in a new segment of society, those native to the society must be the ones who do the work, for they are the only ones who possess the necessary “bridges.”

5. Care must be taken to “disciple” a people first. Let the group make its group decision to become Christian, and then work on “perfecting” the Christians. Another principle is: Don’t slow down a people movement by perfecting. Perfecting must become an important part of church work, but it can wait. As is normal in evangelical circles, the new churches are encouraged to pray for revival to aid in their perfecting. Church growth thinking runs counter to the “individual decision” theology of much of current Protestantism. It stresses “group decisions” or as McGavran phrases it, “multi-individual decisions.” These decisions are no less real, the only difference is that they have been made after discussion and agreement with others of one’s family or larger relation. There is an emphasis on “quality” Christianity, as opposed to mere numbers and nominal Christianity. Whether the desired quality is always achieved can be debated. But to them, on paper at least, numbers are not opposed to sincerity, commitment and knowledge.

People movements, then, are the goal. But how do people movements start, and why do they start where they do? To answer these questions, Church Growth people engage in strenuous research. This is one of the main tasks of Fuller School of World Missions. The school is not just concerned with teaching missionaries. It is also concerned with ongoing scientific research that seeks to locate receptive peoples, and then evangelize them. It is a vast clearinghouse of facts, figures, methods, successes and failures.

Missionaries receiving degrees do research that is added to this pool of knowledge. McGavran writes,

One who would understand church growth must be particularly careful that he distinguishes between what churchmen hoped would happen, what happened in an instance or two, what ought to happen, and what in fact did happen. The picture built up by patiently assembling accurate statistics concerning the Church and its many constituent parts is the foundation of all further knowledge of church growth.^{xix}

One analyst describes the scientific nature of church growth,

Church growth places an emphasis on research. This is done in a disciplined scientific way to discern why churches grow.... More and more is becoming known about how to plan intelligently for church growth. In all sciences there are research methodologies developed to uncover pertinent information so those involved in the field can have better knowledge on which to operate. Church growth science is no different. There is an attempt to use the best and most revealing research to determine why churches have growth or decline, what helps a church in growing and what hinders it.^{xx}

McGavran and Arn write,

The scientific method is thinking about things of the kingdom with the same astute observation, common sense, and good judgment that we use in thinking about other areas of life. The scientist works with specific tools; so does the Church Growth researcher.^{xxi}

Data used by Church Growth scientists ranges from case histories of growing churches, to data gathered by secular scientists that may point to a unit of society that is ripe for the Gospel. McGavran writes,

How does one know whether a population is responsive? Eventually measurements may be worked out which will tell I 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.^{xxii}

And he succinctly puts it, “The great obstacles to conversion are social, not theological.”^{xxiii}

Principles of the American Church Growth Movement

At this point, I would like to shift from general Church Growth principles, to a discussion of how these principles apply to American Churches.

1. Church Growth is the will of God. This is the starting point for all church growth. A missionary must have a desire to see the church grow, and this desire is based on what he knows God desires.
2. America is a mosaic of homogeneous units. American homogeneous units would include, for example, the various groups that make up the Spanish speaking community as well as other ethnic groups that are keeping their national identity. The concept extends to various groups of whites whose cultural identity may have been lost, but which still share certain characteristics.

Rural Americans might be classified as a homogeneous unit. University environs might include others. A community of workers employed at a local factory would be another. Middle class America would be viewed as one of many units, and not the standard against which all others are to be measured. Any group is a homogeneous unit that considers itself “we” over against everyone else who is considered as “they.”

The upshot of this is that each of these units should have its own church. Indeed, if full evangelistic potential is to be reached, a church must only include those of one homogeneous unit. Peter Wagner writes,

The social, racial, cultural, economic and linguistic composition of the local church should as nearly as possible reflect the corresponding marriage and family patterns of the community in which it exists if it is to maximize its evangelistic potential.^{xxiv}

And again,

If the option of crossing homogeneous unit lines and mixing two or more different groups in the congregation is chosen, the positive effect is that Christians will feel very good about their success in breaking through racial or class barriers....However...the evangelist potential of the church will be seriously curtailed.^{xxv}

3. The Gospel flows best along “the bridges of God.” This concept is applied to America just as it is applied to world mission work. Those within a homogeneous unit have natural relationships where they can do evangelism work. A group should follow its bridges out as far as it can. When it runs into another homogeneous group, instead of incorporating it into itself, it should plant another church.

This concept of using the “bridges of God” is the bottom line in American Church Growth methodology. The book *The Master’s Plan* by Win and Charles Arn describes the plan of evangelism proposed by the Institute for American Church Growth. This plan was devised in the course of analysis of the successes and failures of methods used by churches across the country. The book describes a fictional character, Chuck Bradley, and how his Pastor introduced him to this program. It describes how he and each church member was taught to identify his “extended family,” a group of relatives or acquaintances whom he would work to lead into the church. The plan is simple. Work within homogeneous units, and start a people movement of sorts. Witness by word and deed to your friends and relatives and lead them to Christ.

It is significant that Church Growth has completely abandoned traditional Protestant crusades and yearly week long rallies. Win Arn used to work for the Billy Graham Crusade before being converted to Church Growth thinking. In keeping with the Church Growth insistence on judging programs with hard data, he has studied the results of crusades, and other programs such as Key 73, and Here’s Life, America put on by Campus Crusade. His analysis led him to the conclusion that relatively few were actually incorporated into the church as a result of these efforts. Their conclusion is that the local church, and not para-church organizations, is the answer to evangelism. As in Church Growth in general, “multiply churches” is the answer to evangelizing the world. The importance of the local church cannot be emphasized by church growth people enough.

But the American Church Growth Movement has become much more than simply applying McGavran’s basic principles to America. Church Growth has become church growth. Recalling our opening comments, the Church Growth Movement is also a more general and diffuse movement. As much as the Fuller men want to guard their term and retain its narrow scientific connotation, even among them, the term has been widened, and its capital letters lost. Currently, anything that is remotely connected with describing how a church grows has come under the umbrella of Church Growth seminars and instructional material.

Books are rolling off the presses with instructions on growing churches. Two sources I am familiar with are the Institute for American Church Growth, and the Charles E. Fuller Institute. The books in the Bibliography are primarily from the former.

What can you find under the Church Growth umbrella? Let me give you a smattering.

There are general books that deal with trends in growing churches. Books in this category would generally come from groups or individuals that do serious research and observation. Peter Wagner’s book *Your Church Can Grow* and McGavran and Arn’s *Ten Steps For Church Growth* would be examples of this type. These books list what the authors feel are common denominators of growing churches across the United States.

There are books in which pastors describe their growing churches. Frank Tillipugh’s *The Church Unleashed* is an example of a growing church in the Denver area.

There are books on small churches, such as *Making the Small Church Grow* by Robert Maner. There are a few books on preaching, such as Joe Harding’s *Have I Told You Lately?* There are books on why people fall away from church such as John Savage’s *The Apathetic and Bored Church Member*. There are books on Spiritual Gifts. There are books that help the church diagnose itself and solve its problems. There is a myriad of

books on the dynamics of congregations and operating a church with good principles of group dynamics. And there are books on creating an appealing Sunday School.

There are church analysts (e.g Lyle Schaller and several groups in the Pasadena area) that visit churches and help them solve their problems on location. You can attend seminars, or sponsor them in your own area. Movies on various aspects of church growth are available. You can even buy a board game on church growth. Magazines are available from various groups. Taped lectures are available, as well as degree programs at Fuller composed of home reading and brief on campus classes.

In short, anything written on what makes churches grow can be gotten through Church Growth organizations. The movement then has fanned out into all areas of church growth writing and research and become in addition to a group with specific principles, a clearinghouse for a diverse group of authors and researchers.

The Theology of the Church Growth Movement

Can we use Church Growth materials? To properly answer this question, we will have to examine the theology of the Church Growth Movement. We will have to locate its place in American Protestantism, attempt to grasp what the Gospel means to it and define its meaning of ministry. Hopefully we will be able to see that its methods are conditioned on its theology (i.e. not “neutral”) and whether or not those methods will be compatible with our theology. I might add that the following analysis is designed to give you a general picture of Church Growth thought, and not a detailed and well defined outline. I have attempted to isolate a few characteristics of Church Growth that go together to form a pattern I think we should be aware of.

First, Church Growth theology fits into the American religious scene at the point where left wing evangelicals, conservative liberals, and Pentecostals meet. I found a book by Richard Quebedeaux to be particularly helpful. Quebedeaux, in his book, *The Young Evangelicals* classifies protestantism into four groups. First, there are the “closed Fundamentalists”. According to him this is fundamentalism at its worst, with its “dogmatism” and “rudeness”. Then there are the “open fundamentalists.” These churches are attempting to keep the best of their doctrinal heritage, but are attempting to be more open and cooperative with the evangelicals. Third, there is “establishment evangelicalism.” *Christianity Today* would be their magazine, Wheaton, Illinois would be their mecca, and Billy Graham their spokesman. Within their ranks, though, there has arisen a new group. This group, according to Quebedeaux, has certain distinctive characteristics that make it unique. He labels this group “The New Evangelicalism.” He lists its 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 re-opened dialogue with mainstream Ecumenical Liberalism.^{xxvi}

This book was written about the time when Church Growth was getting off the ground. It describes to a “T” the nature of Church Growth theology, and it can be demonstrated that the movement contains each of the five characteristics. In particular, their view of Scripture, their emphasis on the “social dimension” of the Gospel, and their association with mainstream liberals come through clearly in their writings.

Let’s focus on one of Quebedeaux’s characteristics, the ecumenical nature of Church Growth. Church Growth is ecumenism in the extreme. Church Growth may bring under it’s umbrella those who have a doctrinal concern, but the leaders have created a false antithesis between doctrinal concern, and fulfilling the great

commission and have opted for the latter. They have convinced themselves that no church has the truth. And they have adopted an attitude so pragmatic that whatever church is growing is the one whose methods should be copied by all the rest. McGavran writes,

It is essential to remember that while Christians base their actions on God's truth, the truth which the Bible reveals is not fully exemplified in any empirical church. The one way is never what any given church does. Its rituals, customs, hymns, and *doctrines* (emph. mine) are all man-made and imperfect.^{xxvii}

The ecumenical outlook today assists in increasing the tolerations with which other patterns are viewed, but it has not notably increased willingness to search out more effective patterns and use them. Lutherans in Puerto Rico follow their own distinctive pattern, which has achieved inconsiderable growth, rather than switch to a Baptist pattern which has produced great church-growth. Both eschew the Assembly of God pattern which has produced much more growth than either. Evangelistic missions stick to evangelistic paths even when those are not as successful as educational paths, and vice versa.^{xxviii}

It is interesting to note that while they espouse an ecumenical attitude, their pragmatic concern has led them to teach also the importance of a church's feeling that it is the only true church. They stress the importance of the point Dean Kelly makes in his classic book, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing*. His point is that churches with narrow minded concern for the (their) truth share an evangelistic zeal that is absent in ecumenical churches.^{xxix} This evangelistic zeal is what is needed for church growth and so important to the movement. In fact, McGavran and Wagner go so far as to stress the benefit of churches splitting. Each church has a new purpose, and engages in evangelism work with new zeal.^{xxx} And so they espouse a rather paradoxical attitude: ecumenicity and separatism.

How can they do this? It's easy. First, they reduce their faith to the lowest common denominator (as McGavran does above). Then they consider other doctrines as ritual and an outgrowth of a particular culture. Then they view each church as a body that because of its cultural/doctrinal background is best able to minister to a particular segment of society (homogeneous unit). And so a church becomes unique because of its form (even though the church itself might think it is unique doctrinally.) This creates an ecumenical stance that doesn't alienate anyone, but at the same time a separatistic uniqueness that fosters evangelism along homogeneous unit lines.

We must realize that doctrine cannot survive in Church Growth thought. To underline this fact, we note that Church Growth men stand in awe of the Pentecostal movement. The rapid growth of the Pentecostals has enamored them. In a recent book Peter Wagner wrote,

Even during my own seminary training in the early 1950's my professors implied that many of the gifts had ceased at the end of the apostolic age. One reason for this attitude was that these professors, like many others, had not yet come to terms with the Pentecostal movement which, at that time, had not gained the strength and acceptance it enjoys today.^{xxxi}

Peter Wagner's pastor, Ray Ortlund, while not a Pentecostal, gives evidence to the affinity between Church Growth and Pentecostalism,

We only have unity because we have a common life. One of the greatest hindrances to practiced unity, I suppose, is that people think they can have it by prescribing a certain polity or creed. But you only get unity of spirit by having THE Spirit.^{xxxii}

Given the lack of doctrinal emphasis in Church Growth, we have to ask, what becomes of the Gospel? And then, what is their ministry? This is the crux of the issue, and it is against this that we will assess Church Growth.

One of the most striking things about Church Growth literature is the absence of the Gospel message. In spite of all the talk about fulfilling the great commission, there is little attempt to describe what it is we are to share. Now granted, you might not expect every book on Church Growth to go into a detailed presentation of the Gospel, or explain how the Gospel is the center of Church Growth methodology. But when you read book after book and find an almost complete absence of reference to the importance of the Gospel, you begin to wonder. Of all I read, only two books emphasized the Gospel in any way, *Back to Basics in Church Growth* and *On the Crest of the Wave*. But notice how McGavran and Arn define belief in *Back to Basics*,

The church growth movement is based on solid conviction. Christ has spoken the definitive and final word: "I am the way, I am the truth, I am the life. No man comes to the Father but by me." This is the certainty the church growth movement has expressed, is expressing, and will express. It is God's will that Christians voice it, print it, broadcast it, shout it, and sing it. 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.^{xxxiii}

This discussion of the Gospel came like streams in the desert at one point in my reading, but as you can see, it is still a rather dry stream. The Gospel is not there. Forgiveness is consistently an "also mentioned" aspect of the Gospel.

This has profound implications on the Church Growth definition of ministry. When the Gospel is absent, moralism is substituted for sanctification. Ministry gravitates toward a mere teaching of doing good under the heading of submitting to the Lord of my life. The wonderful connection St. Paul makes between forgiveness and my ability and desire to serve my Lord in Romans 6 is lost. And once that is lost, or to a large extent lost, Christianity becomes primarily a religion of ethics and morals and "right living." Its appeal is to people who have hurts and aches and it promises a cure. Although it teaches that repentance and Christ's forgiveness is where healing begins, it seems that the point of beginning and therefore the final goal is on healing rather than on salvation from sin and the curse of the Law.

Church Growth thinking departs from the themes of the total depravity of human nature, the knowledge of God's gracious forgiveness worked in me by the Holy Spirit, and the fact that I now serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code. It enters into themes such as the need for a Christian society as the best of all societies, the need for me to surrender myself to Christ, and need for me to obey his commands. Its ministry becomes preaching freedom through my yielding myself to Christ and obeying him, rather than through Christ's freeing me both for salvation and for service through his death on the cross. The nature and purpose of the Christian Church shifts off center.

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 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 in 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 why people join the church, and not the message of the Gospel.

We must strive to develop good skills in group dynamics, to foster relationships with unbelievers, and take away whatever adds unnecessary offenses to the offense of the cross. But the problem with Church Growth is that these matters which clearly belong to the sphere of the Law (the Law to love my neighbor), have become the means by which the Church grows. If you doubt what I am saying, then read Church Growth material and compare the place social science plays in church growth with the place the Gospel plays in it.

This confusion of Law and Gospel is evident even the basic Church Growth principles that might appear neutral at first. Think of a couple of the principles of Church Growth described earlier.

The homogeneous unit principle and the people movement principle can both be used to describe how many churches grow. To work within language boundaries and even within cultural boundaries is certainly not wrong. It is wise. However, when McGavran says, "The great obstacles to conversion are social, not theological,"^{xxxiv} one begins to wonder whether his use of the homogeneous unit principle is as "neutral" as ours might be. What he means becomes clear when we begin to see that in Church' Growth writings, the homogeneous unit principle is stressed to such an extent that a common culture, and not a common experience of sin and grace, is the most important thing in the spread of the church.

To illustrate how the homogeneous unit concept has been allowed to shape all Church Growth thinking, let me give you two examples of how Scripture is interpreted in the light of sociology and culture (the homogeneous unit), rather than in the light of the cross.

Take, for example, the Church Growth understanding of Acts 6:1-7. There we meet two distinct groups, Hebrew Christians and Hellenistic Christians. A problem arose. The Hellenistic Christians complained against the Hebrew Christians that their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. The apostles solved the problem by appointing seven deacons to handle this matter. Now we take this account at face value. The distribution of food was not equitable. The disciples recognized the problem and solved it. Church Growth does not see it that way. According to them, the problem of the widows was only a surface problem. The real problem was that the Jewish Apostles were in charge of both the Jewish and Hellenistic homogeneous units. The Hellenists wanted autonomy. The disciples recognized this and subtly got out of the predicament by "using pious language," i.e. the matter of their not wanting to "neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables." (Acts 6:2) That was not their real reason for appointing seven elders. The real reason lay in their recognition of the homogeneous unit principle, and that only if the Hellenists received autonomy would their evangelistic fervor be sustained.^{xxxv} Certainly this interpretation does not give much credit to the faith of the Hellenistic Jews, nor does it reflect well on the position of authority of the apostles who had to use "pious language" to solve the problem.

A second section of Scripture that is uniquely interpreted through "church growth eyes," is Galatians. The whole question of the Judaizers and their evil effects on the congregations in Galatia is reduced to a matter of culture. The sin of the Judaizers is that they wanted the Gentile homogeneous unit to assimilate into the Jewish homogeneous unit by adopting their laws. Peter Wagner says,

The Apostle Paul saw clearly that the Gentiles could become followers of God without becoming Jews. Now there were a whole lot of Jews who did not believe this until their dying day. They were called Judaizers. And wherever Paul went and led Gentiles to the Lord and let them become Christians and still eat pork and be uncircumcised, why these Judaizers came up to perfect the saints and told them, "If you really wanted to become followers of God you've gotta be Jews. So get circumcised and stop eating pork and all those other things that you bad Gentiles do. Now that was cultural; that wasn't theological.

The whole New Testament and all that Paul writes is telling us that that's not theological, that's cultural
- Judaizing.^{xxxvi}

This is how this section is seen through “church growth eyes,” even though Paul expressly declares that what is at stake is not the matter of the offense of cultural barriers, but the offense of the cross. This example especially tells us much about the place of homogeneous unit sociology in Church Growth thought. Church Growth eyes have focused on culture, but seem to be blind to the centrality of the cross.

This same pattern is found in the distinction between “perfecting” and “discipling.” Certainly there is a distinction between coming to faith, and growing in faith. We do not wait until one confirmand has reached complete maturity before we go out and find others. But there is more than this to the Church Growth distinction. Peter Wagner discusses the objections another missiologist, Orlando Costas, has with the Church Growth distinction between “discipling” and “perfecting.” His comments shed light on what Church Growth is leading to in this distinction. Quoting Costas and then adding his own comments,

“A disciple is not merely one who receives and accepts a body of information. He is one who submits himself to the instruction of a teacher. To push the issue of ethical change to a post conversion stage, which is what Church Growth theology does...” Now you see Costas is right; that's what Church Growth theology does. “is to limit the Biblical understanding of conversion version which calls for a turning from sin to God.”^{xxxvii}

We might describe our objections differently, but Costas does point out the untenable rift between conversion and sanctification in Church Growth theology. When Church Growth talks about discipling, they are merely talking about a general acceptance of a group that Jesus is Lord. When they talk about perfecting, they are talking about instruction as to how to serve Jesus as Lord.

When St. Paul talks about conversion, he links with it an understanding of sin, an understanding of forgiveness, and an inseparable understanding of how we now for the first time can serve God in the new way of the Spirit. To be a disciple means to be one who already can and wants to serve. Church Growth, in defining conversion, has already drawn off most of the Gospel as we understand it, makes of it a moral commitment, and then proceeds to “perfect.” “Discipling” and “perfecting” can be separated because the Spirit-worked link of justification to sanctification has not occurred simply because the real Gospel is absent. Again, the Law is dominant.

When we turn to actual methodology, or strategy, for missions, we begin to see how these principles work out in practice.

Two men are often held up as examples of people who are on the right track, Lyle Schaller, and Robert Schuller. Their ministry is held up as the norm and Church Growth urges us to copy their techniques.

Lyle Schaller is a church planner, who has analyzed thousands of churches across the nation. He shares his insights in his books. His books are nothing but descriptions of group dynamics, and “creative” ways of handling problems. Of all the books I read, I enjoyed his the most. He has said that all he was trying to do was offer suggestions as to how to handle problems in churches using the experience of other churches. He viewed churches as organizations with political and dynamic problems. He attempted to help congregations in self analysis and out of situations where they are just butting their heads against a wall. But no matter how instructive his books are they are all Law, and no Gospel. Church growth is effected through eliminating barriers to people's coming into contact with the Gospel.

The second recommended example is Robert Schuller. To me it is much more frightening that he is viewed as a good example by Church Growth. But it is much more revealing of Church Growth thinking. Schuller's philosophy of evangelism work revolves around his oft quoted phrase, “Find a need and fill it.” To Schuller this means identifying what need a person, or a group of people (homogeneous unit) has and then designing a ministry around it. During his first year in Orange County, CA, Schuller rang 3,500 doorbells and

asked people why they didn't come to church. In general, he found that what churches were offering wasn't what people wanted. What people in Orange County needed, according to Shuller, was a feeling of worth. Hence, he developed his message that revolved around "positive self esteem" or "self worth." Sin, forgiveness and God's grace are taught only to believers. His Sunday Morning Service caters to unbelievers. His hymns, sermon, and even the architecture of his building (the Crystal Cathedral) stress this feeling of self worth that he feels people need. It becomes obvious, even to conservative evangelicals, that Schuller is undermining the preaching of sin and forgiveness, and that his ministry is not a ministry of the Gospel, as they understand it.^{xxxviii} Yet he is a model in Church Growth circles.

This theme of "find a need and fill it" is advocated by another student of Church Growth, George Hunter. Hunter studied at the School of World Missions, and as Chairman of the United Methodist Board of Evangelism pushed Church Growth thinking in that group (though not without some opposition.) In his book, *The Contagious Congregation*, a book on evangelism strategy, Hunter describes concisely what evangelism becomes in Church Growth thinking.

His beginning point is the need to discover where people hurt (like Schuller). To do this he offers a model of human needs, Maslow's Hierarchy of Human Motives. He writes, 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.^{xxxix}

Hunter explains how the evangelizer uses this model,

- 1) The witnesser discovers, or the other person shares some particular need for which the gospel is relevant.
- 2) The witnesser than 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 partial 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.^{x1}

Hunter concludes,

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. The strategy that I am leading to is this: When we find that people are relatively low on the hierarchy, we may engage them out of an “Inductive-Grace” model; when we find that they are relatively high on the hierarchy, an Inductive Mission model.^{xli}

Hunter’s “Inductive-Grace” model is simply this: when I discover a person who has needs that relate to the simpler facets of life, hunger, shelter, financial security, I offer him the comfort that God will provide for his needs, and ask him to turn himself over into God’s hands and ask for help from the God of love. And God will give his grace. Hunter’s “Inductive-Mission” model is this: When I find someone higher on the list, to get on the right track and become the person God meant him to be, then I offer him the Gospel which says that God has freed him for service (mission). He writes, “It is in altruistic serving activities that we are set free to realize our potential to its height and to fulfill the reason for our birth.”^{xlii}

Hunter poses a question in which he also defines what evangelism means to him, “How can we become effective enablers of the Great Possibility for other people?”^{xliii} Where is sin and grace? Where is the Gospel of God’s forgiveness? Donald McGavran put his stamp of approval on the book in the forward, “John Wesley would have rejoiced in it. Dr. Hunter has given us tools for the task. Let us use them.”^{xliiv}

This pattern of theology and methodology continues in more strategy suggestions. Probably the best introduction to American Church Growth methods is found in *A Pastor’s Church Growth Handbook*, Vols. I and II. These volumes contain the best articles from “Church Growth: American,” the publication of the Institute for American Church Growth. It contains articles from ministers all over the country and gives a very broad picture. Without going into too much detail, the emphasis is on discovering the social needs of people, and using them as one’s “in” to begin preaching the Gospel.

One of the most often proposed avenues of contact with people relies on the psychological stress scale developed by Thomas H. Holmes. Holmes listed stress producing events and assigned each a value. These ranged from 100 for death of spouse to 45 to retirement, to 20 for change in residence. The idea is that if we reach people during times of stress, we will find them more responsive to the Gospel. This scale, by the way, has been used by men in our Synod. Now, we can understand it’s use properly, for God sometimes uses stress situations to impress on us his Law. When that is the case, certainly the person is more responsive to the Gospel. But its use easily fits into the concept of the Gospel being a social healing. To focus on times of social stress is to invite warped use of the Gospel. At the end of the article in which Holmes’ stress chart was proposed, the author writes,

New Testament Christianity has the only viable answer to the family problems this nations and the people in it are experiencing. The church has something very valuable to offer the community. This is one way of finding the hurt in the community and healing it - and that makes congregations grow. If Christians can offer people in the community help in improving the quality of their life, they can minister in a way that no one else can. People who are not yet interested in learning how to save their souls, are often interested in learning how to save their marriages and their homes. People will often attend a weekend workshop on family life when they would never attend a traditional church meeting. In such situations Christians can contact people who are likely to be receptive subjects for evangelism.^{xlv}

Certainly people come to our churches for reasons other than to hear the Gospel. We minister to them in love, and help them in whatever way we can, and continue to pray that the Lord will open their hearts to the real

problem, their sin. But is not Law and Gospel of necessity confused when we give people the impression through the kind of evangelism tools we use, that our church exists to help them in their social needs? I have discussed this avenue of Church Growth methodology at length because I believe it is the root of Church Growth evangelism methods. If you can see this pattern, you will also be able to see in what direction a Pastor will be pushed who leans on Church Growth to help him in his evangelism program.

Church Growth and Our Church

The Church Growth Movement should not be taken lightly. It is knocking at our door. The Missouri Synod has delved heavily into Church Growth theology and methods. It is teaching Church Growth at its Seminaries and through workshops around the country. A workshop was held here in Montana in the Flathead Valley toward the latter part of July.

Church Growth books and ideas are being used by Pastors of our Synod. Recent issues of TELL have leaned heavily on Church Growth, and while not always quoting from them, have shaped articles around the Church Growth mold.

Currently our Synod is talking about growth and expansion. So why not use Church Growth ideas?

The conclusion that I have come to after reading a good chunk of the Church Growth library is that Donald McGavran's basic principles lead to a ministry that to a greater or lesser extent revolves around the social Gospel. While "homogeneous units" and "people movements" might appear to be "neutral" ideas, the underlying nature of those principles cannot be separated from a way of doing evangelism that uses the subject's human needs, and avoids creating a need through the Law, and solving that need with Christ's forgiveness. While we might observe the validity of "homogeneous units" and "people movements" in our own mission work, a missiology that wraps itself up in these principles will tend toward advocating the use of the social sciences as its means at the expense of the means of grace. The only difference between Church Growth social Gospel and Liberal social Gospel, is that to the Liberal the social Gospel is his Gospel, while to the Church Growth advocate, the social Gospel is used as a tool to get a person to a point where he can hear the real Gospel.

I got a lot out of the books I read. I was made more conscious of how a congregation hinders the Gospel. I learned about "cosmetic" changes that a congregation could make to improve people's first impression of the Christian and his Gospel. I am better able to see our congregation through the eyes of a visitor, or an unbeliever, and I will endeavor to educate our congregation in this. And I learned much about "group dynamics" in a congregation. (The same things our PT professors taught us even though they didn't use that term.) While our congregations should be developing sanctified "group dynamics," still, as sinful human beings, they interact in a worldly way. Being able to see these patterns helps to guide the congregation in more godpleasing ways.

We cannot downplay how the Law of love is brought out, sometimes brilliantly, in Church Growth materials. To do so would be to undermine our own growth in sanctification. On the other hand, no matter how brilliantly certain elucidations of God's law are brought out, it is still law. And after a while, it became wearisome to read about method after method that was based only on the Law.

The main thing I got out of my reading was a sharpened understanding of my identity as an evangelist. How easy it is to fall into the trap of using "means" other than sin and grace to motivate people to come to worship or join the church. And I learned that when you strip away all human reasons for encouraging people to join the Church, your sinful flesh does not like it. To react to Church Growth methods as I am doing does not mean adopting a do nothing attitude. But it means going out into the wilderness with John the Baptist and preaching the Law and Gospel, and that alone. And is not Luther out there too?

I believe that the greatest need for our Synod today is to come to grips with the sort of thought that Church Growth people advocate. In the past, our identity was forged through doctrinal discussions and struggles. Law and Gospel was clearly explained in propositional truths. But an understanding of Law and Gospel must not be limited to explaining the propositions of our faith, but must extend into developing evangelism principles and methods that are suited to conveying propositional truths without depending on the

social Gospel as its medium. As we go forth and continue to develop hearts that see lost souls, our doctrinal discussions must spread into the meetings of our Mission Boards as they discuss evangelism methods. And since they are on the front lines of an expanding Synod, it may be their work that in the end has the most far-reaching consequences.

If we were Reformed, I would recommend joining the Church Growth movement today. But the Gospel we hold will not fit into Church Growth categories. What we need is a concerted effort to work toward a theology of missions that expresses itself in the language of Scripture and in the language of the Lutheran Church and defines itself carefully over against other theologies, especially Church Growth. We can do this through providing input to our Secretary of Evangelism, and our District Evangelism Committees. We must realize, though, that our answers are not going to come from one man, or one board or commission. They can only come from the collective study and deliberations of our pastors and laymen.

We need to spend more time at conferences studying evangelism patterns in Scripture. Topics could include a study of growth patterns among St. Paul's churches, or a study of the matter of "stress factors." Do they play a part in recorded New Testament conversions? Time should be spent in mission analysis. Is WELS shaped along homogeneous unit lines? What implications does this have on home mission work. A study of how the Gospel is spreading in Malawi would be interesting and perhaps give us in the home mission field some insights. Time should be spent on becoming sensitive to the proper distinction between Law and Gospel in evangelism methods. What other "means of grace" might we be using in our mission work? Do marriage seminars and Dobson films used as evangelism tools properly convey Law and Gospel and do they give a proper first impression to potential church members about the purpose of our church? Much time was spent on the grassroots level coming to grips with the roles of men and women. Does the topic of evangelism deserve less?

The future of our Synod is going to be decided on whether we adopt the spirit of the Church Growth movement, or define evangelism in terms of the Spirit. Our future will be determined on whether we draw our evangelism out of our experience of sin and God's grace, or use methods and thought patterns developed out of the experience of Reformed conversions. May God enable us in the coming years to firm up our identity as a mission minded church, and then through us bless many with the message of the world's pardon in Christ.

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ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid*, p. 14.

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^{xv} Donald McGavran, *op. cit.* p. 223.

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^{xviii} *Ibid*, p. 63, 64.

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^{xxxii} Raymond Ortlund, *Let the Church Be the Church* (Waco, Texas: Word, 1983) p. 60.

^{xxxiii} McGavran and Arn, *Back to Basics in Church Growth*, p. 52.

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^{xxxix} George Hunter, *The Contagious Congregation*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979), p. 41.

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