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# Misunderstanding Church Growth

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by T. Joe Culumber

Church growth thinking is at the center of controversy today. Much of the criticism, however, derives from a basic misunderstanding on the part of the critics. Church growth thinkers have never pretended to have all the answers, nor to present a complete theology or ecclesiology.

Leading thinkers in church growth are, for the most part, open to criticism and appreciative of insights that will strengthen the field of church growth. Students of church growth are encouraged to read the best critics of church growth thinking. My concern is that many who are critical of certain emphases in church growth will reject church growth *in toto*.

I recently asked a seminarian about the attitude toward church growth on his campus. He replied it is usually identified with a joke about buses from two large churches that crashed in their race to pick up passengers in a neighboring state! That may be a logical response to church growth as popularized today, but hardly comes to grips with the biblical and theological issues raised by serious exponents of church growth theory. In any movement, there are those who unfairly represent and exploit it — and church growth is not immune at this point. Yet even the most outspoken critics of church growth do not reject a proper concern for the growth of Christ's body. The responses of several critics of church growth are significant.

## John H. Yoder

Peter Wagner, a leading proponent of church growth thinking, acknowledges Mennonite scholar John H. Yoder as one of the ablest of church growth critics. Yoder's essay on "Church Growth Issues

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*Joe Culumber is Associate Director for Church Growth of Light and Life Men International of the Free Methodist Church and an alumnus of Asbury Theological Seminary.*

in Theological Perspective” in *The Challenge of Church Growth*<sup>1</sup> is required reading for church growth students. Yoder raises the following key issues in church growth theology: (1) the cleavage between “discipling” and “perfecting”; (2) the question of the sequence of evangelism and nurture; (3) the lack of theological depth; (4) an over-emphasis on the missionary society’s presence as a criterion for growth; and (5) an over-emphasis on a conscious strategy of mission. Yoder concludes his insightful critique with these words:

I want to be understood as strongly favoring church growth. I am grateful for the urging of “church growth” advocates as it drives mission agencies to be more courageous in criticism of questionable institutional efforts . . . . I support the concern to get better tools to analyze one’s own forms of mission. I support the *a priori* optimism as to the prospects for the gospel. There are winnable people and our message is something they are looking for. I share the concern to find ways to let the decision for Christ be made in terms of the culture within which we speak.<sup>2</sup>

### **Howard A. Snyder**

Howard A. Snyder, writing in *The Problem of Wineskins*, says: “I have had contact with and benefited from the church growth movement . . . . While in essential agreement with the emphasis — which argues forcefully that Christian churches are divinely intended to grow significantly in number — I feel it also needs the corrective of other biblical emphases to keep it from turning into a mere ‘spiritual technology.’ ”<sup>3</sup>

Snyder, whose writings are held in high regard in church growth circles, cautions against uncritically equating institutional church growth with the progress of the kingdom of God. He argues that church growth cannot be simply “made to happen” by the right techniques or programming. Snyder shows it is normal for the church to grow, and the need to eliminate those man-made hindrances which prohibit the church from growing. In *The Community of the King*, Snyder endorses church growth thinking, properly qualified and understood:

Church growth does advance the Kingdom of God —

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*provided that by church growth one means the growth, both numerical and spiritual, of the genuine community of God's people . . . . When faithful to the gospel, therefore, the church through its growth furthers the cause of the Kingdom.*<sup>4</sup>

Snyder adds:

God has called his church to make disciples of all peoples throughout all lands and this implies numerical growth. Disciples are countable. Thus we have the startling and yet very matter-of-fact recording of numerical growth in the book of Acts.<sup>5</sup>

Here again is qualified support for church growth thinking. Snyder's concern that we not equate institutional church growth with kingdom growth is shared by many within the church growth school.

### **J. Robertson McQuilkin**

J. Robertson McQuilkin, a former missionary to Japan and now president of Columbia Bible College and Columbia Graduate School of Bible and Missions, criticizes the church growth movement from the perspective of a "friendly outsider." McQuilkin surveys five key principles of church growth in the light of Scripture, noting certain dangers and weaknesses. These principles of church growth correspond to five questions: (1) Is numerical church growth a most crucial task in missions? (2) Is it right for the church to concentrate on the responsive segments of society? (3) Are people movement conversions valid? (4) Are anthropological studies legitimate for evangelism? (5) Will large growth result from using church growth principles and techniques? Responding to these questions in *Measuring the Church Growth Movement*, McQuilkin concludes:

Study of the biblical basis of the major church growth presuppositions suggests that a uniform answer to this question (of biblical validity) is not possible. None of the presuppositions, rightly understood, need be in conflict with biblical teaching. However, only two were seen to flow directly from biblical mandates, two more seemed to be

derived from biblical principles, and one was seen to be extrabiblical, lacking both mandate and principle for validation. Yet even this was not seen to be intrinsically antithetical to biblical theology.<sup>6</sup>

Here is another critic of church growth who, conscious of its weaknesses, does not see the thrust of church growth as conflicting with Scripture.

### **Orlando E. Costas**

Along with John H. Yoder, Peter Wagner singles out Orlando E. Costas as a church growth critic demanding a hearing. Costas' criticism is particularly important because he represents a nonwestern (third world) perspective on church growth. Costas devotes a significant section (40 pages) of *The Church and Its Mission*<sup>7</sup> to restating and reaffirming church growth principles. He acknowledges the biblical basis and imperative for church growth, its theological rationale, and the positive contribution it makes to the mission of the church. The Latin American missiologist also deals with the problem areas in church growth thinking.

Costas isolates five problem areas in church growth thinking: (1) a shallow hermeneutical base; (2) a theological focus that is church-centered rather than Christocentric; (3) a truncated concept of mission; (4) an ambiguous concept of man and sin; and (5) an over-reliance on anthropology to the exclusion of the other social sciences. Still he is quick to admit that his own "critical interaction" with church growth is not meant to be a "negative criticism," but rather a positive proposal for strengthening church growth thinking. Costas concludes:

. . . Church growth theory appears as an important and positive theory of mission . . . . And as I have observed, its proponents are open to the strengthening of its weak points. In this respect, it is an open theory of mission. It behooves every one of us, therefore, as responsible churchmen, to utilize it as much as we can in our ministry and to strengthen it with our own valuable insights.<sup>8</sup>

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### **Rene Padilla**

Another third world perspective on church growth is advanced by Rene Padilla, a Latin American from Argentina. In his Lausanne address, “Evangelism and the World,” Padilla offered a corrective to church growth thinking:

It follows that the real question with regard to the growth of the church is not successful numerical expansion — a success patterned after worldly standards — but faithfulness to the gospel, which will surely lead us to pray and work for more people to become Christians. I am for quantity, but for quantity in the context of faithfulness to the gospel. I am for numbers, but for numbers of people who have heard a presentation of the gospel in which the issues of faith and unbelief have been made clear . . . .<sup>9</sup>

While Padilla critiques the numbers orientation of church growth as a temptation to submit to worldly standards, still he affirms the basic thrust of church growth thinking:

. . . The numerical expansion of the church is a legitimate concern for anyone who takes the Scriptures seriously . . . . This concern as such should not be questioned . . . . Furthermore, there is nothing to insure that those who win fewer people for Christ will be able to show forth a higher quality of Christians as a result . . . .<sup>10</sup>

### **Marcus Barth**

A respected biblical theologian writing on the book of Ephesians some 20 years prior to the present church growth controversy has an important insight into church growth. In his study of Ephesians, which is basically an ecclesiology, Marcus Barth uncovered the biblical basis for church growth. He writes:

Of the living church’s existence on earth, there are many signs . . . . Where the church is, there growth and building take place. It is characteristic of the church . . . to grow visibly. Roots and foundations might remain invisible. But it is a visible evidence of the church’s presence and life

in the world that it is a structure “growing by being joined together” (2:21), and a body being built and building itself (4:12, 16). It is a sign of the church that it resembles in part a living plant, in part a growing human body, in part a house in the process of being built. The metaphors “rooted” and “grounded” refer to the mystery of growth and of life that sustains the church.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, Marcus Barth’s biblical scholarship affirms the biblical basis for church growth. He goes on to show that the numerical expansion of the church is basic to the New Testament. He is so convinced of the centrality of the growth of the church in Ephesians that he warns: “Ephesians is read with less than care when only the concept of the ‘body of Christ’ is derived from it, and when the vital concept of the ‘growth of the body’ (4:15-16) is ignored.”<sup>12</sup>

## Conclusion

Much of the misunderstanding surrounding church growth thinking can be cleared up once church growth is properly defined and understood. Church growth thinking is basically open-ended, and its advocates are eager for continuing dialogue and interaction with the rest of the theological community. As with any movement, church growth has its weaknesses. Yet even those critical of church growth thinking express endorsement of the basic thrusts of church growth. Granted, the endorsements are qualified. But they reflect a discernment which acknowledges weaknesses in church growth without rejecting the entire church growth emphasis.

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>John H. Yoder, “Church Growth Issues in Theological Perspective,” *The Challenge of Church Growth*, ed. Wilbert R. Shenk (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1973).

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>3</sup>Howard A. Snyder, *The Problem of Wineskins* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1975), p. 17.

<sup>4</sup>*The Community of the King* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1977), p. 117.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 118.

<sup>6</sup>J. Robertson McQuilkin, *Measuring the Church Growth Movement* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1973), p. 73.

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<sup>7</sup>Orlando E. Costas, *The Church and Its Mission: A Shattering Critique From the Third World* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1974), p. 124.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 148.

<sup>9</sup>Rene Padilla, "Evangelism and the World," *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, ed. J. D. Douglas (Minneapolis: World Wide Publications, 1975), p. 138-139.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup>Marcus Barth, *The Broken Wall: A Study of the Epistle to the Ephesians*, (Chicago: The Judson Press, 1959), p. 109.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 118. ■