

AN EVALUATION OF THE CHURCH GROWTH MOVEMENT

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I. INTRODUCTION

In the first of a series of eight articles on the Church Growth Movement (hereafter CGM) in R. C. Sproul's "Tabletalk". Os Guinness says that the CGM is to the 1990's what the Christian Right was to the 1980's. In the 1980's evangelicals were told to mobilize, now we are being told to modernize. Then, we were told that we needed to hold on to the past by flexing our political muscles, now we are being told that we must get ready for the future by developing our managerial and therapeutic skills. Over the past decade the emphasis has switched for the formation of politically active special interest groups to the growth and development of super or megachurches.

More specifically, as the name suggests, the CGM is concerned with church growth. And "church growth" according to Thom Rainer, who has just written what is being touted by insiders as the first true textbook of the CGM, "is that discipline which seeks to understand, through biblical, sociological, historical, and behavioral study, why churches grow or decline." The actual CGM itself "includes all the resources of people, institutions, and publications dedicated to expounding the concepts and practicing the principles of church growth, beginning with the foundational work of Donald McGavran."

While Rainer and others want to link the CGM to the early church in the book of Acts, and to the spiritual awakenings of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and to the evangelistic contributions of men like John Wesley, George Whitefield, and Charles Spurgeon, he comes closer to the truth when he traces it back to the methodological approach of Charles Finney and most certainly the work of Donald McGavran. For more than anyone else, it is McGavran who is the founding father of the modern CGM.

Donald McGavran was born in India, in 1897, to missionary parents. After completing his college and post-graduate education in the United States he returned to India in 1923 as a missionary with the United Missionary Society. While there, McGavran was bothered by the slow growth of the churches and set out to find out why they were doing so poorly. Over a period of seventeen years he studied 145 mission stations and eventually published his findings in 1955 in a controversial book called "The Bridges of God." Some praised it as a "breath of fresh air," and others as a revolutionary book that would cause people to re-think missionary policy, McGavran argued that evangelism is more than just proclaiming the gospel and waiting for God to produce results; it literally involved making disciples. Because of this, the church needed to embrace those things that actually produce disciples and discard anything that does not. He also believed effective evangelism is something which produces results that can be counted numerically and it is much more likely to take place if the person doing the evangelizing belongs to the same culture, class, tribe, or family as the person he is trying to evangelize. He further maintained that while the main task of the church was to bring unbelievers into committed relationship to Jesus Christ and active fellowship in the church, the part of the Great Commission where Jesus told his disciple to "teach them to observe all things," was secondary and distinct from the actual discipling process.

McGavran's concept of evangelism, his pragmatism, his reliance on numbers to determine what is and what is not effective evangelism, his "homogenous unit principle", and his emphasis on a basic commitment to Christ that was manifested by active involvement in the local church, continue to influence the CGM to this day. In 1960, he was invited to establish an Institute for Church Growth on the campus of Northwest Christian College in Eugene, Oregon. But far more significant in terms of today's CGM, was the invitation he received in 1965 to come to Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California, where he became the founding dean of the Fuller School of World Mission. In 1970, he wrote "Understanding Church Growth" which is now in its third edition, having been revised and edited by C. Peter Wagner. It goes beyond "Bridges to God" and gives us a good idea of his more mature thinking of the "theology, sociology, and methodology of church growth."

During the 1970's there was no one individual who represented who represented the CGM in America, because McGavran was involved with third world missions. Therefore, during this time the movement was most clearly represented by the Fuller School for World Missions, which he founded and people like Ralph Winter, Arthur Glasser, Charles Kraft, Allen Tippett and C. Peter Wagner. While the movement continued to grow, and the 1970's saw Win Arn establish the Institute of American

Church Growth, and John Wimber become the founding director of the Department of Church Growth at Fuller (now the Charles E. Fuller Institute of Evangelism and Church Growth), it had to fend off criticism of its homogenous unit, its lack of social concern, its openness to Pentecostalism, and what some saw as Pelagianism.

It was not until the early 1980's that one person emerged as the leader and chief spokesman of the movement in the United States, and that person was C. Peter Wagner. He had served as a missionary to Bolivia, and had studied under McGavran at Fuller, where he had been on staff since 1971. In 1981, he published "Church Growth and the Whole Gospel," which thrust him into the spotlight as McGavran's successor, and in 1984 he took up his responsibilities as the Donald A. McGavran Professor of Church Growth. Since 1956 he has produced over 700 works, including 40 full-length books. In 1972, he taught the first course in church growth for pastors, and when the D. Min Program was introduced at Fuller in 1975, he taught the church growth segment. This part of the D. Min program has expanded over the years so that now a pastor can do up to 80% of his doctoral work in this particular area of study, which is amazing, seeing it did not even exist just a few short years ago.

In 1988, Wagner published a book, which not only stirred a lot of controversy, but in many ways removed him from forefront of the CGM. "How To Have A Healing Ministry Without Making Your Church Sick," saw him put forward a case for "power evangelism." In it he argues that the preaching of the gospel needs to be accompanied by various power phenomena, like speaking in tongues, miraculous healings and the exorcism of demons, if it is to pack a New Testament punch. Wagner had not always been open to such phenomena because of his "dispensational" background, but his own personal healing after attending a healing service in Bolivia, the rapid growth of Pentecostalism, a new openness on the part of his ever-pragmatic mentor McGavran, and the influence of John Wimber and MC510 (Signs, Wonders, and Church Growth) had changed his mind.

Ironically, Wagner's fascination with this new world of spiritual power and its implications for church growth provided an opportunity for a whole new set of individuals to come forward and take the CGM to where it is today in 1993. Thom Rainer includes in this group what he calls practitioners/pastors like Bill Hybels of Willow Creek Community Church in Chicago and Rick Warren of Saddleback Community Church in California; sociologists and demographers like George Barna (who is founder and president of Barna Group, a full-service marketing research company in Glendale, California which has conducted extensive research for many corporations and organizations including Visa, The Disney Channel, Focus on the Family, and the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association); and consultants like Lyle Schaller and Carl F. George. These, and many others, pump out all kinds of newsletters, magazines and books, audio and video tapes, and are involved in conducting and/or speaking at seminars and conferences all over North America and beyond. The Fuller Institute for Church Growth puts out a monthly tape called "The Pastor's Update." This tape, along with all of these other resources, keep those who are interested up-to-date with all the latest developments in this ever-changing field of endeavor.

So where does this leave us today? Today it is no exaggeration to say that the CGM is a force to be reckoned with. As Rainer puts it, "for many years church growth was perceived as a movement on the fringe of evangelical Christianity... (but now)... thirty years after its birth, the movement has found widespread denominational, practical and theological acceptance." The reason for this is not hard to find. We are living in a time of incredible change, in fact "perhaps no period since the Reformation has brought such changes and challenges to the church." In the minds of those who have embraced what this movement has to offer, something has to be done to address the needs of the hour and the CGM is doing this in a practical, tangible way. No Christian movement of this magnitude, however noble and sincere its stated intentions, is beyond scrutiny in light of the Word of God and in the remainder of this paper I am going to attempt to do just that. To accomplish this I am going to trace out ten leading principles of the CGM and then suggest some things that I believe we can learn from it, before I identify several areas of real concern that need to be carefully discussed by all Christians.

II. TEN LEADING PRINCIPLES OF THE CHURCH GROWTH MOVEMENT

In the first place, the CGM has adopted a phenomenological hermeneutic or a pragmatic principle of interpretation. Although they affirm that the Bible is inspired by God and has power to save and is the final authority when it comes to evaluating the truth claims of all other sources, when it comes to interpreting the Bible, they are directed by something called "growth pragmatism." This means that those doctrines that receive the greatest attention are those, which actually work to make the church grow numerically. They believe that theological findings should always be validated by experience, if possible and adjusted to fit experience, if necessary. Their key Scripture in this regard is 1 Cor. 9:22b where Paul says, "I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some." For those in the CGM, this validates the use of sociology, demography and the fruits of marketing research to determine what part of the Bible they should concentrate on in order to have the greatest impact on the people they are trying to reach.

Rainer makes an important and interesting distinction between "biblical principles" and "church growth principles." Biblical principles like prayer come directly from the Bible. Church growth principles may be derived from the Bible, or they may be derived from all kinds of extra-biblical sources. These extra-biblical principles are perfectly acceptable as long as they are not clearly forbidden in the Bible. For example, because the Bible does not give explicit instructions about what should take place in a worship service or what kind of government a church should have, a church should feel free to do whatever works best in their particular situation.

In the second place the CGM stresses the need for prayer. Apparently this was not always the case, but that changed in the 1980's under the leadership of Wagner after he became more aware of the awesome dimensions of spiritual weapons in the fight. "User

Friendly Churches" by George Barna, is a study of a group of churches he claims are "changing people's lives by bringing them into a deeper relationship with God through faith in Christ and the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit." To qualify for inclusion in this study a church had to be growing by at least 10% a year in terms of its morning attendance (membership being a "meaningless comparative statistic"), and there had to be ample evidence that those attending were actually growing spiritually. Interesting enough, one of the characteristics of all the churches he studied was the "prayer was one of the foundation stones of ministry...the call to prayer was the battle cry of the congregation: it rallied the troops...these people understood the power of prayer...they actively and consistently included prayer in their services, their events, their meetings and their personal ministries." This did not happen by accident either. It was the result of careful teaching about prayer, that was put into practice by leaders and people alike, and it was accompanied by ongoing reminders to keep on seeking the Lord's face, with a degree of accountability to make sure this was indeed the case.

Thirdly, the CGM puts a high premium on the right kind of pastoral leadership. As Wagner puts it, "In America the primary catalytic factor for growth in the local church is the pastor. In every growing, dynamic church I have studied, I have found a key person whom God is using to make it happen." The pastor is expected to have the blood of Issachar in his veins; he must be somebody who understands the times and knows what Israel should do. According to church growth theory, many pastors are ineffective because they do not have a realistic view of their own gifts and abilities, they do not know the people they are serving, and they do not understand how the community they are attempting to reach looks at life. Successful leaders are men of vision, who not only know how to pray, but how to read the polls. They are spark-plugs who know how to motivate others, who know how to involve others in ministry, who are willing to be ranchers (some would seriously say "cheerleaders"), who are confident, decisive and optimistic. The CGM believes the church needs leaders who are disciplined and wise; who know how to communicate their ideas and how to follow through with an initiative after it has been adopted. Their experience indicates that one of the greatest hindrances to growth is a copy-cat mentality which does not take the principles and implement them according to one's own unique circumstances. And this hindrance is followed closely by giving up too soon when there is a setback.

Fourth on the list is the involvement of all church members in ministry. They argue that too many church members believe that the pastor, and other members of the ministerial staff, are paid to do ministry so it should be their responsibility. But this is not the way to growth because it involves an enormous waste of talent and spiritual giftedness. However, getting people involved in ministry is not all that easy. Not only must the people themselves understand that they are a kingdom of priests but church leaders, especially pastors, must be willing to let members begin new ministries. To bring this about a church may have to be reconstructed to allow more freedom. They remind us that there is a difference between doing ministry and sitting on a committee and talking about it. Church leaders need to help members of the congregation discover what their spiritual gifts are and then encourage them to use them. In some cases this means that pastors will have to confront their own insecurities which lie behind their unwillingness to relinquish

"power", and they will have to make a conscious effort to become "enablers," not just "scholars or teachers, social activists or parents."

In the fifth place, the CGM sees effective evangelism as a crucial priority and this includes the need to plant new churches. "Effective evangelism" is that which produces results which can be counted and which actually brings people into the church as active participants. This being the case, so-called "cold-call" evangelism is out (ie. door-to-door, street-corner evangelism), as is most "crusade" evangelism, because these methods just do not work. Times have changed. People are biblically illiterate. They are very busy and do not appreciate being interrupted at home by religious fanatics. Ours is a consumer society that has been conditioned to respond only if what is being offered meets a perceived need and the gospel, at least in its old form, is completely irrelevant to most people. These and other "realities of the marketplace," mean that Christians interested in evangelism must change their approach if they want to be successful. To this end, the CGM advocates the use of small groups where outsiders can be introduced to the gospel and to Christians in a less threatening way. It also calls on evangelicals to rethink what we are doing and why we are doing it. Maybe the gospel would be better served if we changed when we meet to worship. Maybe we should change our traditional ways of worshipping altogether! And if we are not prepared to be that radical, the very least we should do is emphasize the importance of cultivating meaningful relationships with those we are trying to reach because effective evangelism is much more likely to take place if there is an existing personal relationship.

The relationship between church planting and evangelism is simple: "denominations that are experiencing the most rapid growth have been those that stress church planting." According to church growth studies, new churches not only have a higher rate of growth, but they tend to do a better job reaching the "unchurched," as opposed to merely rearranging the existing evangelical constituency. Today, church planting is not just a matter of sending some people from one congregation into another area to start a new work. There are many options available including a larger church "adopting" a smaller struggling one; a satellite-type structure much like branch banking where there are several basically autonomous groups in a given area all related to a parent-church; a multi-congregational setup where different congregations use the same building and multi-campus churches where one group of leaders works with a single body of people that meets in different locations.

Sixthly, the CGM believes that the worship service needs to be used as a critical evangelistic tool. This is driven by research which indicates that if the "unchurched" are going to enter a church building, they are most likely to attend a Sunday morning service, as opposed to an evening service or a small group like a Sunday School class. They are most likely to do this because they do not want to be singled out or put on the spot. They do not want to be questioned or asked to commit themselves to anything. They merely want to come and observe what is going on and leave as quietly as possible. The key word is "anonymity". Because of this the "worship service" must change. Since we are dealing with baby boomers and others who insist on quality, we must make sure that everything we do has "excellence" stamped on it. Furthermore, we need to pay attention

to what they want and surveys tell us that they want: worship services that are informal and relaxed, music that is contemporary and sermons that are not too long but practical, relevant, interesting, simple, positive and even entertaining. They want drama, skits, dance and other more visual ways of expressing the faith. One church growth practitioner even tells us that if we are going to have a "revival," we need to make it a one-day event because people are just too busy for anything else!

Seventhly, the CGM believes that churches must have aggressive "church growth strategy". It is not enough to pray and wait for people to come to our services - we must have a plan of action. This is not to deny that God is sovereign, rather it is to assert our God-given responsibility to fulfill the Great Commission by going out into the world and making disciples. Having a plan helps the whole body move as one, it clarifies what it is we are trying to do and it provides a standard by which to measure whether we are succeeding or failing. Wagner sees a challenging and yet realistic plan as a "practical manifestation of faith". However if a church develops a plan, it must take steps to put the plan into action, otherwise its value is lost. When planning for church growth, a congregation with its leaders should look at ways in which it can make contact with community. How can we raise our profile in the community? What needs can we meet? What events can we organize that will draw in the unchurched? Remembering McGavran's "homogenous unit principle", a good plan will focus attention on and direct resources to those who are most like the members of the church, since sociologically they should be the most receptive to their witness.

Eighthly, the CGM understands the importance of integrating new converts into the life of the church. Nobody can please all of the people all of the time... and those who come within the CGM would be the first to say that you shouldn't even try. Each year there will be those who come and those who go, for all kinds of reasons. If people are not comfortable in a given church, in many instances, they would be better off attending somewhere else. But having said this, church growth proponents also recognize that if a church is going to grow it has to "close its back door." You have to find ways to keep members involved in the life and ministry of the church. If this is going to happen, people must be encouraged to develop meaningful friendships within the church, they must find out what they can do to contribute to the work, they must understand and share a common vision for the ministry and they must feel that they are growing spiritually as a result of their contact with the church. If these things are not happening, the sheep will be restless and they may look elsewhere for a place where their needs will be met.

Ninthly, the CGM stresses the need to have a ministry to youth. Barna reports that successful churches believed that "ministering to young people was the key to having a growing, healthy church." There are many different reasons for this. Baby boomers are very concerned about their children, so programs for children and young people bring those that run them into contact with their parents sooner or later. In fact, many adults will attend a church for no other reason except that there are things for their kids to do. Statistics show that two out of three adults decide to commit themselves to Christ before they were eighteen years of age, so youth ministry represents "the highest potential for conversion." Today's youth are not only the leaders of tomorrow but they can have a

positive affect on the life of the church right now, by their freshness and zeal and their willingness to question things. And besides all that, children can have a profound effect on the spiritual life and interests of their parents. Converted children can be missionaries to their own families and they can challenge their parents to pursue a deeper walk with God. When it comes to working with young people you have to have quality people who practice what they teach. You should not be afraid to develop your own curriculum, but whatever you do, keep things interesting... after all church is to be fun!

Tenthly, the CGM tells us that we should pay careful attention to our external, physical surroundings if we are going to make a positive impression on people for Christ. In particular, evangelicals must realize the importance of having plenty of parking, a clean up-to-date nursery, lots of classroom space, an attractively landscaped lot and a comfortable, welcoming auditorium. And when a church reaches 80% of its capacity in any of these key areas it is time to start making plans to expand or its rate of growth will plateau, and may even begin to decline. But be careful, because it is as important that you do not have a building that is too big, as it is that you do not have one that is too small. Whatever, the key word here is "user friendly." From the lighting, to the sound equipment, to the seating in the auditorium, to the bulletin... everything should have a professional look that gets people's attention and tells them that are serious about what you are doing.

III. WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THE CHURCH GROWTH MOVEMENT?

The CGM has many things to say to us as we near the end of the 20th century, because as Os Guinness has said, "It represents a concern for many of the most-needed components of Christian renewal and reformation." The CGM reminds us of the importance of the Great Commission and of the fact that there are still millions and millions of people, both at home and abroad, who do not understand who Jesus Christ really is. It also reminds us that at the centre of God's plan to reach the world is the church. It is not some optional extra that is more of a hindrance than a help, but is a living growing body of redeemed people who are responsible to communicate the gospel and disciple those who trust in the Saviour. The CGM challenges us with the possibility of growth and the need to work hard to plant new churches and strengthen existing ones. We are not to sit around and feel sorry for ourselves, or hunker down and wait for Jesus to come again; we are to take a good look around at the fields that are ready for harvest and pray and dream about the possibilities. More than that we are to plan. Strategy is not "worldly". It is for God's ambassadors as well. We need to start asking strategic questions like: how can we reach our world for Jesus? What do people outside the church think? What can we do, where we are, to communicate the unchanging truths of the Word of God in a way they can understand? What can we legitimately borrow from the human sciences that will help us with our task at this time, which may be as volatile and unpredictable as any time since the Reformation?

At the same time, the CGM dares us to reevaluate what we are doing and why we are doing it and this is very necessary from time to time. It exposes us to other models of ministry that may have picked up something we have forgotten, or may have assumed was unimportant, or may never even have thought of before. Even though many ministers acknowledge the importance of prayer, many still do not pray as they should. If this is the case, we can learn from those within the CGM who have learned the discipline of prayer and meditation and the value of a consistent, humble walk with God. After all, we cannot expect people to do what we are not doing ourselves. Leadership is not just a matter of knowing the right answers, there is also an essential, exemplary component.

In far too many churches, a small handful of people do most of the work while the larger majority are content to come and get "ministered" to. There are many reasons for this, from controlling personalities who love to be in the spotlight and have trouble believing that anybody can take their place, to downright laziness on the part of an assortment of evangelical "pew potatoes". Because of this, we need to pay attention to the CGM when it tells us that it is healthy for a church and its individual members to exercise their gifts and we need to help them do so, and give them opportunities to develop their abilities. Vibrant Christianity is not a spectator sport, nor is it an individual endeavour, it is a team effort and everyone must pull together if the whole body is going to grow and be effective.

While some see the traditional worship services as a "sacred trust" that should never be touched or altered, the CGM at the very least, makes us think through what we are doing. And even if we are not prepared to buy into all of the changes they think are long overdue, let's face it, a biblical reassessment of our priorities would probably do us all a lot of good. The times of our services, the way we conduct prayer meetings, the kind of music we use and the types of sermons we preach are all examples of things that can become fossilized for no good reason except that "things have always been done that way". Whatever we may think about changes in any of these areas, to continue doing things the way we are just because that's the way it has always been done, is not good enough.

I also think the CGM movement is to be commended for its emphasis on excellence in ministry. Sometimes Christians give the Lord far less than their best. How many sermons and Bible studies flop because those responsible did not put in the time and effort necessary to make the truth come alive? How many church buildings are as well-appointed and well-adorned as the homes of the members who attend each week? In this part of the world most Christians come from user-friendly homes where everything is neat, clean and inviting, but few are prepared to contribute the money which they have (and lavishly spend on themselves) and even fewer are prepared to do the work that is required to make the "meeting-place" a place where people want to meet. Until the gap between what we say is important and what we do to demonstrate this is closed, many churches will never be more than mediocre, which is not only dishonouring to God, but in most cases it puts us outside the sphere of His blessing.

IV. WHAT IS THERE ABOUT THE CHURCH GROWTH MOVEMENT THAT SHOULD CONCERN US?

First, and foremost in my mind, is the pragmatic principle of interpretation which is used to determine which biblical passages and doctrines receive the greatest attention. Several analysts have pointed out that this hermeneutic opens the door for a new kind of liberalism in which "the world sets the agenda for the church." No matter what Christian leaders profess to believe, if they are guided in their teaching and preaching by what appears to "work," they will fail to declare all the counsel of God, and as time goes on, they will eventually end up distorting the truth of the Bible, all of which our wise God has revealed for our good.

Closely related to this is the question of relevance. It is important to be relevant, but relevance has its limits. In fact, it is possible to be so relevant that one becomes irrelevant because you are merely telling people what they already know, and not what they need to hear. In his book "Marketing the Church", Barna gives us what he considers to be a fundamental principle of Christian communication: "the audience, not the message is sovereign." The trouble is, that when one makes the audience sovereign, when they determine what is said and not said, and how it is said, the speaker is not left with much to say. And if the speaker is the church, she is thereby robbed of her prophetic function in society. The real tragedy is that many Christians have missed this point, while some in the world seem to understand it, as the following poignant lament, which Guinness quotes from the "New Yorker", illustrates. "The preacher, instead of looking out upon the world, looks out upon public opinion, trying to find out what the public would like to hear. Then he tries his best to duplicate that and bring his finished product into a marketplace in which others are trying to do the same. The public, turning to our culture to find out about the world, discovers there is nothing but its own reflection. The unexamined world, meanwhile, drifts blindly into the future."

This ought not to be. Success, or what appear to produce results, is not a reliable principle of interpretation. The Bible warns us that sometimes what "works" is false, and may even be Satanic. The gospel is not always "user-friendly". It contains bad news for modern man as well as good. While we must be sensitive to the needs of people around us, we must preach Christ and Him crucified, and be prepared to endure the trouble that will come our way. How we apply the Bible will vary depending on the situation we are addressing, but the essential message must not change no matter how much it rubs people the wrong way, because whether they know it or not, it is exactly what they need to hear.

The CGM's pragmatic principle of interpretation is also of great concern because I am afraid it will keep the church from confronting some of the major social issues of our day. David Wells has said that "evangelicalism has increasingly found out that the cost of modern relevance has been its own theological evisceration." I would like to add "social and moral evisceration" as well. How does a "user-friendly" church address issues like abortion, feminism, homosexuality and the hedonism of our day without offending the community it is trying to reach? What we need today is powerful preaching of the biblical text in a way that people can understand. We need wise, and yet courageous men,

who will translate the text, not transform it into something it is not. We need those who have come under the authority of the Lord to bring others who do not know Him into His awesome and wonderful presence.

My second area of concern revolves around the nature of Christian ministry. Make no mistake about it, the CGM is calling for a radical change in our traditional understanding of the Christian ministry. While the biblical qualifications for leaders are not denied and in many cases assumed, I believe it is significant that they are not positively articulated. While passing reference is made to the leadership styles of various biblical characters including Jesus, too often these references seem to be nothing more than an attempt to find a Scriptural example of a modern psychological or management principle. Wells has pointed out that once upon a time pastors "believed that they were called to think about life, to think in ways that were centred in and disciplined by the truth of God's Word." However, things have changed. The pragmatic, utilitarian spirit of our age has made this old model obsolete and this has not only affected what the pastor is supposed to do on a daily basis, but what kind of training is given to future shepherds. Wells goes on to say, "as the technological world has encroached upon the pastorate, management by technique has come to replace management by truth", and he cites as an example "Leadership Magazine" (A Practical Journal for Christian Leaders) which does not seek to give understanding as much as a way to manage problems in the church. Guinness claims that over the years "Leadership" has looked at every conceivable problem in the church, yet less than 1% of its articles have any reference to Scripture at all, or any serious theological reflection.

This is not accidental. This is a deliberate move away from the old ways. Today we are being told that if a church is to grow and a minister is to be a success, he must become more "professional." He must know how to delegate and interact with his people. He must be open and affirming. He must be a sparkplug who gets things going by inspiring confidence in his congregation. He must be visible without being overbearing. In short, he must be a combination of therapist and chief executive officer. He is not so much someone who speaks for God as he is one who manages an institution whose job is to provide services and good feelings. Sadly, it is not only the new realities of the marketplace that demand this, it is also driven by a sense of insecurity that many modern pastors feel in their hearts.

The pastor used to be the best educated and most respected leader in the community and theology used to be the "queen of sciences", but like everything else, all that has changed. As Don McCullough has said, "now he finds himself excluded from all that is meaningful in society, he is a generalist in an age of specialization, he worked with words in a video culture and as he refers people to doctors, psychologists and lawyers for 'concrete help', he wonders where he fits in." I believe that in many respects, the CGM's attempt to refocus the ministry is an attempt to deal with this marginalization of the ministry and this is at least one reason why so many men find it attractive. The CGM has found the pastor a niche in the crowded marketplace of specialists. He is a "church growth professional" and he is not irrelevant!

But this is far removed from the beautiful simplicity of the biblical pattern. In his book "Ashamed of the Gospel", John MacArthur sums up the apostle Paul's instructions to the younger Timothy who was trying to find his way as a minister in the hostile, pagan world of first century Ephesus. Tragically, what Paul said and what we are being told today are light years apart. To Timothy, Paul says: 1) be faithful in preaching the truth, 2) be bold in exposing error, 3) be an example of godliness, 4) be diligent and work hard, and 5) be willing to suffer hardship and persecution for the Lord. Whatever the CGM might teach about how to resolve some of the structural problems of the church, we cannot wander very far from these biblical priorities and directives without doing ourselves and the church of Jesus Christ great harm.

My third area of concern involves what I see as the commandeering of the worship service by the unchurched. It is one thing to be aware that whenever we gather there may be some who do not know the Lord, and to act accordingly; but it is quite another to say that we should design the whole worship service for the unchurched, that we should think of them first and cater to their whims and wishes in order to get them to come back. This idea is bound to produce problems in the church, particularly in the area of preaching, which is already looked down on by many churchgoers. Expository preachers like John MacArthur have already noticed what is going on. He writes: "Bad doctrine is tolerable; a long sermon most certainly is not. The timing of the benediction is of far more concern to the average churchgoer than the content of the sermon. Sunday dinner and the feeding of our mouths takes precedence over Sunday School and the nourishment of our souls. Long-windedness has become a greater sin than heresy." The CGM warns us that if we are going to appeal to "unchurched Harry and Mary," not only must we monitor the length of our sermons, but we must be very aware of what we say and how we market our "product". In fact, we must go out of our way to make sure that wherever possible we are as upbeat and positive as possible, because modern men and women hear enough bad news every day. We must speak to their "felt needs" in an amusing and entertaining way. If they want music or skits or multimedia presentations we should give it to them. Why, some "churches" even have Christmas and Easter extravaganzas with live elephants, kangaroos and zebras, and fireworks for the Fourth of July. One of America's five largest churches decided to "perk up the attendance at evening services" by staging a wrestling match. And then there is the pastor who "ended one sermon by ascending to heaven via invisible wires that drew him up out of sight while the choir and orchestra added a musical accompaniment to the smoke, fire and light show." Boy, I'm sure the unchurched were impressed... but is that what we are supposed to be doing? Is this how the early church perked up attendance?

Perhaps an even more basic question should be asked. Was the early church that was born of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost "user-friendly" by today's church growth standards? Certainly they reached out to those who did not know the risen Lord, but when they gathered it was not to be entertained, or to entertain anyone else, it was to study the apostles' teaching, to fellowship with one another, to break bread, to pray and to praise God. There was a sense of awe that characterized their gatherings and when Ananias and Sapphira lied to the Lord and died because of it, great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events.

When we gather as believers we do not gather to be entertained, but to worship the God who has made us and redeemed us from our sins. We gather to hear the Scriptures read and explained, to sing hymns and songs of praise, to pray and to share in the things of God with our brothers and sisters. Our goal should not be to see how many unchurched people we can keep interested, nor should our goal be the acceptance of the world. We gather to glorify God and learn how to serve Him better. Unbelievers are welcome, but when they come to observe our worship it should be such that they are convinced by all that they are sinners. It should lay bare the secrets of their hearts, so they fall down and worship God exclaiming, "God is really among you" (1 Cor. 14:24-25).

The CGM wants to see the worship service used as a critical evangelistic tool because it believes evangelism should be the great priority of the church. But what it does not understand is that by allowing the unchurched to commandeer the worship service, they are smothering the holy fire that drives all true evangelistic efforts. That is the worship of the Lord who is holy, holy, holy... the Lord Almighty, who alone is able to purify his servants' lips and move them to go and proclaim His word (Is. 6:1-3). If we are to fulfill the Great Commission, we must first gather to worship before we move out into the world and urge men to be reconciled to God.

In the fourth place, I am concerned about the danger of relying upon technique, instead of the supernatural power of God. The use of techniques or means is not necessarily inconsistent with relying on the supernatural power of God. Indeed, God often works through human instrumentality. It is not the use of techniques that troubles me, but the danger of "trusting" in various techniques to solve the problems of the church. If we trust in a technique, even if that "technique" is prayer, we are guilty of worshipping a false god - because it is not the means that we are to depend upon, but the God who gave them to us in the first place.

When technique is emphasized over theology, the real nature of the church and her problems is disguised. The church is not just another human institution with a few structural or organizational problems that can be fixed by the appropriate expert who knows how to apply the latest finding of the social sciences. It is a supernatural body being constructed by the Lord Jesus Christ that is engaged in a life and death battle with the powers of darkness, and it will only survive and prosper as it draw nourishment, wisdom and strength from her risen Head. A preoccupation with technique puts the spotlight on secondary issues and not on the Word of God where it belongs. It can also cater to human pride, because when all is said and done it is not our stories or our organizational abilities or our hard work that brings people into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. It is the sovereign Lord who alone is able to raise the dead that has driven His truth home to the heart by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Just because a given technique works, does not mean it is right. A non-confrontational, humorous, anecdotal method of preaching may pack them in, but this does not mean the message is sound or that the growth is healthy. As a matter of fact, one of the big problems with modern techniques is that they work so well that people can be

drawn into the church who have never been regenerated by the Holy Spirit. Once in the church, they are given a false assurance of salvation and they are worse off than they were in the beginning. We would do well to remember that "growth for growth's sake is cancerous".

Techniques can also raise false hopes in those who are not as talented, or as godly, or as experienced as the heroes they look up to in the CGM. The reason people flock to conferences and seminars and snap up all the latest books on the subject of church growth is because they believe if they do what "so-and-so" is doing, their church will grow too. But unfortunately this is rarely the case, and the church growth experts know it. Every situation is different, and every person is unique in ways that do not guarantee just anybody will be a star once they understand how the stars of the evangelical CGM made it to the "top".

Though the CGM makes much of getting as many people as possible involved in the ministry of the church, reliance on data and information may give rise to a new elite, a new priesthood. During the Reformation, Luther fought to break down the division that existed between the clergy and the laity because it was unbiblical and it was hindering the spread of the gospel. We must be very careful that unbiblical and damaging divisions are not established between demographers, sociologists, managers and super-pastors and the rest of us mere mortals, which may obscure the glorious gospel of God's grace. What we need today are not more church growth technicians, but students of the Word who refuse to be manipulated and blown here and there by every wind of teaching.

Finally, I am concerned that in spite of all the hype, the CGM is not really working as well as some think. Just a few months ago, Kenneth H. Sidey wrote an editorial in *Christianity Today* (Aug. 16/93) entitled: "Boomer, Boom and Bust". He is an elder in a church that moved to a "seeker approach" on Sunday mornings three years ago. In his article, he tells us that after they moved to this new approach their attendance "rose significantly," but upon studying what was going on, he and his fellow elders discovered "that on any given Sunday, only about 40% of those who call our church 'home' are in the services. An 'average' congregant attends only twice a month. At the same time, he or she gives little and serves even less, yet expects a high level of service and support from the church." He goes on to say that their church is not unique and "other Boomer-oriented churches that they compared notes with face similar situations". I think the sub-heading hit the nail on the head... "Churches now 'service' the consumer generation, but the challenge is to convert it".

Sidey's observations correspond to some degree with those of Bill Hull, who is the director of church ministries for the Evangelical Free Churches of America. In a book called "Power Religion," he says that the "CGM has promised more than it has delivered". Contrary to all that has been said, statistics show that the number of evangelicals has been declining for the past 25 years. The average evangelical church in the United States only introduces 1.7 people to Christ per year for every 100 people who attend. At this rate Hull says we are "only replacing the dead". But what about all those megachurches who have mastered the principles of church growth? Twenty years ago

there were 100 mega-churches who drew at least one thousand people, in 1992 there were 4000, and that number is expected to increase throughout the decade. While the number of megachurches continues to climb, 90% of all American churches have an attendance of 200 or less. In fact, 50% of all Christian who attend only 7% of the churches. When you put all these figures together it is obvious what is happening in America, and I have no reason to doubt that it is much different here in Canada. The so-called megachurches are simply drawing from (or should I say "feeding on") existing smaller churches, and that may be why Barna predicts that during the 1990's 100,000 American churches will close doors. The truth is that evangelicals are not converting the lost or penetrating their communities. For all their talk about relevance, evangelicals have become largely irrelevant, and now they are in danger of practical extinction in this part of the world. Instead of helping us fulfill the Great Commission, it now appears that in many instances the CGM is really a vehicle whereby some big churches can maintain, or increase, their share of the dwindling evangelical Christian market at the expense of a lot of smaller churches.

What is the answer? In spite of its weaknesses, I do not think we should write off the whole CGM. I agree with Os Guinness when he says: "historically speaking, the CGM is a significant new initiative in the long history of Christian innovation and adaptation". He goes on to say that Christians are not as "hidebound, stuck-in-the-mud, or dying for a change," as some church growth leaders would have us believe. On the contrary, "the Christian faith is unrivalled among the world religions for its genius in innovation and adaptation. And no branch of the Christian faith has demonstrated this genius more often and more successfully than the evangelical movement." The problem is not innovation per se. This is often necessary and is part of our Christian heritage. The trick is to be innovative without being seduced by the world, so that we compromise what is non-negotiable. The CGM has many important and helpful things to say to us in the area of "stewardship, whether of people, resources, or time." If we can take the best of what the CGM has to offer without wandering from the truth of God's Word, I believe we will be better able to serve our Lord in this generation. However, to do this we must read the Scriptures more than the social sciences, until the truth of the Word is written on our hearts. We must pray that God will guide us and do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. We must assess where we are at and make plans to do what we can to fulfill our part of the Great Commission. And we must personally reach out to people in their own environment and bring them to where they should be... at the feet of Jesus. But after all has been said and done, amid the clamour of our noisy, triumphalistic culture will all of its techniques and experts, let us remember what the Lord said to encourage Zerubbabel about the future of the kingdom: "'Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,' says the Lord Almighty" (Zec. 4:6). So it has always been, and so it will always be when it comes to the church of our Lord Jesus Christ, and we must never, ever forget it.

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