

# Journal of the American Society for Church Growth

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Volume 6  
Issue 1 *Church Growth at the End of the  
Twentieth Century*

Article 3

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10-1-1995

## 40 Years of Church Growth: A View from the Theological Tower

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### Recommended Citation

Russell, W. (1995). 40 Years of Church Growth: A View from the Theological Tower. *Journal of the American Society for Church Growth*, 6(1), 17-41. Retrieved from <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/jascg/vol6/iss1/3>

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**40 Years of Church Growth:  
A View from the Theological Tower**

**Walter Russell III**

*Introduction*

I am presently a New Testament theologian and Hermeneutics professor inhabiting an ivory tower in sunny Southern California. However, before becoming totally covered with ivory tower dust, I spent nine years as a church planter and pastor in Texas and Baltimore, Maryland. Therefore, I have intersected the Church Growth Movement from the dual perspectives of theologian and practitioner. However, my studies in Hermeneutics make me realize that my perspective is fraught with some serious limitations, the greatest being that it is *my* perspective! Therefore, I present these evaluative thoughts about the first forty years of the Church Growth Movement, and especially the first twenty-five years of the movement in North America (1970-1995), with the humility appropriate to one person's perspective on so vast and diverse a phenomenon as that of the Church Growth Movement (hereafter CGM).<sup>1</sup> In this spirit, I ask you to accept kindly my evaluation with the texture in which it is offered: humble, appreciative, yet deeply concerned and even distraught at certain key points. Because of the intensity of my concerns, I will speak only fleetingly of my appreciation of the positive aspects of the CGM. You should be well aware of these marvelous contributions. The bulk of my remarks will reflect my concerns about certain foundational theological aspects of the movement.

*Positive Theological Contributions Of The CGM*

First, the good news. From my perspective, there have been two significant theological contributions by the CGM. The **first contribution** is the theological clarification that the growth of the Church is not something that should be simply an overflow of the life of the Church. Rather, growth must be something that is *intentional* and embraced at the *purpose level* of the Church. The CGM has simply underscored the clear and purposeful growth-focus of the Great Commission of Jesus the Messiah (Matt 28:16-20). While growth does sometimes occur as an overflow of the healthy life of the Church, local church expressions of this are generally the exception, rather than the rule.

The present church of which I am a member is an interesting case study in growth and intentionality. This is the First Evangelical Free Church of Fullerton, California. This church grew at an amazing clip over the twenty-two and a half years of Chuck Swindoll's pastorate (1971-1994). While the pastoral staff of the church was very disinterested in, even opposed to the CGM, the church grew very large. The pastoral staff tended to attribute this to being unintentional about Church Growth tenets and to building a healthy church life. However, it was more likely due to following inadvertently some fundamental truths of the CGM. In particular, this church built its ministry around a fine pulpiteer. While this is also a commentary on the cultural and sociological dynamics of the World War II generation, it also confirms that this church grew because it *intended* to grow by doing those things that reflected a fundamental will or purpose to grow. Therefore, by God's grace it grew to be one of the largest churches of Southern California. However, the growth was not incidental to the life of the church, but rather *purposeful and intentional* because of the high priority placed on the pulpit ministry. Moreover, growth occurred, not in a unintentional manner, but rather because growth was intended. I am profoundly grateful that the CGM has heightened our awareness of the centrality of the growth that the Great Commission demands. We must continue to be **purposeful and intentional** about the worldwide growth of the Church of Jesus Christ.

This leads to my understanding of a **second contribution** of the CGM. It flows very naturally out of an intentional focus on the growth of the Church. This second contribution is the clarification and development of the Church's understanding of the

leadership qualities and characteristics necessary to catalyze and mobilize a group of Christians. Perhaps we assumed too much about this specific ability to lead and motivate a group before the CGM focused its guns on the topic. We cannot do that any more in light of the helpful research that has been done on leadership by those involved in or associated with the CGM.<sup>2</sup> I have benefited greatly in my own leadership and in my counseling of various Christian workers, most of whom *wrongly* assumed that they could catalyze a group to action. However, these are painful insights to possess as we enter into what looks like a leadership crisis both in North America, and perhaps, in the whole world. We evangelicals are even speaking about “‘a missing generation’ of younger leaders ready to take the place of the senior post-World War II group of evangelical pioneers.”<sup>3</sup> Thanks to this clarification about the mobilizing aspect of leadership by the CGM, at least we know what we are missing! However, we can also use this information to help grow future leaders. Perhaps nothing could be as strategic for the Church in the immediate future than to give focused attention to the development of godly leaders for God’s people.

But this has been the good news. Now I must turn to my theological concerns about the CGM as we stand on the cusp of the 21st century. However, in moving to my concerns I must commend the society and its leadership, especially my friend and your current president, Dr. Gary McIntosh, for the security to open yourselves to feedback from an outsider. As we all know, this can be a very risky venture, freighted with lots of potential for pain. I trust that your risk will bring some edification and positive dialogue. But first to the pain!

#### *Three Theological Concerns About The CGM*

Before expressing my own theological concerns with the CGM, let me distinguish and seek to distance myself from previous criticisms of the movement. There have been at least seven or eight strongly worded critiques of the CGM in the last four years ranging from the oblique to the straightforward. These books have been authored by such critics as Os Guinness,<sup>4</sup> John MacArthur, Jr.,<sup>5</sup> Douglas Webster,<sup>6</sup> John Seel,<sup>7</sup> Tom Raabe,<sup>8</sup> and Charles Colson,<sup>9</sup> among others. These were synthesized in Dr. John N. Vaughan’s 1993 Presidential Address to this society enti-

tled "The Church Growth Movement: Offense to the Cross?"<sup>10</sup> In his address, John Vaughan nicely summarized nine of the specific accusations compiled from these books:<sup>11</sup>

1. Abandonment of foundational principles laid by Dr. Donald McGavran by today's CGM leaders.
2. Excessive application of pragmatism by McGavran and an expansion of that misapplication by his disciples to the exclusion of Scripture. This fosters "an end justifies the means" philosophy of ministry.
3. Vulgar compromise of Scriptural truths by redefining "contextualization" of the gospel into contemporary terms like "user friendly" churches designed to tell people what they want to hear, rather than what the Scripture mandates.
4. Attempting to solicit "felt needs" of people through surveys and then customizing our message to affirm their best sense of self-esteem as a reachable "target group."
5. Systematic failure within the CGM to examine its presuppositions, principles, and "laws" through the use of modern, objective, research technique.
6. Systematic displacement of scriptural principles and teaching about the sovereignty of God in the growing of His churches.
7. Leading churches to focus on merely "churching" the already converted "unchurched" rather than reaching the unconverted for commitment to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.
8. Failure to distinguish numerical growth of biblically orthodox churches from those teaching false doctrine.
9. Preoccupation with size of a church as the measure of success.

On a ironic note, I am struck by the pragmatic nature of most of these criticisms of the CGM's pragmatism! However, my concerns are not necessarily those of my colleagues. In fact, my concerns are a bit more foundational, theologically-oriented, and

perhaps, more abstract to many of you. In this sense, my critique is simultaneously more limited in specific concerns, yet more sweeping because of the nature of my concerns. Therefore, I would hope you would allow me to have my own distinct voice without the emotional baggage engendered by earlier critiques. Also, may I ask you not to push aside the concerns I raise because they may *appear* to be somewhat general and slippery at first. One of the legacies of a couple of generations of pragmatism and utilitarianism is that we have devalued discussions of a foundational theological or philosophical nature. So, I trust that we can plow some new ground here today by discussing these concerns face-to-face in an irenic and cordial manner. Additionally, I hope that the very nature of our dialog will help to underscore some of the steps that we need to take *together* to bolster any theological weaknesses that may exist.

My fundamental theological concern is that undergirding the CGM at its most profound level is *a defective theology of persons*. I am not sure that the movement began with this; I have not necessarily perceived it in the work of Donald McGavran (e.g., in *Understanding Church Growth*), although there are those who vehemently disagree with this assessment.<sup>12</sup> However, somewhere between 1970 and 1995, a defective theological anthropology crept into the CGM. This is not a secondary or peripheral issue. It is central to the very concerns and well-being of the movement and essential to the CGM's impact on the Christian faith. Therefore, I want to give the bulk of my time to unpacking this central concern and two corollary concerns that flow out of it.

What do I mean by "a defective theology of persons"? By this I mean that the writings of recent advocates of the CGM and the seminars that they sponsor perhaps unwittingly espouse a less-than-biblical view of human beings. This is true of the CGM's view of persons at both the individual and group levels. But what is *a biblical view* of human beings? Perhaps one of the most robust and accessible expressions of the biblical theological anthropology is found in the works of the German evangelical, Erich Sauer. In particular, Sauer wrote a book setting forth a biblical view of persons called *The King of the Earth* and subtitled "The High Calling of Man according to the Bible and Science."<sup>13</sup> Listen to some of Sauer's chapter titles in his section on biblical anthropology (pages 72-191) "The Earthly Kingship of Man,"

The Winning Back of the Earth through the Rule of Man," "The Divine Nobility of True Christian Living," "Holiness and Glory in the Eternal Perfection of the High Calling of Man," and "The Practical Way to True Human Nobility." Originally written in 1959, speaking of human beings as "kingly" or possessing "nobility" sounds stunningly archaic at the end of the twentieth century. And that is exactly the problem that we face! Speaking of ourselves in the lofty language of Scripture (e.g., Psalm 8) sounds very foreign and arcane to our ultra-modern ears.

In our culture more broadly, and in evangelicalism more specifically, we have absorbed modernity's tawdry and shrunken view of persons. Combined with western culture's existential view of the human dilemma, which we have also absorbed in massive doses, we have then backed into an sub-biblical view of human beings. We have dipped inch by inch into our culture's shallow view of persons and simply overlaid it with a thin Christian veneer. Not that such a shrunken theology is unique to the CGM. Of course, it is not. This is a much broader plague within evangelical Christianity. However, because of its high profile and ecclesiastical leadership as the main shaper of North American ecclesiology in the last generation, the CGM has *de facto* become one of the main purveyors of this small-minded anthropology.

Now this is a sweeping indictment of all of us and of our respective Christian communities. Am I overstating my case in order to justify my presence here as a New Testament theologian? I honestly do not think so because of the widespread manifestations of this tawdry view of persons. What are some of these manifestations? To name but a few, the following are what I deem to be the most serious current manifestations within the CGM of a sub-biblical anthropology:

- in general, the use of utilitarian language to refer to persons that is depersonalizing, impersonalizing, and ultimately, demeaning to our dignity as bearers of the image of God.<sup>14</sup>
- a limited view of both the dignity and the intellectual capacity of persons which manifests itself in too many marketing-driven programs and not enough equipping-oriented programs for the saints in the main structures of

the church.<sup>15</sup>

- too much anti-intellectualism and an utilitarian-oriented approach to training and not enough genuine theologizing and biblical teaching which has resulted in a broad, grass roots base of immature and largely secularized saints.<sup>16</sup>
- an inadequate understanding of the Great Commission in terms of its view of human beings which manifests itself in two fundamental ways: an artificial separation of teaching from evangelizing in the discipling process<sup>17</sup> and a minimizing of the centrality of church planting which emphasizes the community dimension of human beings.<sup>18</sup>
- a defective view of spiritual gifts and the ministry of believer-priests which has resulted in an emphasis on gifts that is largely utilitarian to a local church's growth.<sup>19</sup>
- a defective view of small groups that is also utilitarian to a local church's growth and based on inadequate concepts of believers in community.<sup>20</sup>

I have just said a mouthful regarding a less-than-biblical view of persons within the CGM. Individually, each of my six points of concern may not seem to be overwhelmingly persuasive. I think that each point stands quite powerfully on its own. However, if you beg to differ, then I encourage you to consider *the cumulative weight* of the evidence! Does not this combined weight indicate that something is amiss at the foundational level of our theology of persons? We cannot contrive of defective structures and strategies for human beings without some sense of a defective view of human beings! This is my fundamental theological concern with the CGM.

May I pause and be pastoral for a moment? I am concerned about any of us who create whole conceptions of the growth of the Church grounded and predicated upon a defective theology of persons. Assuming that our mouths are speaking from that which fills our hearts and souls (as Jesus said in Luke 6:45), then such defective conceptions of church growth reveal that we probably have defective conceptions *of ourselves* as human beings



bearing the image of God. I include myself in this category when I say that many of us who are the most aggressive leaders and shapers of our Christian communities are some of the most hurting and alienated members of our society. We are generally lonely, isolated, disciplined, obsessive, driven, success-oriented, and largely friendless males. For many of us, our souls are desperately dry and empty. This is the condition that Henri Nouwen has addressed so powerfully in his little book, *In the Name of Jesus* (subtitled "Reflections on Christian Leadership"):

I am not at all surprised that so many ministers and priests suffer immensely from deep emotional loneliness, frequently feel a great need for affectivity and intimacy, and sometimes experience a deep-seated guilt and shame in front of their own people. Often they seem to say, "What if my people knew how I really feel, what I think and daydream about, and where my mind wanders when I am sitting by myself in my study?" It is precisely the men and women who are dedicated to spiritual leadership who are easily subject to very raw carnality. The reason for this is that they do not know how to live the truth of the Incarnation. They separate themselves from their own concrete community, try to deal with their needs by ignoring them or satisfying them in distant or anonymous places, and then experience an increasing split between their own most private inner world and the good news they announce. *When spirituality becomes spiritualization, life in the body becomes carnality. When ministers and priests live their ministry mostly in their heads and relate to the Gospel as a set of valuable ideas to be announced, the body quickly takes revenge by screaming loudly for affection and intimacy.* Christian leaders are called to live the Incarnation, that is, to live in the body—not only in their own bodies but also in the corporate body of the community, and to discover there the presence of the Holy Spirit.<sup>21</sup>

It is not a new phenomenon that religious leaders would lose touch with themselves and with the general populace by valuing conceptions of growth and success over human beings. Jesus regularly crossed swords with the religious leaders of his day over this very issue: their shrunken theology of persons. In a

remarkable passage in the New Testament, we read of a series of five escalating conflicts between Jesus and the scribes and Pharisees. This passage, Mark 2:1-3:6, is astoundingly significant because it underscores the great disparity between Jesus' theology of persons and the Pharisees' anthropology. In these five escalating conflict stories<sup>22</sup> we see the following:

- 1) In **Mark 2:1-12**, Jesus heals and forgives a paralytic of both his sins and his paralysis, but some of the scribes reason in their hearts against Him. They were more concerned about the possibility of their movement's rules being violated than about a suffering person being healed and forgiven.
  - Do we care more about maintaining our principles about Church Growth than we care about suffering, sinful human beings finding forgiveness, possibly in ways not anticipated by our movement's principles?
- 2) In **Mark 2:13-17**, Jesus calls Levi as a disciple and then eats with him and his friends, the sinners and tax-gatherers; but the scribes of the Pharisees grumble to Jesus' disciples because they care more about the success of maintaining their table fellowship purity than about these outcast Jews following Jesus as disciples.
  - Do we value the purity of the "doctrines" of the CGM more than the joy of sinners following Jesus in ways that may make us uncomfortable?
- 3) In **Mark 2:18-22**, the disciples of both John the Baptist and the Pharisees questioned Jesus about why His disciples did not fast regularly as they did, thereby showing the priority of maintaining present movement practices over celebrating the Messiah's presence in their midst.
  - Do we glory in aspects of the CGM perhaps elevated to the level of dogma or ritual and miss the freedom of celebrating Messiah Jesus' presence in our midst in new, fresh ways?
- 4) In **Mark 2:23-28**, the conflicts escalate when the Pharisees criticized Jesus for His disciples picking off some heads of grain while walking through the grain fields on

the Sabbath. Again, these most influential grass roots religious leaders of Israel cared more about the success of their own religious enterprise than about the well-being of human beings. Jesus's rebuke is forever devastating to such a shriveled theology of persons: "The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath!" (2:27)<sup>23</sup>.

- Do we believe that our Church Growth practices were made for man, or have we distorted them to where man is now made for our Church Growth practices? (i.e., the tail is now wagging the dog!)
- 5) In **Mark 3:1-6**, we see the climactic confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees when He heals a man with a withered hand in a synagogue on the Sabbath. Again, the Pharisees valued the maintaining of their own standards of religious success more than they valued this poor, contorted human being. Jesus' response is remarkably instructive about His anthropology: "And after looking around at them *with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart*, He said to the man, 'Stretch out your hand.' And he stretched it out, and his hand was restored." (Mark 3:5; emphasis is mine).
- Have we become so dogmatic about our CGM doctrines and so protective of our resulting careers that our hearts may have actually become hardened to our fellow human beings and we deserve our Savior's anger because of our callused state?

My fellow disciples of Jesus Christ, if I am accurate to only a small degree about our adopting a defective theology of persons from our Modernity-intoxicated environment, then this is an issue that must be rooted out. The danger is that this may be truly "a frog in the kettle" situation.<sup>24</sup> It is something that we backed into and absorbed from our culture in incrementally-imperceptible degrees. However, the pot is still boiling and we are no longer green, but brilliantly red. But worst of all, we may have hindered the true work of the Kingdom of God at key points because we did not embrace and maintain our Savior's lofty view of our fellow human beings. If there is the slightest

possibility that this could be true, is not such a foundational issue as our theology of persons worthy of our profound inquiry and self-examination? I trust you believe that it is.

This brings me to my **second theological concern** about the CGM. I am persuaded that our defective theology of persons has led to a **defective theology of leadership**. Such a statement may seem contradictory at first because of my earlier praise of the CGM for its clarification of the mobilizing or catalyzing aspect of leadership in the Church. However, I am not now taking away with the left hand of sorrow what I formerly gave with the right hand of joy. Rather, I am making a distinction between the helpful contribution of one aspect of the leadership function and the defective overall theology of leadership in the Church that I have sensed in my interaction with the CGM.

What do I mean by “a defective theology of leadership”? Paralleling my first theological concern about a defective theology of persons, our theology of leadership is largely functionally-defined in terms of mastering certain skills and is modernity-reductionistic from the lofty view of leadership found in the Bible. For example, the New Testament emphasizes the development of virtues in an elder or pastor’s character and spheres of influence as the primary qualifiers for leadership. Nineteen of the twenty elder qualities in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 focus on these virtues. Only one quality focuses on a skill: able to teach. In other words, if we wanted to be crassly quantifiable in our approach, we could say that 95% of the emphasis in determining who should lead should focus on a person’s character. The remaining 5% of emphasis should be on the one skill of teaching the flock the Word of God. However, in our culture we regularly confuse skills and gifts with character and readily substitute the former for the latter when we look for a leader. I share the guilt in this tragic trade-off because I teach in a typical evangelical seminary where we have almost a total emphasis on skill acquisition and hardly any emphasis on character development. We have a shrunken theology of leadership in the Church that flows out of our shrunken view of humanity. Let me further illustrate my point.

One of the basic tenets of the CGM in recent years is that a church must have a single pastor or a senior pastor who spearheads the vision of the church and with whom seekers can identify. It has been observed that the world’s twenty largest

churches manifest this pattern.<sup>25</sup> There have been books by CGM advocates that seek to equip pastors to be this kind of leader and manager.<sup>26</sup> In the popular CGM parlance, this type of leadership often has been referred to as “the Moses Model of Leadership.” The parallel is that as Moses envisioned and led Israel to the Promised Land, so should the senior pastor cast the vision and lead his church to growth. Such a dynamic view of leadership has been attractive to many frustrated and defeated pastors. I applaud the ministry of encouragement that the CGM has had to countless pastors! Pastoral ministry is extremely difficult in North America in light of the unrealistic expectations for personal fulfillment that most people have. However, this leadership model is defective theologically and questionable ethically. May I explain?

Theologically, the Old Testament anticipates and the New Testament authenticates that there will be “the New Moses Leadership Model.” Moses himself exhorts Israel in Deuteronomy 18:15 to expect a prophet like him who will come in Israel’s future: “The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your countrymen, you shall listen to him.” The New Testament makes it clear that Jesus the Messiah is that prophet, the New Moses.<sup>27</sup> For example, in John 6:1-13 after Jesus performed the messianic miracle of feeding the five thousand in the wilderness and still had twelve baskets of barley loaf fragments left over, notice the response of the people:

When therefore the people saw the sign which He had performed, they said, “This is of a truth the Prophet who is to come into the world.” Jesus therefore perceiving that they were intending to come and take Him by force, to make Him king, withdrew again to the mountain by Himself alone (John 6:14-15).

In other words, it is clear that the Moses model of leadership is, in fact, a New Testament phenomenon, but it is a leadership model that is filled by Messiah Jesus *and Him alone!* To speak of the Moses model of leadership and to apply it to a pastor or to any Christian leader is to usurp the role of the *true* New Testament Moses Model. This is a significant theological misunderstanding and an absolutely fallacious foundation for a popular leadership model in the Church. We can confidently put a “No Vacancy” sign in the window for the Moses Leadership Model

room. It is occupied by Jesus Christ quite nicely, thank you, and no one else need inquire!

But there is more theological evidence to indict us on our defective theology of leadership. In addition to usurping Jesus' role as the New Moses, we have misunderstood His role as the Senior Pastor of each local church. Now this is a remarkable claim and it demands remarkable proof to validate it! Fortunately, five passages in the Old and New Testaments do that very thing. First, the Old Testament passage. **Ezekiel 34** is a remarkable chapter within the exilic prophet Ezekiel's prophecies about Israel's past and future. Ezekiel, a prophetic contemporary of Jeremiah, experienced the exile and the destruction of Judah during his ministry. While in Babylon, he recorded Adonai Yahweh's "woe oracle" to the shepherds of Israel in Ezekiel 34:1-10. The prophet Ezekiel announces that Yahweh is taking away the shepherding of His people Israel from their present shepherds. The term "shepherds" normally included not only the political shepherds (kings) of Israel, but also the spiritual shepherds (the priests and prophets).<sup>28</sup> In Ezekiel 34 the focus is primarily upon the political shepherds (kings) of Israel. The Lord God removed them from tending His flock Israel because they neglected the needs of the flock in order to care for their own needs. They exploited God's people and let them be destroyed while profiteering off of them. Israel's shepherds stand under the judgment of God and He pronounces woe upon them as He also did in Jeremiah 23:1-8.

However, Ezekiel also brings a "blessing oracle" for God's flock in this chapter. The blessing is that Yahweh Himself will shepherd His people (vv. 11-24). The Lord God will search for and rescue His sheep by His own hand. He will do this by placing over them His designated ruler:

"Then I will set over them *one shepherd, My servant David*, and he will feed them; he will feed them himself and be their shepherd. And I, the Lord, will be their God, and My servant David will be prince among them; I, the Lord, have spoken" (vv. 23-24; emphasis is mine).

Under Yahweh's servant David, He will restore His flock to their land and rescue them from their plight by making "a covenant of peace" with them (v. 25; cf. Ezek 37:24) and gathering them from the nations and blessing their land (vv. 25-31). There-

fore, in this remarkable chapter of woes and blessings, the Lord God establishes His future pattern for the shepherding of His people.

From the New Testament perspective, it is quite obvious that Jesus of Nazareth is the greater David who is the One appointed by the Father to shepherd His people. We see this in four New Testament passages. First, in **Matthew 9:35-38**, Jesus expresses both the care of a true shepherd by going about the cities and villages and teaching, proclaiming the gospel of God, and healing every disease and sickness (v. 35). He also expresses the concern of Yahweh's shepherd as He observes the shepherdless flock:

And seeing the multitudes, He felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and downcast like sheep without a shepherd. Then He said to His disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Therefore, beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest" (vv. 36-38).<sup>29</sup>

Secondly, in **John 10:1-18**, Jesus is more overt and claims that He is "the door of the sheep" and the only way of deliverance for them (vv. 7-10). Even more vividly, He claims, "I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep" (v. 11). In contrast to a hireling who flees when the wolf comes (vv. 12-13), Jesus will not flee because of His concern for the flock (v. 13b). As the good shepherd, He knows His own and lays down His life for them (vv. 14-15). He is the One designated by the Father to unify God's flock:

"And I have *other sheep* which are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they shall hear My voice; and they shall become *one flock with one shepherd*. For this reason the Father loves Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it again. No one has taken it away from Me, but I lay it down on My own initiative. I have *authority* to lay it down, and I have *authority* to take it up again. *This commandment* I received from My Father" (vv. 16-18; emphasis is mine).

I suggest to you that Jesus' claim to be the Good Shepherd is the claim to be the Messianic Servant whom the Father has designated—fully authorized—to be the Shepherd of God's people.

This includes not only God's historic people Israel, but also the "other sheep which are not of this fold" which are to become "one flock with one shepherd" (John 10:16).<sup>30</sup> John 10:1-18 completes the theological loop begun in Ezekiel 34. God's shepherding of His people is fully delegated to the God-Man, Jesus the Messiah. He is the *only One authorized* to die for the flock and to rise again for the flock. What a God! What a Shepherd!

Our last two New Testament passages take the historical fact of Jesus' role as the designated shepherd of God's people and apply it in a pastoral manner to two groups of people within the church. In **1 Peter 2:25** the apostle applies Jesus' shepherding of our souls to those servants who are suffering unjustly at the hands of their masters: "For you were continually straying like sheep, but now you have returned to the Shepherd (poimhvn) and Guardian (ejpivskopo~) of your souls." In **1 Peter 5:4**, Peter concludes his encouragement of the elders/pastors who are to shepherd the flock of God voluntarily, eagerly, and as examples (vv. 1-3) with a word about Jesus' shepherding: "And when the Chief Shepherd (ajrcipoivmhn) appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory."

I have sought to validate in this long biblical chain that Jesus the Messiah is truly the Shepherd of not only the whole (universal) flock, but also each local expression of the whole flock. Do you believe this? Do you believe that the risen, ruling Messiah Jesus is truly the Chief Shepherd—the Chief or Senior Pastor—of each local flock?<sup>31</sup> I believe that this is the Bible's teaching. But I also believe that it has been covered over by our mystical, a-historical view of the Risen Christ's present ministry. What the Old and New Testaments proclaimed as Messiah's very specific shepherding ministry in space-time history, we have turned into "mystical mush"! We talk about Jesus being the Chief Shepherd of the Church and it becomes cosmic fuzziness in our hands! One can hardly recognize the reigning, ruling Messiah in our theologies because we are functionally so man-centered and theologically so mystical. With our hollow view of Messiah Jesus' shepherding of the Church, we can easily move to fill the vacuum with our own conceptions of leadership. We end up with Senior Pastors and pastors of every type who *functionally* fulfill the role that God has only delegated to the Messiah. We usurp our habitation as undershepherds and encroach upon the God-Man's authority as the *Overshepherd*.



By inappropriately elevating the role of undershepherds with titles like "Senior Pastor" or "the Moses Model of Leadership," we ironically devalue them. We stake our claims on turf that belongs solely to Another and thereby diminish the land that we are supposed to inhabit. We glorify alleged qualities of leadership that are many times simply man-centered, fleshly strategies contrived to glorify ourselves. We miss so very often the central qualities that should characterize godly undershepherds and true leaders of God's flock: a humble, tender heart that hears the Chief Shepherd's voice and carries out *His* will. We have a defective theology of leadership that all too often results in the flock looking for something from their undershepherds that only the Chief Shepherd could give them. Sadly, many times our theology of leadership actually encourages this wrong focus. I believe that we need significant re-theologizing in this area of our ecclesiology.

Does this mean that there is no room for visionary leadership in the Church? Not at all! In fact, a significant leadership crisis seems to be emerging at this very moment in evangelicalism. However, what these biblical passages establish is *the nature* of strong, visionary leadership that is biblical. Jesus explicitly said that we were *not* to lead in the Church like the Gentiles (pagans) lead in the broader culture (Matt 20:20-28; Mk 10:35-45). Strong, visionary Christian leadership is to be under our true leader, Jesus the Messiah, and is to be humble and servant-like to the Body of Christ (Matt 20:26-28; Mk 10:43-45). Our profile is that we lead from *among* God's people (e.g., Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:1a). We lead in light of Messiah's vision for our local body as reflected in the gifted members He has given our local congregation and the collective heart and passion for ministry this flock possesses. The vision and passion of the leader(s) are therefore informed by the personality of the flock and tempered by the resources our Messiah has graciously given to the congregation. Such a view of strong visionary leadership is radically different from the CEO model that many American Christians indiscriminately have adopted from the American business community. The *context* for leadership is not the business community, but the people of God. However, by training pastors to be CEO's, we ironically end up training them to lead in exactly the same way as the "Gentiles" lead!<sup>32</sup> Such are the tragic payoffs of a defective theology of leadership.

Additionally, there is also a very important **ethical dimension** to our theology of leadership that I have never heard discussed. I would like to suggest it to you briefly for your consideration. If it is true, then we all have some very significant rethinking to do in our respective ministries. If there is the possibility that we have a defective anthropology which also has spawned a defective theology of leadership, then it may also be true that we have attracted Christian leaders and pastors with a defective anthropology. In other words, they would sense an affinity to the teachings of the CGM because some of the movement's defective underpinnings would resonate with their own defective underpinnings. Even more dangerously, the CGM would be giving them techniques and methodologies that would serve as a short term fix. Specifically, in the short term they would be encouraged to master certain skills and effective ministry approaches rather than develop essential godly virtues over the long term. Not that it has to be an either-or choice, but human nature is such that we are very vulnerable to the easier and the shorter road. However, this is counter-productive to the Kingdom of God over the longer stretch because we undercut the process of developing leaders who are continuing to be transformed by the Spirit of God in areas of deceptive fleshliness.

Ethically, I am appealing to the CGM for a greater moral sensitivity to the *instrumental evil* that is likely to result in a given environment by dispensing tools that are will probably be misused by a certain group. This may be akin to giving a recovering alcoholic a wine-making kit for Christmas or offering a recovering gambling addict pastor a job as a chaplain in a Las Vegas casino! While the acts of giving the wine-making kit or offering the casino job may not be unethical, in and of themselves, the likelihood that evil could result from these actions must also be considered as a part of the moral reasoning. I would suggest to you that the spiritual, emotional, and psychological immaturity of many of the younger leaders in our evangelical communities makes it *highly likely* that they will misuse in a utilitarian manner many of the pragmatic tools of the CGM.<sup>33</sup> This probable misuse must be factored into the decision-making of the leaders of the CGM. You must be looking beyond the short term, immediate results that your training may give these young leaders and also be considering the long term negative effects that may likely result in their lives and in the lives of those to whom they minister.

This demands moral reasoning that sees beyond the immediate and meaningfully considers the likelihood of how people will use the training we offer them. But the healthy growth of the Church demands such ethics.<sup>34</sup> Addressing a defective theology of leadership also demands such ethics.

Let me share very briefly my third and final theological concern about the CGM. It flows out of the first two concerns of a defective theology of persons and a defective theology of leadership. This final concern is that the CGM also has a **defective theology of community**. In other words, we have a shrunken sense of what the people of God are like in their corporate state. Frankly, it is impossible to separate our theology of the Church collective from our theology of persons and our theology of the leaders who shape them into communities. However, let me attempt to develop this logical conclusion from the previous two concerns.

Several disciplines within the university, most notably Sociology, have been asserting for several years that we are experiencing what is being called "the communitarian crisis in the modern western world."<sup>35</sup> At a popular level this has given rise to such books as *Habits of the Heart* by five American sociologists who studied individualism and commitment in American life.<sup>36</sup> The concern of the broader academy is that we are rushing headlong into the disintegration of society as we have known it because of the loss of the commitment to community and the loss of the basic skills necessary to maintain community. Much of this pivots around the changing sense of what defines "the self" in Western society.<sup>37</sup> While there has been an ongoing change in the definition of "the self" in the West since the collapse of feudalism, it was greatly speeded up during the Enlightenment. Finally in the twentieth century, we have seen very radical and disturbing changes in the conception of selfhood. In a brilliant depiction of this phenomenon, historical psychologist Philip Cushman has asserted that now *the self is empty in Western society*:<sup>38</sup>

Many authors have described how the bounded, masterful self has slowly and unevenly emerged in Western history. This is a self that has specific psychological boundaries, an internal locus of control, and a wish to manipulate the external world for its own personal ends.

I believe that in the post-World War II era in the United States, there are indications that the *present* configuration of the bounded, masterful self is the empty self. By this I mean that our terrain has shaped a self that experiences a significant absence of community, tradition, and shared meaning. It experiences these social absences and their consequences “interiorly” as a lack of personal conviction and worth, and it embodies the absences as a chronic, undifferentiated emotional hunger. The post-World War II self thus yearns to acquire and consume as an unconscious way of compensating for what has been lost: It is empty.<sup>39</sup>

I share these glimpses of the research of sociologists, philosophers, and psychologists to envision you about the deeper level that our evangelical discussions should be taking place. These phenomena of the empty self and the loss of community in Western society have enormous ramifications for us as Christians, in general, and for the CGM, in particular. However, there are few profound analyses of this landscape by evangelicals. Quite honestly, most of our analyses have been unspeakably superficial and have spawned strategies that have probably exacerbated the problems more than they have relieved them.

In other words, I am naive enough to believe that we should love and respect persons more than any other humans and therefore should have expertise in building profound, healthy communities more than any other groups. However, we persist in offering remarkably trite solutions to the problems, even compared to radically secular groups! Oh, we are sophisticated in the technologies of ultra-modernity (or postmodernity), but this is a large part of the difficulty! The tragedy is that this is where the cows come home with our shrunken theologies of persons and leaders. We end up empowering leaders who are incredibly alienated persons, most who have never experienced any meaningful sense of community in their own lives. Therefore, these dear bruised and battered persons have absolutely no sense of how to nurture and foster community among the people of God. Rather, they approach the church functionally and attempt to arrange the saints in ways that will meet their own needs as leaders. Then we come along and give them strategies for the growth of their Christian communities that are, quite frankly, too

trivial to be true! Rather, our strategies may well be deepening the sense of alienation and lostness at both the individual and group levels of our Christian communities. This should not be!

In the place of our superficial solutions, I beg you to seek to recapture the profound richness and complexity of how the Body of Christ is to be functioning. The whole of our communities is to be far greater than the sum of our parts. We are far more than a confederation of autonomous individuals, each with an agenda focused on personal fulfillment. We must go well beyond the view of community that is seen through the eyes of alienated moderns. Therefore, we need a theology of Christian community that leaves room for the Spirit of God to move among us and to engender a rich, full sense of our connection to God and to one another as His people. Instead of creating loose bundles of individual sticks, we need to be growing redwoods! But to grow redwoods, we need a theology of redwoods. We need a biblical theology of Christian community. What an incredibly crucial area to begin to study together!

#### *Conclusion*

I fear that I may have been too negative in my theological evaluation of the CGM and that you may have anticipated that my conclusion is, "Just blow the thing up and start over!" Nothing could be further from the truth! Rather, I have one very positive, simple, and straightforward conclusion. It is this:

We need to work *together* as colleagues from various disciplines in order to study and strategize about the growth of the Church and the worldwide advancement of the Kingdom. As we have done today, we need to dialogue *face-to-face* as biblicists/theologians and CGM experts. Those of us who have criticized you need to repent of our "hiding and hurling" approach where we first inform you of our concerns in a Christian book. We need to work *together* to underscore the CGM with better theology and a richer connection to the Word of God. As fellow members of the Body of Christ, we must stand together against the fragmentation of knowledge that has flowed out of the Enlightenment. This demands that we stop practicing our respective disciplines with a ghetto mentality. Instead, we must work together in an *interdisciplinary manner* as we combine our diverse spiritu-

al gifts. One of our chief aims must be to showcase that our knowledge is *profoundly unified* under the headship of our Chief Shepherd, the Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, I challenge you to have the courage to enrich and deepen the CGM by colaboring with those of us who have criticized you. Should the Lord tarry, why cannot the next forty years of the CGM be characterized by a more mature cooperation within the Body of Christ? Come, let us reason *together* to the glory of God!

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#### NOTES

1. William J. Abraham. *The Logic of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1989), 70. Abraham calls this "a kind of hang-glider effect" when evaluating the CGM and "attempting to hover above a vast body of material and controversy and arrive at a broad judgment about its merits."
2. For example, the insightful work of J. Robert Clinton, *The Making of a Leader* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1988).
3. Comments by Leighton Ford in the Foreword to *The Making of a Leader*, p. 9. Ford has also described the baby boomer generation as a generation that maintains what its parents created, rather than pioneering new areas (Chapel Message at Talbot School of Theology, Biola University, September 12, 1995).
4. *Dining with the Devil: The Megachurch Movement Flirts with Modernity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1993) and edited with John Seel, *No God But God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1992).
5. *Ashamed of the Gospel: When the Church Becomes Like the World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1993).
6. *Selling Jesus* ((Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992).
7. *The Evangelical Forfeit, Can We Recover?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker

Books, 1993).

8. *Ultimate Church: An Irreverent Look at Church Growth, Megachurches, and Ecclesiastical 'Show Biz'* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1991).

9. *Power Religion: The Selling Out of the Evangelical Church* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992).

10. The text of this address was reprinted in *Church Growth Today*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (1995) pages 1-3.

11. Vaughan, "Offense to the Cross?," page 2.

12. For example, Sidney H. Rooy, "The Concept of Man in the Missiology of Donald McGavran: A Model of Anglosaxon Missiology in Latin America," *Westminster Theological Journal* 37 (1974-75) 172-205. Rooy summarizes his lengthy criticism in the following manner:

The lack of clarity in McGavran is the result of an inadequate biblical theology of man in his relationship to God, the cosmos, and his fellow man. The tendency in his anthropology and in his ecclesiology to consider the Church as an aggregate of spiritual, redeemed individuals and the Church of Christ as a group of units, does not do justice either to the uniqueness of man as the image of God or to the essential unity of the Church (202).

13. Palm Springs, CA: Ronald N. Haynes Publishers, Inc., 1981. Original English edition, Exeter, UK: The Paternoster Press, 1959. See also the excellent theological work by Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God's Image* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1986). Additionally, see the helpful work by Ronald B. Allen, *The Majesty of Man. The Dignity of Being Human* (A Critical Concern Book; Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1984).

14. For example, the language used by some churches for the pastoral position of including new members in the body sounds strangely like plant and animal physiology: "Director of Assimilation." Also the language of Carl F. George in his description of the leaders of the meta-church model sounds eerily like the unknown variables "X, C, D, and L" in an algebraic equation (*Prepare Your Church for the Future* [Grand Rapids, MI: Fleming H. Revell, 1992] 119-149). Is this the kind of language we should use when referring to those in the image of God? This kind of language gives credence to the criticism that the CGM has helped to move North American Evangelicalism from using methodologies that reflect "Early Modernity" to methodologies and technologies that evidence "Ultra-Modernity" or even "Post-Modernity." For a broad backdrop to this discussion, see George Marsden, "Evangelicals, History, and Modernity," in *Evangelicalism and Modern America*, George Marsden, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1984) 94-102.

15. Is George Barna's brazenness about marketing an anomaly to the CGM? See Barna's *Marketing the Church: What They Never Taught You About Church Growth* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1988).

16. This can be seen in various training models within the CGM, but the "Leadership Community" of the Meta-Church Model is a prime example (George, *Prepare Your Church for the Future*, 135-149).

17. See the critique of the late David J. Bosch, "The Structure of Mission: An Exposition of Matthew 28:16-21" in Wilbert R. Shenk, ed. *Exploring Church Growth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1983) 218-248 and his later discussion, "Matthew: Mission as Disciple-Making," Ch. 2 in *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (American Society of Missiology Series, No. 16; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991) 56-83. Within the CGM, W. Charles Arn, "Evangelism or Disciple Making?" in *Church Growth: The State of the Art*, C. Peter Wagner, editor with Win Arn and Elmer Towns (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1986) 57-67 has noted this problem and argued for "disciple making" over evangelism as is widely practiced.

18. That such a corrective is needed can be seen in the book by CGM advocate Robert E. Logan, *Beyond Church Growth* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1989) which sought to demonstrate that the addition of church planting is "beyond" the general emphasis of the CGM:

Second, many leaders fully committed to the church growth movement need to expand their ministry horizons. So many pastors and church planters I talk with *focus almost exclusively* on growing their own local churches and *functionally ignore* the imperative to start more congregations (p. 17; emphasis is mine).

See also, Elmer L. Towns, "The Great Commission and Church Planting," in Wagner, *Church Growth: The State of the Art*, 143-149.

19. The most influential book on spiritual gifts within the CGM is a classic case in point: C. Peter Wagner, *Your Spiritual Gifts Can Help Your Church Grow* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1979). See also, Robert Logan, "Principle 8 - Mobilizing Believers According to Spiritual Gifts," in *Beyond Church Growth*, 160-172. It is a delicate balance to communicate that believers and their gifts have *intrinsic worth*, and yet they should fulfill a *vital function*.

20. See Robert Wuthnow's critique of the small-group movement in the United States in *Sharing the Journey: Support Groups and America's New Quest for Community* (New York: The Free Press, 1994).

21. New York: Crossroad, 1994) 47-48; emphasis is mine.

22. See the fine discussion of the form of Mark 2:1-3:6 and its five



"conflict or controversy stories" in Robert H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1993) 105-110.

23. All Scripture quotations are from the New American Standard Version.

24. With apologies to George Barna!

25. For example, by John N. Vaughan, "Trends among the World's Twenty Largest Churches," in *Church Growth: The State of the Art*, 131. See also, Vaughan's *The World's Twenty Largest Churches* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1984) and *The Large Church: A Twentieth Century Expression of the First Century Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1985).

26. For example, Carl F. George and Robert E. Logan, *Leading and Managing Your Church* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1987).

27. There is a consistent emphasis in John's Gospel that Jesus is the Second or New Moses who is far greater than the first Moses:

For example, while the Torah was given through Moses, Jesus himself is the New Torah because He has seen the Father and explains him (John 1:17-18). While manna was given through Moses, Jesus himself is the true manna from heaven (John 6:32-35). "It is because Jesus supersedes Moses that ascriptions such as 'life,' 'light,' 'bread,' and 'water,' which previously applied to the Mosaic Torah, are transferred to him" [M. E. Isaacs, "The Prophetic Spirit in the Fourth Gospel," *Heythrop Journal* 24 (1983) 403]. (Walt Russell, "The Holy Spirit's Ministry in the Fourth Gospel," *Grace Theological Journal* 8 (1987) 237-8).

28. Charles Lee Feinberg, *The Prophecy of Ezekiel* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1969) 195.

29. Note that Jesus the Messiah's concern as the Great Shepherd is for His disciples to gather the plentiful harvest of shepherdless sheep. The primary focus of this age, in Matthew's Gospel, is that the peoples of the world be "harvested" on behalf of Messiah Jesus (e.g., Matt 28:16-20).

30. In a very important messianic passage, Psalm 2:7-9, the psalmist speaks of Messiah's enthronement in the messianic office as God's Son (v. 7). He receives *the nations* as his coronation gift (v. 8) and He will *shepherd* them with a rod of iron (v. 9). The Apostle Paul asserts that this was fulfilled at Jesus' resurrection (Acts 13:30-33; Romans 1:1-5). The point is that even in the Old Testament, Messiah's shepherding role was seen to extend beyond Israel to the nations.

31. See also Matthew 23:1-12, especially vv. 8-12, where Jesus as-

serts that we are not to call others "Rabbi" (v. 8), "father" (v. 9), or "leaders (kaqghthv~), for One is your Leader, that is Christ [Messiah]" (v. 10).

32. For example, of the three suggestions by a CGM advocate for determining the quality of new staff added to your church, the second suggestion is "recruit new staff on the basis of devotion to the senior pastor." (C. Peter Wagner, *Leading Your Church to Growth* [Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1984] 213)

33. The fragile and vulnerable state of our younger spiritual leaders was passionately recounted by Paul Wilkes in his remarkable, broad-ranging article, "The Hands That Would Shape Our Souls," *The Atlantic Monthly* (December, 1990) 59-88.

34. For an excellent treatment of the ethical principles of "nonmaleficence" and "beneficence" which underlie this discussion see Tom L. Beauchamp and James F. Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, Second Edition (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1983) 106-182.

35. Leading the charge is well known sociologist Amitai Etzioni, the founder of the Communitarian movement. See his book *The Spirit of Community. The Reinvention of American Society* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1993). See also the fine collection of essays edited by Leroy S. Rouner, *On Community* (Boston University Studies in Philosophy and Religion, Volume 12: Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991).

36. Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton (New York, NY: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1985).

37. See E. Brooks Holifield, "The Elusive Self in the American College," *Soundings* 66, No. 1 (Spring, 1983) 100-108 and Leroy S. Rouner, editor, *Selves, People and Person. What Does It Mean to Be a Self?* (Boston University Studies in Philosophy and Religion, Volume 13; Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992).

38. "Why the Self Is Empty. Toward a Historically Situated Psychology," *American Psychologist* 45/5 (1990) 599-611.

39. Cushman, "Why the Self Is Empty," 600.