

Concerns About the Church Growth Movement

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Some are enamored by it. Some are intrigued by it. Some are wary of it. Some are repulsed by it. There are many different reactions that people have to what has been called the most important mission development in this century, the Church Growth Movement. One thing that is clear about this movement is that it has to be dealt with by anyone who is engaged in mission work in the 1990's.

It has to be dealt with because it is everywhere. In our zeal to carry out the Great Commission we will inevitably run into Church Growth principles and methods. They are cornering the market in this area. They are printing the books and material. They are offering the seminars. They are producing the tapes, the movies, the videos, and on and on. As we do our best to accelerate our evangelism efforts, however, it is important for us to carefully evaluate the material which is so readily available as well as the implications of using this material.

The goal of this paper will be to point out the concerns which we, as confessional Lutherans, have about this movement. I will endeavor to pinpoint the teachings of the Church Growth Movement with which we take issue and why we do so. It is my hope that this paper will help you make some important decisions as you deal with this issue.

It would perhaps be beneficial to provide you with a brief outline of what lies ahead. This paper will be divided into the following parts:

- * The Key principles of the Church Growth Movement
- * Doctrinal concerns regarding the Church Growth Movement
- * Practical concerns regarding the Church Growth Movement

The Key Principles of the Church Growth Movement

The Church Growth Movement is not easily defined. On the one hand it is a specific movement with specific leaders and principles. On the other hand the term has come to denote something more nebulous, something that is not associated with any specific person or principle. In this paper we will be focusing on the Church Growth Movement in the more specific sense, the movement begun by Donald McGavran which is now centered at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California.

Donald McGavran was a missionary for the Disciples of Christ. He had become the overseer of their mission in India by the mid 1930's. His frustration began to build when he saw that none of the 17 churches under his care was growing. He grew in the conviction that God wanted more growth than he had seen and that it would come if only mission work was done in an "enlightened" way.

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 1955, McGavran published, *The Bridges of God*, a book which set forth his principles of church growth. In 1961 McGavran began an "Institute for Church Growth" at Northwest Christian College in Eugene, Oregon. This organization later moved to Fuller Theological Seminary where McGavran became the founding Dean of the School of World Mission.

McGavran initially applied his principles to missions in foreign countries. But in 1972 he and C. Peter Wagner organized a course for local pastors which applied these principles to American churches. Thus the American Church Growth Movement began. While there have been slight variations on the principles first set forth by McGavran in 1972, the key principles still are used today. These are the principles that we will now consider.

A Church Growth principle has been defined in this way: “A universal axiom which, when properly applied, results in significant quality and quantity growth of the church.”¹ How does one discover such a universal truth? By a process of careful observation. One observes where the church is growing and then asks why. The answer or answers one finds leads to the discovery of one or more Church Growth principles.

We will be examining five key Church Growth principles. These were chosen because they are principles which can be traced back to the founder of the movement, Donald McGavran and because they form the basis for the more recently discovered principles. First, and the foundation on which all the other principles rest:

The Harvest Principle

McGavran writes, “The Church Growth Movement maintains that the central purpose of all evangelism must be finding the lost and bringing them back to the fold.”² Charles and Win Arn put it this way, “The Master’s Plan is based on the conviction that God wants his lost children found. The bottom line in effective evangelism is whether people are won to Christ and the church grows.”³ The harvest principle 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 proponents make a distinction between a “find theology” and a “search theology” A “search theology” is the conviction that the essential task in missions is not the finding but going everywhere and preaching the gospel. A “find theology” is the conviction that mission work is essentially bringing in the harvest. This distinction is brought out by Charles and Win Arn when they write,

Intentionality in evangelism means the church regularly measures itself against the yardstick of the numbers of new disciples it produces...Intentionality in outreach means doing something. But it doesn’t mean doing just anything. More than just good intentions are required. Effective evangelism requires insight and study as to what are the best and most productive intentional efforts that can be made...Tremendous power results in a local church which intentionally focuses on specific growth goals.⁴

Church Growth leaders point to the New Testament to support their harvest principle. McGavran writes, “The New Testament Church did not badger and bother people who resisted the Good News, but hurried on to those who were ready to become believers.”⁵ This quote leads us to a second key Church Growth principle:

Receptive People

This principles follows closely on the heels of the harvest principle. The thought is that if we are to be most effective in “harvesting” people for Christ, we should find those who are most receptive to the gospel message and work with them. The proponents of Church Growth put a lot of emphasis on this principle. They have developed the “Receptivity-rating scale.” This scale is supposed to measure the receptivity of a person to the gospel based on the stress factors in their life. The death of a spouse rates a 100 on the scale; divorce rates a 73 on the scale; an addition to the family rates a 39; moving rates a 25. The following is an explanation of how the scale works,

¹ Kent R. Hunter, *Foundations for Church Growth* (1983), p 19.

² Donald A. McGavran, *Effective Evangelism* (1988), p. 108.

³ Charles and Win Arn, *The Master’s Plan for Making Disciples* (1982), p. 58.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 59.

⁵ Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (1980), p. 33.

The scale...indicates different events, in approximate order of their importance, which have an effect in producing periods of personal/family “transition.” The higher the number, the more receptive the person to the Gospel. For example, someone who was just married and is also having trouble with their boss will be more receptive than if either event had occurred separately.⁶

Following this method the church is to expend its greatest effort on those individuals or groups of people who are in a transition period in their lives. While those who do not rate high on the scale are not ignored, the fields are to be “occupied lightly.”

A method which is based on this principle is called the “felt-needs approach.” This is the method which is embraced by Robert Schuller. He conducted a survey of 3500 homes in one year and asked the people “why aren’t you coming to church?” The answers to this question were used to develop a ministry that would suit their “felt-needs.” The way he went about filling these needs was to give the people a dose of self-esteem under the theme “you are loved.” The results are often praised by Church Growth advocates and Schuller is held up as a hero, even though he is far from them doctrinally.

Again the Church Growth advocates look to Scripture to find support for their discovery. They here look to the miracles of Jesus, saying that he came to take care of a felt-need and that is what brought people to faith.

The message was relevant because it spoke to the person’s need. Jesus’ ministry of healing focused on people’s needs...then their healing...then their following of Christ...The Christian commitment one sees in Scripture is not based on a series of theological propositions to believe in, but on a faith that makes people whole.⁷

This becomes the basis for the book, *The Master’s Plan*. The book focuses on how people can reach out to their extended family and bring them to Christ. The main focus is on dealing with the felt-needs of those who they are in contact with. This approach relies heavily on the receptivity scale to target these needs.

Another way, according to Church Growth thinking, to increase the chances of reaping a harvest is to carry on a mission work within a specific people group. In Church Growth terminology this is called

The Homogeneous Unit Principle

A homogeneous unit, or a people group, is defined as “a section of society in which all the members have some characteristics in common.”⁸ This principle looks at the world as a vast mosaic of tens of thousands of pieces. Within society each one of these pieces, or homogeneous units, likes to remain separate from the rest. They have their own language, customs, or culture. The proponents of this principle feel that forcing people to cross these barriers is a great deterrent to making disciples. Donald McGavran writes, “In most cases of arrested growth of the Church, men are deterred not so much by the offence of the cross as by nonbiblical offenses which are caused by forcing people to cross linguistic, class or racial barriers.”⁹

To support this principle, McGavran uses the “*πάντα τὰ ἔθνη*” of Matthew 28:19. He sees these words, all nations, as referring to the individual pieces of the mosaic. He imagines that this is then a scriptural mandate to work among homogeneous units.

In line with this principle is the idea of People Movements. This principle refers to the observation that the gospel spreads more quickly when a natural relationship (e.g. friend, relative) is used as a channel for the faith. When explosive growth is seen a “People Movement” has begun.

Spinning off of the homogenous unit principle is

⁶ Charles and Win Arn, *The Master’s Plan* (1982), p. 90.

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 111.

⁸ Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (1980), p. 95.

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 223.

New Church Planting

This principle is closely tied to the previous one in that it focuses on the need for each homogeneous unit to have its own local church. The thought is that if people do not like to cross racial or ethnic barriers to become Christians, then each group should have its own church. McGavran writes, “If God’s plan for the salvation of the world is to be carried out, a mighty multiplication of living congregations must occur in most pieces of the mosaic in most countries.”¹⁰

The point of emphasis here is not simply more congregations but more congregations that serve specific groups. For example, in a large metropolitan area it would be possible to have two or three congregations with their own pastor, choir, boards etc. worshipping in the same building. Each one would serve a specific group and reach out to that specific group.

In areas where there is not a core group of Christians to start this new congregation (such as a foreign field), then the church is to work toward cross-cultural church planting. The idea behind this is to plant a church in another culture, build it up with a people movement and hand over control as soon as possible. This is something we do in our foreign mission fields, seeking to establish an indigenous church body as quickly as possible.

However, in Church Growth circles this happens more quickly. It happens more quickly because the time for training the members of the indigenous churches to carry out the ministry is not as extensive. The de-emphasis on seminary training is stated in these words by Kent Hunter,

In other words, church growth teaches that there ought to be more avenues of becoming a recognized member of the clergy besides having to leave the community and go off to seminary for several years. As church growth principles have had a continuing effect on the church, many denominations are beginning to offer alternative opportunities for lay people to be trained for ministry.¹¹

This brings us to the fifth key Church Growth principle we want to consider:

Discipling

The Church Growth movement focuses a lot on what happens after a person has been brought into the church. This focus first of all comes out in the principle: Discipling, not perfecting. This principle states that you should not demand too much from a person before baptizing them and bringing them into the church. The time for instruction is to wait until the person is firmly established in the congregation.

On the other hand, the proponents of this principle are quick to point out that further nurture must be done. This principle has been stated as Disciples, not decisions. It is clear that this is to counter the usual trend in evangelical circles of bringing a large number of people to “make a decision for Christ” and then allowing them to slip away.

Central to both of these principles is the movement’s concept of a disciple. *The Master’s Plan* points out three phases of becoming a disciple. One is the “Decision” or “Commitment” phase. The next is described in this passage,

Repentance involved a change of mind and heart; a turning “from.” The other side of repentance is conversion. It is a person’s turning of allegiance to God in obedience and faith. In the turning and new lordship in life, God regenerates and gives eternal life.¹²

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 335.

¹¹ Kent R. Hunter, *Foundations for Church Growth* (1983), p. 59.

¹² Charles and Win Arn, *The Master’s Plan* (1982), p. 113.

This obedience is often referred to as accepting Jesus as Savior and Lord. But that is still not the final step in becoming a true “disciple” as this passage states,

Realize that evangelism is not complete until the person is incorporated into the Body. The end goal of effective evangelism is that the new Christian becomes a disciple and responsible member of the church. Incorporation goes beyond just formal membership.¹³

A disciple, then, in Church Growth thinking, is one who has come to believe in Jesus Christ, has agreed to obey Jesus and has become a responsible member of the church.

This last part of the definition of a disciple is helpful for Church Growth advocates in evaluating effectiveness. This is a visible, tangible piece of information, thus recording it is easy. On the basis of this churches are asked to evaluate their effectiveness, search out the reasons for the problems and look for solutions which will add to their numbers.

And that is the bottom line in all of this, numbers. From these principles the emphasis on growth is evident. Make harvesting your priority, seek out those who are most receptive, plant churches that will grow quickly, and make disciples which can be easily counted.

These are the basic principles of the Church Growth Movement. At this point we will now spend some time evaluating the problems found in them and why we should be concerned.

Doctrinal Concerns About the Church Growth Movement

As you can already see from this brief overview of the Church Growth Movement, we will have some doctrinal concerns. These concerns are warranted because of the many glaring doctrinal problems in this movement.

The De-emphasis of Doctrine

The first problem with the doctrine of the Church Growth Movement is that doctrine is de-emphasized. For the advocates of this movement doctrine is something that can easily be pushed aside or done away with completely. This is clear from some of the principles stated above but also from the words of the leaders of this movement which directly speak on this subject. Donald McGavran writes,

Each denomination is a separate branch of the one universal church...As long as each branch is firmly in the vine, as long as each branch believes on Jesus Christ as God and only Savior and the Bible as the inspired and only reliable Word of God, real differences in regard to baptism, ecclesiastical organization, and other **less central doctrines** can be tolerated. (emphasis mine)¹⁴

The Church Growth Movement clearly tries to distinguish between “fundamental” and “non-fundamental” doctrine. Of course, Scripture does not permit this distinction to be made but encourages us to hold fast to every doctrine.

This also leads to a strong push toward ecumenism. Robert Koester brings this point out in these words,

Church Growth is ecumenism in the extreme. Church Growth may bring under its 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

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 117.

¹⁴ Donald A. McGavran, *Effective Evangelism* (1988), p. 105.

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** are all man-made and imperfect.”¹⁵

The danger signs here are clear! The doctrine which God sets forth in Scripture is considered irrelevant for the purposes of Church Growth. Whatever church grows the most is said to be correct, thus people like Robert Schuller and the Charismatics are held up as heroes while conservative churches are looked down upon.

The Church Growth Movement is also saturated with Reformed doctrine. It permeates every aspect of their thinking. The leaders of the movement make no apologies for this.

Downplaying the Means of Grace

The Reformed problem of downplaying the Means of Grace is very evident in the Church Growth Movement. If you were only to read Church Growth literature, you would have to come to the conclusion that following a set of sociological principles is what produces growth. Throughout their literature they talk about fulfilling the Great Commission, yet their literature is striking in that the gospel is almost totally absent. Nowhere do they make mention of the Gospel being the “power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.” Nowhere do you see a reference to the Holy Spirit using the means of grace to create faith in the hearts of those who hear.

What, then, do those in the Church Growth Movement say creates faith? The answer is summed up nicely by Robert Koester,

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, 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.¹⁶

This loss of the gospel leads to many problems in Church Growth literature. You do not hear of the Gospel being the tool that is necessary for winning souls to Christ. Instead the people are “persuaded” to become disciples of Christ by the caring actions of the members. Charles and Win Arn express this in these words, “Your most important role, as a witness to the people in your Extended Family, is personifying Christ’s love. Christ’s love is communicated through your caring... God’s love is best seen and experienced by others through our love.”¹⁷ While showing the love of Christ in our lives is an important part of our life of sanctification, it can never be a replacement for the actual proclamation of the Gospel. In fact, the expression of the Scriptural truths of law and gospel is actually discouraged in these words,

The non-Christian person who perceives your relationship as one of a “friend” is far more likely to eventually respond to Christ’s love than the person who sees you as a “teacher”—instructing on doctrine, sin and morality.¹⁸

¹⁵ Robert J. Koester, “Law and Gospel in the Church Growth Movement” (1984), p. 15.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 18.

¹⁷ Charles and Win Arn, *The Master’s Plan* (1982), p. 98.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 105.

The impact of this kind of thinking is seen clearly in the “felt-needs” approach. There the gospel is simply the cure for the immediate problem that faces the person, not the answer to the greater problem of sin. Forgiveness through the blood of Christ is downplayed and the emphasis instead is on how having God in your life makes the trials of this life a little easier.

The Sacraments are also abused and neglected in Church Growth literature. The Lord’s Supper is completely ignored. Baptism is robbed of its meaning and, as can be expected in Reformed doctrine, becomes simply an ordinance.

In the New Testament the rite of incorporation into the Body was baptism. Baptism was a crucial part of becoming a Christian...Baptism was the accompanying act of obedience and confession, and without baptism, a believer did not enter the early community of faith.¹⁹

Another outcome of this de-emphasis of the means of grace is that goals are not focused on preaching the gospel but on making the church a nice place to visit. Professor David Valleskey writes,

Though this does not appear to be the intention of Church Growth practitioners, you will note here a shift in emphasis from creating faith to creating church members. With this shift, this altered goal, comes a corresponding shift in means to accomplish the goal. Now the primary question is no longer: What is needed to bring this person out of darkness into light? out of death into life? out of hostility against God into peace and friendship with God? Instead the question is: What can we do to make our church—its buildings and grounds, its people, its worship, its programs—as attractive as possible so as to bring more people in?²⁰

The point is not that we are to neglect our building and grounds, neglect our programs, but that these are only auxiliary to our main work: the proclamation of the Gospel in Word and Sacrament.

There is another, deeper factor that results in an inadequate treatment of the means of grace in Church Growth, and that is a

Faulty Understanding of Sin and Grace, Law and Gospel

This faulty understanding of sin and grace comes through clearly in the emphasis in most Church Growth literature on decision theology. This, of course, is their attempt to answer the question, “Why some and not others?” It robs sin and grace of their full meaning.

Paul clearly states in Ephesians 2:1, “As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins.” And again in Romans 8:7, “The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so.” There is clearly no room for any decision on our part at all in coming to faith. Dead people cannot change their situation. Spiritually dead people cannot choose to become spiritually alive. In fact, this is not even something which we desire by nature. Scripture is very clear on this.

Yet much of Church Growth is based on the assumption that we must make such a decision. This leads to “Persuasion” evangelism. Throughout Church Growth literature the need to persuade people to commit themselves to Christ is prevalent. The decision is the first step in becoming a believer.

The problem with decision theology can be traced to the denial of the total depravity of man. This denial is seen in the receptivity principle. This principle states that some are more receptive to the gospel because of their life situation. There is no mention of the law convicting them of their sin. There is no mention of the fact that this is necessary before the Holy Spirit works faith in their hearts by the proclamation of the Gospel.

Instead we are encouraged to do “soil testing” research to discover which communities are most receptive to the Gospel and thus offer greatest potential. This is not in accord with Scripture because there is

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 113.

²⁰ David J. Valleskey, “The Church Growth Movement: An Evaluation” (1990), p. 25.

never a group of unbelievers who are more receptive of the gospel than any other group. All are equally lost in sin.

The Church Growth Movement also confuses law and gospel. The confusion of law and Gospel is seen in the way the “law of love” is the compelling factor in bringing someone to faith. But it can be seen elsewhere in the principles. This is true even of the principles which seem “neutral” at first.

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 and others say, “The greatest obstacles to conversion are social, not theological.” 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.

Robert Koester points out how this homogeneous unit principle has been allowed to shape all Church Growth thinking by showing how it has been used to interpret Scripture in the light of sociology and culture, rather than in the light of the cross. He writes,

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 writes,

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.²¹

This is how this section of Scripture is interpreted even though Paul expressly states that what is at stake is not just a culture but the very Gospel itself. For Church Growth people the greatest obstacle to conversion is not the offense of the cross, as Scripture clearly teaches, but cultural offenses. If we tear these down, they say, then we will be most effective in our efforts.

An Improper Relationship between Justification and Sanctification

Many Church Growth advocates regard justification and sanctification as important doctrines to be taught and applied as the church carries out her mission. Something we would agree with wholeheartedly. However, they frequently differ from the Lutheran position in the way they relate these two doctrines to each other. Lutherans believe and teach that justification by faith is the central doctrine of the Christian faith, the doctrine on which the church stands or falls and therefore by which the church is built and preserved. The desire to seek the lost and witness for Christ are necessary fruits of justification and evidences of saving faith.

While the Church Growth practitioners certainly recognize the necessity of justification, most of the materials which it produces make sanctification the main emphasis. This emphasis on sanctification becomes evident, for example, when a “disciple” is defined as one who has accepted Jesus as Savior and Lord and has been incorporated in to the body of Christ as a responsible member. A distinction is here made between one who makes a decision for Christ and one who is a disciple.

²¹ Robert Koester, “Law and Gospel in the Church Growth Movement” (1984), p. 20.

We would all agree that far too many who confess their faith do not continue in that confession. We would agree that a disciple of Jesus should grow in faith and in good works. And we also agree that the congregation has the responsibility to nurture a new convert and see to it that the person is incorporated into the body of believers. But to distinguish between the ordinary believer and a disciple of Christ is to mix justification and sanctification, thus causing a weak Christian to doubt salvation. Scripture does not distinguish between a believer and disciple, they are one in the same. The most essential element in discipleship is not obedience but faith. Obedience is the natural outcome of faith and thus belongs in the realm of sanctification, not justification.

There are other points of doctrine that our troublesome with the Church Growth Movement including a blurred understanding of the distinction between the pastoral office and the priesthood of all believers, a belief in the restoration of Israel, and an ever-increasing love for the charismatic movement. These we will not get into in detail here but are a concern in this area.

Practical Concerns About the Church Growth Movement

With so many errors in doctrine, there are some real problems with putting these Church Growth principles into practice. The principles are not neutral as they may first appear to be. They are bound tightly to the false doctrine which underlies them. I will point out some of the real difficulties we will have if we try to follow these principles as they are laid out for us in the Church Growth Movement.

The first problem is that they can easily lead to a guilt trip for both the pastor and the people. The reason for this is because the principles set forth are dependent entirely on what the pastor and people do. Lyle Schaller states in his book, *Growing Plans*,

The pastor must want that congregation to grow. The pastor must have a strong future-orientation. The pastor must be able to see opportunities where others see problems and conflicts. The pastor must be willing to accept and fill a strong leadership role and serve as the number-one leader in that congregation...In other words, while the active leadership of the laity is **the most important single factor in the numerical growth** (emphasis mine) of most middle-sized congregations, the leadership of the pastor is the key in large congregations.²²

While it is true that the pastor and laity need to have a zeal for missions and do all that they can to remove obstacles to proclaiming the gospel, the final outcome is not in their hands. This is left for God. While we are responsible for planting the seed of the Word and for watering the plant, it is God who makes it grow. Throughout the New Testament whenever growth is recorded in the church it is attributed to God alone. Without this fact clearly stated it is easy to start to question our efforts. We can easily fall into the trap of evaluating what we do simply on the basis of numbers instead of on faithfulness to the calling God has given us.

This is true also of the laity. They can be easily led to think that they are not good Christians if they do not bring others into the church. Christ simply tells us to be witnesses to what he has done, not persuaders. His gospel is the only thing that will persuade anyone to believe in him. His gospel is more effective in doing this than anything we can do. If we fail to remember this we will take our members down a path of guilt when we do not see the outcome of our faithful witnessing.

This needs to be remembered also when we are evaluating our congregations and their programs. It is God pleasing to do this for he wants us to make the best use of the resources he has given us. But what should we use in this evaluation? Kent Hunter states,

²² Lyle E. Schaller, *Growing Plans* (1985), pp. 85,87.

If growth is not occurring, something is wrong: there is sickness in this organism called church. Church growth diagnoses the sickness and shows ways in which the people can allow God to bring healing and health to the church.²³

Are we to use Church Growth principles to evaluate our efforts? Should we not instead get back into the Scriptures and apply law and gospel to the problem and use that as our evaluation. This will be much more effective in remedying the problems which sin brings into our midst than simply studying societal and anthropological research. It is the law that diagnoses the problem, pointing out our laziness, our lack of love for lost souls, our poor stewardship and concerns for building and program instead of souls. It is the gospel which then leads us to see that these sins were also washed clean in the blood of Christ which then compels us to change these sinful attitudes and to put our efforts where God wants them.

Another danger with putting these principles into practice is that our focus can easily be shifted away from our main task, preaching the gospel. When you read Church Growth literature you get weary of all of the cosmetic commands that are made. If you want to grow you need to concentrate on how many off street parking spaces you have, how large and modern your nursery is, how well marked your building is and on and on. While all of these are good suggestions, they dare not become our only focus. It is so easy to get distracted by the building or the program and forget about the reason we have the building and the program, the preaching of the Word.

This same problem comes in the area of evangelism itself. Lyle Schaller, when referring to developing an outreach strategy refers to “developing a member-recruitment program.”²⁴ It is easy to make this our focus. It is easy to think of evangelism simply in terms of church membership instead of preparing souls for heaven. That has to be our ultimate goal. We witness to all that will listen, whether they are “receptive” or not. We witness to all because that witness may be used by the Holy Spirit to create faith in that heart, even if we do not see it. This does not mean that we witness once and never return. No, we are to make a concerted effort to bring that person into our flock, going back time and time again with that same message of law and gospel. But if this does not occur we have not spent our effort for nothing just because a new member was not “recruited.”

Having stated these concerns, how should we proceed. Should we simply throw out anything that hints of Church Growth because it will not benefit us? Should we adopt these principles after trying to Lutheranize them? I am of the opinion that we can use some of the material from the Church Growth movement. Some of it is very helpful. It gives us insights into how we can remove obstacles to proclaiming the Word to non-Christians. It is helpful to get a perspective on what a non-Christian notices in a worship service. It is helpful to see that we can do some things to make visitors feel more welcome in our service as we proclaim to them the life-giving message of the gospel.

The literature also can help us in indirect ways. It can lead us to refresh our memories once again on what our task is. It can remind us to evaluate how we are using our resources based on God’s Word. It can lead us to focus our attention on meaningful efforts at sharing the gospel. And it can point out to us that we are to be eager when we look at the challenges and opportunities that God has placed before us, especially since we have such a rich treasure to share in God’s Word.

However, we need to be very cautious as to how much we take from these sources. In looking at this movement closely I have found that it would be more helpful to take a long look at the missiological principles set down in God’s Word than to spend a lot of time in Church Growth material. The New Testament is a wonderful example of how God uses us to witness and how God then brings forth the fruit. It is in Scripture that we see “friendship evangelism” when Jesus calls his disciples. It is in Scripture that we see how Paul became all things to all people so that by all possible means he might save some. It is in Scripture that we see that it is not with wise and persuasive words that we bring people into the faith but with the gospel message which the Holy Spirit uses to create and strengthen faith. It is in Scripture that we are reminded of the reason for carrying out the Great Commission, that reason being that Jesus died for our sins and the sins of the whole world. I am

²³ Kent R. Hunter, *Foundations For Church Growth* (1983), p. 26.

²⁴ Lyle E. Schaller, *Growing Plans* (1985), p. 66.

firmly convinced that a study of the New Testament missiological principles would be more useful than reading all of the books that Church Growth has to offer.

One final concern that I would like to address that is related to this subject is the concern that we would get a “witch-hunt” mentality in this area. There are definite reasons to be concerned with the errors found in Church Growth. There are reasons to be wary when we see these principles and methods becoming noticeable in our circles. But there is also the danger that we will go to the opposite extreme.

We need to be careful that we do not let fear of Church Growth become a convenient excuse for neglecting the work of missions. We need to be careful that we do not let fear of Church Growth lead us to question the motives of those in our midst who express a great desire to carry out this work to a greater extent than we have. We would be doing our brothers and the kingdom a great disservice if we begin to question every outreach program that is used and automatically label that person as having “Church Growth eyes.” God has given us a great privilege and responsibility in entrusting us with the task of preaching his gospel. May we encourage each other in this task at all times. And if we have a concern with what we see happening, may we lovingly admonish and correct without judging hearts.

Finally, may we remember those comforting words of Jesus connected with this task of making disciples, “Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” May that give us joy, strength and courage as we take up this task to the glory of God’s name.

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