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A Response to Dr. Russell

Jerold F. Reed

I want to thank Walt, my colleague in ministry and brother in Christ for the paper he has just presented. The seriousness with which he approaches his writing is obvious when one glances at his footnotes. The intensity of his concern is appreciated as he nuances his subject from page to page. And his critique as being that of only one person, himself, lends credence to the humility with which he comes to the task at hand.

I come to this response out of 22 years of evangelism, church planting, educational and community development work in Ecuador and Mexico. And now I have eight years under my belt back in the United States teaching evangelism, church growth and discipleship at North Park Theological Seminary. I'm thankful for two full home assignment years (furlough) that I had studying under Donald McGavran, Alan Tippett, Ralph Winter, Chuck Kraft, Arthur Glasser, and Peter Wagner.

With this as background I have to say that I agree with a lot of what Walt Russell is saying especially about the need for Godly leaders. There has been an erosion of values that in the beginning days of the Church Growth Movement were either there or assumed to be there. If you think back with me you will remember that the concept that caught people's attention was not "church growth" but rather people movement. Dr. Russell's concern of a **defective anthropology** in the Church Growth Movement is very insightful. However, I remind you that from the beginning, McGavran's theology of persons embraced a high view of people in their social context and within the matrix of a social fabric that held people together and that affirmed their

solidarity with one another. Evangelism was no more to be the tearing of people out of their context, out of their families, or out of their communities. We began to see people vis-a-vis McGavran's ground-breaking book, *Bridges of God*—people in their context and to see how human relationships were always at the heart of the communication of the gospel and the expansion of the church. But today things have changed here in North America (I exclude Mexico from North America for this discussion).

As Ralph Winter said in *Mission Frontiers*, (Cover story June-October quarterly 1990 p7) "Like many other things, the phrase 'church growth' can be hijacked and flown to unintended destinations. As a missionary, one wonders out loud where the domesticated U. S. version of church growth is going."

Dr. Russell specifically gives us six points demonstrating the Church Growth Movement's "...absorption of modernity's tawdry and shrunken view of persons. "I take issue with three of his six points."

The first point criticizes 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. The foot noted example of a church having a person ministering with the title "Director of Assimilation" is criticized because it sounds like we are dealing with plant or animal physiology. Now I don't think that sounds any more strange than the parable of the wheat and weeds where the reference is to Christians and non-Christians being separated at the end of the age or the case where we find a simile when the Apostle Peter writes that Christians are "like living stones being built up into a spiritual house." Another criticism that is unwarranted is that of prescribing the meta-church model leader references of X, C, D, and L to algebraic unknown variables—thus depersonalizing the leader. In this case Carl George is not dealing with the naming of persons or describing their worth any more than when Moses appointed leaders over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens was he depersonalizing them. The point in the meta-church model is organizational not morphological.

Then skipping to the third point in his list of six, which says that there is "too much anti-intellectualism and a 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. This criti-

cism truly describes a large part of the church today but cannot be attributed to the CGM. I see this more as a challenge to doing a lot of hard work than faulting a movement that has continually been challenging the church to take seriously the mandates of Scripture.

His sixth point highlights the CGM's "defective view of small groups that is also utilitarian to a local church's growth and based on inadequate concepts of believers in community." I'm sure this is a just criticism in some cases, but the CGM's salient models all the way from the Yioda Full Gospel Church in Korea to Dale Galloway's and Ralph Neighbor's cell group ministries certainly discredit this criticism of the CGM. As a matter of fact, the CGM holds high the models of church renewal as seen through cell group movements based on the New Testament models as seen in the revival of the 60's in the southern cone of Argentina and Chile and in the underground church of China since 1949.

Dr. Russell's exposition of the Pharisees' anthropology is one that I agree with and one that I believe the members of the American Society for Church Growth would also agree with. There is a caricaturization of the CGM however, that draws the fire of those who do not know us. Certainly flexibility and freedom are hallmarks of our movement that help us elevate people over programs and processes so that people in fact are more important than our ministries. At least I want to believe that this is true. We couldn't possibly be guilty of a defective anthropology or have a defective theology of persons or could we? That question now remains. We have to stop and ask ourselves if in fact we don't treat people like objects at times in our evangelical zeal and concern. Yes maybe there is more here than we want to accept. Or if this is not true for us as leaders, is it possible that those who listen to our clarion call to win the lost don't in fact begin to act methodologically or, if you please, mechanically in their zeal and obedience and thus become like the very Pharisees whose behavior we disdain. Walter Russell is doing us a service when he forces us to look at such a foundational issue as our theology of persons. This then brings me to Dr. Russell's discussion of a **defective theology of leadership**.

He comes to us with a no-holds-barred ecclesiology which many would affirm but also which in practice is often only theoretical. I don't think any of us would disagree with Dr. Russell

that character in leaders is of the utmost importance. However, I believe we have perhaps assumed Christian character wrongly in too many situations. But beyond the character consideration is the matter of who is really THE pastor. To say that Jesus is the Chief Shepherd is not a problem for us until we come right down to the nitty gritty of who decides things. Where is the church that will pray and fast until they are certain that what some leader has said is in fact what the Chief Shepherd wants his church to do. We see this modeled in Acts 13 where after praying and fasting the church confirms the word of a leader about sending Paul and Barnabas out as missionaries. Again in Acts 15 we see a major decision in the first church council being made in conjunction with the Chief Shepherd for it says "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements." It is here where "mystical mush" becomes specific and concrete in guidance and decision making at leadership levels.

Dr. Russell has laid a theoretical base that raises the issue of role clarification for church leaders. Yes, the undershepherd's submission to the Chief Shepherd is easy to agree upon but is not easily measured or evaluated. I Peter 5:1-4 gives us the broad outline but the larger question remains. What is the leader's role in relation to the other members of the body of Christ in the local context? No, there is no reason think that an undershepherd (a leader) who is completely submitted to the Chief Shepherd will not exercise the leadership roles that are commonly observed among those who are strong leaders.

As he comes to the end of his paper Dr. Russell expresses his concern for an **ethical dimension** that works itself out as the communication and imparting of tools and methods for effective ministry in such a way that they fall into the hands of inept and/or immature Christians who in turn use the methods and tools without the maturity and wisdom necessary and thus begin manipulating and hurting people. I point out that this has always been true in any ministry starting with Simon the sorcerer and thus is not peculiar to the CGM.

Finally he ends his trilogy of defectiveness—a defective theology of persons, a defective theology of leadership—with a **defective theology of community**. It is here that I take greatest issue. Not that community is not important, but rather that it has been the church growth movement that brought to light and em-

phasized models of Christian community that have been a major corrective to what in fact has been a defective theology of community. Even as the CGM began overseas so now it was from places like Korea, China, Argentina, and Kenya that we have observed and imported once again a corrective for true *koinonia* and Christian community. This time it has been the CGM's emphasis on cell groups and the formation of cell churches. We all know of David Yonggi Cho in Korea. That model has done much to create community in churches in America. But the CGM has also highlighted numerous other ministries that are similar around the country. Community is back and is growing thanks to the CGM. I must also say that those with "church growth eyes" will quickly perceive that "western societies" problem of the "empty self" is an open door for ministry and doing kingdom work which will result again in church growth.

Dr. Walter Russell has done us a large favor in calling us again back to the basics. We can no longer make assumptions about the maturity of the church, nor its leaders and their relationships and motives for ministry. Every aspect of ministry and its leadership must be continually scrutinized under the light of the Scriptures and the lens of the Holy Spirit.

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