
A 1979 Perspective on Church Growth

by Donald McGavran

Today, as interest in church growth is cresting all across the United States and beginning to reach the state churches of Europe, it is most desirable for each denomination to study what church growth means to *it*. Dr. Howard Snyder's splendid article in the October 1978 issue of *The Asbury Seminary* does this for those denominations which trace their origin to John Wesley. As Dr. Snyder says in his concluding paragraph, each tradition ought to examine itself in the light of church growth. Recently, a visitor from Norway spent some time with me exploring what church growth can mean in a nation in which all the citizens are already baptized members of the Lutheran Church.

We rejoice in such examinations of the implications and meanings of church growth. The theological and ecclesiological bearings of church growth on each denomination should be explored. At the same time, we must be sure that the comment is on what essential church growth really is. So much has been written on church growth, and from so many angles, and to so many particular situations, that it is easy to find oneself ascribing to church growth what it is *not* saying.

This is particularly true because church growth theory, theology, and ecclesiology have been framed in an interdemonimational setting. The basic theological and ecclesiological positions have been deliberately stated in a way that enables them to be accepted by Christians of different traditions. The intent was to lead Christians of different churches and communions to return to biblical imperatives concerning propagating the Gospel, imperatives neglected in the tumult which is the twentieth century. To be more exact, church growth has been framed by missionaries of the free churches. Had it

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been formulated by leaders of the state churches, it would have emphasized the same essentials but in a somewhat different way.

As each tradition forms its own church growth ecclesiology and theology, it will state the basic concepts in a way agreeable to its own convictions. Stated by Lutherans in accordance with strict Lutheran theology, church growth will have a slightly different sound from that voiced by Dr. Howard Snyder. Yet both will be essentially church growth — provided that they discern what essential church growth is and avoid the trap of talking about (and qualifying or refuting) the local coloration in some particular statement of the basic theory.

After readers have pursued “A Wesleyan Perspective on Church Growth” contained in the October 1978 issue of *The Asbury Seminarian*, I invite them to study my response to it. They will find illustrations of the principle I have been expounding above — namely, that all comment on church growth ought to make a sharp distinction between the essential heart of church growth and the clothing in which it is dressed to fit different audiences.

As I review the essential church growth position, with which I have had some small connection from the beginning, it is clear that it has been neither Arminian nor Calvinistic. It has been simply and unashamedly biblical. Because our Lord commanded Christians to “disciple the *ethne*,” church growth has assumed that men could do that. He would give them strength to do it. Because He said, “Without me you can do nothing,” church growth has assumed that whatever is done is done by the Lord. Because Holy Scripture says, “If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved,” essential church growth assumes that men and women, of their own free will, can confess and believe. Because our Lord again and again (Mt. 24:24, Mk. 13:22, and on and on) speaks of the elect, church growth assumes that even the free will of men and women is conditioned and controlled by the sovereignty of God. Church growth does not attempt to solve the mystery. We simply accept it. It is there in Holy Scripture.

One thing we refuse to do. We will not spend valuable time debating the theological systems under which various branches of the household of God operate. We insist that the biblical directives to proclaim Christ, and persuade men, and incorporate them in churches, and edify them with the Word, and open them to the Holy

Spirit are so clear that all branches of the Church can easily build a passion to save men into their fundamental programs.

Secondly, Dr. Snyder takes up the matter of discipling and sanctification and says that this is “the key issue in church growth today.” I fear that much being spoken and written on church growth sounds as if that were the key issue, but in essential church growth that issue cannot arise. That discipling and perfecting (sanctifying) appear an important issue is due not to what church growth really says but to what careless writers and readers have made it say. The situation is as follows.

In 1953, 26 years ago, church growth theory was describing the people movement — the way in which societies, tribes, castes and peoples (*ethne*) become Christian. How does an endogamous society, in which everyone marries within the social unit, become Christian? How can evangelization of peoples avoid inferring or actually saying that becoming Christian means leaving that society and joining a different tribe — Church? If evangelization is held to mean *that*, then Christianization is terribly slow. Each convert comes to Christ with a feeling that he has betrayed his *ethnos* — his people.

In *Bridges of God*, as I described how peoples (note the plural) become Christian I coined two new terms — “discipling” and “perfecting.” I took the first from the Greek verb in Matthew 28:19. (Webster’s dictionary does not list “disciple” as an English verb.) Since we are commanded to disciple *ta ethne*, it must be possible to do so. I defined disciple (used in connection with a caste, a tribe, a segment of society) as meaning that

the claim of polytheism, idolatry, fetishism or any other man-made religion on its corporate loyalty is eliminated. . . and its individuals feel united around Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, believe themselves to be members of His Church, and realize that our folk are Christians, our book is the Bible, and our house of worship is the Church.

Then I coined a second term — perfecting — to mean

all that great effort of the churches in old-established “Christian” civilizations, which deals with holy living and with social, racial and political justice; and also all that

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individuals, generation and generation, into a vital and personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

In short, the new technical term “discipling” in church growth thinking from 1953 to 1971 meant helping a people (a corporate body of men and women) turn from non-Christian faith to Christ. “Perfecting” meant the whole complex process of growth in grace of *societies*, including the conversion of individuals generation after generation.

About 1971, under the impact of body life, church growth theory, and other movements, the new verb “disciple,” which I had coined, began to be used for three separate events. First, it was used for the movement of a *society* under the influence of the Holy Spirit, such that large numbers of its members became baptized and committed Christians, and becoming a Christian no longer meant “leaving the tribe of caste” (hereafter, D1). Second, it was used to describe the initial conversion of *individuals*. A person was disciplined when he was led to belief in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and baptized membership in His Church (hereafter D2). Third, the word was used for the later stages of the process by which an individual Christian becomes an informed, illuminated, thoroughly dedicated follower of Jesus Christ (hereafter D3). Dennis Oliver wrote a doctoral dissertation maintaining on the basis of the last few verses of Matthew that a person was disciplined when he was baptized and *taught all things*. A disciplined individual was like a college graduate; he had been through the entire course and passed all his examinations. He was a competent Christian.

In effect, we had three uses of the word “disciple,” but unfortunately people wrote and spoke as if discipling had only one meaning.

Confusion spread far and wide. Averring (on the basis of *Bridges of God*, page 14, thirteenth line) that church growth taught that an individual could become a Christian without any ethical commitment, critics proclaimed that church growth had serious theological lacks. They failed to note that what page 14 is speaking about is exclusively *corporate action*, exclusively the turning of *segments of a society* to Christ. Critics also failed to note that *Bridges of God* declared that converts were required to take the very costly step of renouncing allegiance to the gods. Critics were talking about D2 or D3 and did not understand that *Bridges of God* was talking

exclusively about D1. Furthermore, critics experience was with individualistic American society. They did not see that when populations first turn from Animism, Hinduism, Buddhism or other non-Christian faith to Christ, if there is no D1, D2 and D3 are very unlikely to happen at all.

Discipling Two and Discipling Three were attractive new terms. In individualistic American society, in a land where becoming Christian did not mean “leaving one’s own people and going and joining another people,” D2 and D3 were speaking of desirable processes. Consequently, both church growth men and others started using the new verb “discipling.” They were using it in the second and third meanings. I myself, in my writing to Americans and my advocacy of American church growth, have used the new verb in senses two and three. One advocate told me that he found himself arguing that the Bible requires that ethical decisions be deferred by individuals until after the first declaration of loyalty to Jesus Christ has been made. That subject can, of course, be discussed; but when it is, the speaker ought to make clear that he is talking about Discipling Two, not Discipling Three or Discipling One.

Using the one term “discipling” in three senses, without pausing to define which one is under discussion, has caused a tremendous amount of waste motion and confusion. Much ado about nothing has resulted. Cannons have been trained on mirages and fired with great satisfaction — and little effect. It is the purpose of this article to help resolve the confusion.

As soon as the three kinds of “discipling” are recognized and each one closely defined, the whole difficulty disappears. We are not in the midst of brethren who are seriously in error about the scriptural way. We are in the midst of brethren who are saying wise and true things about different situations.

Take the 30,000 member Mennonite Church in Andhra State, India. This has come into existence by a people movement chiefly from the Madiga caste. Groups of men and women from that caste have heard the Gospel, made multi-individual decisions to follow Him, been baptized and formed into congregations. They have been educated in the fear and knowledge of the Lord over the last 70 years. A sound Christian church has resulted. It has problems, but so do all denominations. This Church would never have come into existence if the one-by-one-against the current pattern had been followed. Fortunately the missionaries were wise men and women, and when

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God brought on a people movement, they lovingly and intelligently cared for it and turned it into a sound part of the body of Christ. This Mennonite Church manifests all three kinds of discipling.

D1 enabled the great turning to take place. D2 brought a stream of individuals within the “Christian movement” year by year and decade by decade to conscious enrollment in the body. D3 has perfected and sanctified a smaller but yet a considerable number of the total community of 50,000 or more to informed, committed, Bible-obeying Christian life.

I am personally a gathered church man. As far as individuals are concerned, I see them in two camps — committed Christians and nominal Christians. I do not believe there are any “born Christians.” I set high standards for Christians. In North America, I find it hard to believe that any real Christians can drink liquor. I would not belong to a congregation in which the minister and the elders took wine or cocktails. I believe that all nominal Christians ought to be led on to become flaming Christians. The true Church, I hold, consists only of those who Christ knows to be His followers. *But* having lived all my life in gathered churches, which practice believers’ baptism, I have to say that it is extraordinarily difficult to impose my ethical requirements for discipleship on other believers.

I would like to build a six foot fence of my ethical requirements and make all would-be Christians jump over it to membership in the true Church, but this is not the pattern I see in the Bible. There, the requirements for membership were just two — “repent of your sins and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ.” They did not have to give up liquor, slaves, circumcision, lack of circumcision, bacon, or a disinclination to associate with gentiles. So, rather reluctantly, I find myself confined to a position which says the biblical prerequisites for baptism can be no other than those required for the early Church in Holy Scripture. The fact that they had to repent did not mean that they had to repent of what now in 1979 appear to me as sins. They had to repent of what then, at their stage of development, seemed to *them* sins.

With sanctification or perfecting, the case is otherwise. Holy Scripture insists in a thousand different ways that the Christian must grow in grace and feed on the Word. The Holy Spirit will lead him into *all* truth. He is to grow in godliness. He is to forgive his enemies. He is to revel in the law and meditate on it day and night. He does this not by his own power, but by the power of Christ. Christ in him

enables him to do these impossible tasks. With Christ in him, he jumps over not my petty six foot fence, but a 60 foot fence. I can do all things through Christ, declares the apostle.

My professional training is in Christian education. That was my field for many years. Christians who now drink milk ought, I hold, to be led on to where they eat meat. The systematic study of God's Word cannot be stressed too greatly. It is the royal road to victorious Christian life. Nevertheless, Christian education, sanctification, perfecting cannot be substituted for conversion.

The last four paragraphs have been written to lay to rest once for all the fear in the hearts of some of our friends that church growth theory is soft toward or unsound on ethical requirements. The charge that church growth believes in cheap grace is particularly absurd in view of the convictions of all the church growth men and women I know. I trust that from now on those paragraphs or sentences or phrases which have been written about Discipling One, about the first great turnings of *groups* from non-Christian religions to Christianity will not (repeat, *will not*) be applied to one-by-one conversions. When we are talking about individuals and their conversion, none of our critics hold more vigorous and demanding concepts of what it means to be a Christian than we ourselves do. Church growth men and women have for years lived as brothers and sisters with Christians of other skin colors and other economic levels. Talk about racism! I challenge any who writes on the topic with such heat today to have slept in the homes of dark-skinned Christians more frequently than have I and other advocates of church growth. Or have more frequently and joyously shared the food of Christian comrades whose diet consisted of rice and bean soup twice a day and nothing more.

Church growth men honor and respect American Christians who are pressing forward with brotherhood. God bless them and further the cause to which they are giving their lives. They and we are *brothers*. But let us have an end to this foolish building up of straw men and tearing them down, this constant and unnecessary inference that church growth is somehow "theologically" unsound or sub-Christian. Most such remarks are based on making what was said of people movements apply to individuals.

Dr. Snyder's fourth point I find myself in hearty agreement with. By all means, let all traditions "develop a biblical doctrine of the church and the kingdom of God." The church growth movement has

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a high view of the Church. Church growth ecclesiology holds that membership in the Body of Christ is necessarily a part of saving faith. If a man really believes in Jesus Christ as Lord, he cannot spurn His Church and remain out of it — a solitary unconnected believer. To be sure, church growth theology defines the Church in a way which includes every group of confessing, baptized, obedient Christians. I, myself, believe that there is no salvation outside the Church — but I do not mean one particular Church such as the Roman Catholic or Baptist.

Here again, church growth men, speaking to an interdenominational audience, have not spelled out an ecclesiology which Presbyterians or Assemblies or Episcopalians would cheerfully acclaim as their own and correct. No. Here again, we have assumed that each denomination would take out insistence that evangelism must issue in countable Christians and countable churches and state it in terms agreeable to itself. This basic high ecclesiology must be clothed in denominational doctrine. That is the business of the denominations, not of church growth theorists. ■