UNDERSTANDING DIVERSIFICATION IN THE CHURCH GROWTH MOVEMENT

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Abstract

Donald McGavran observed isolationist tendencies in the church and proposed both methodological consistency and sociological analysis as factors critical to evangelistic success. Later, church growth thinkers devolved into a syncretistic pragmatism that, over time, rendered the church as irrelevant as the church McGavran sought to combat. I synthesize various strands running through the history of the Church Growth Movement and isolate contributing factors to diversification through critical interaction with a contemporary of Donald McGavran—Lesslie Newbigin. Newbigin's understanding of the relationships among gospel, church, and culture serves as the foundation for understanding how a church can slip into a position of either syncretism that overvalues culture or a position of irrelevance that undervalues culture.

INTRODUCTION

The intersection of modernity and Christendom carried significant ramifications for the church's understanding of its identity and mission. Most significantly, churches became complacent and privatized enclaves that placed less emphasis on spiritual growth to instead pursue institutional stability. Eager to help the church recover its evangelistic identity, Donald

McGavran proposed methodological consistency and sociological analysis as factors critical to evangelistic success and church growth. McGavran first published these preliminary concepts in the 1950s, which formally developed into the Church Growth Movement in the 1960s. By the late 1980s and early 1990s, however, the Church Growth Movement in America bore little resemblance to McGavran's original proposal. Eventually, the Church Growth Movement splintered into several streams, each of which appeared to possess its own unique qualities, characteristics, and identity. This article identifies *diversification* as the process through which the Church Growth Movement separated into numerous streams as it matured, each stream identified by particular nuances and degrees of similarity to McGavran's original propositions. Scholars recognize diversification within the Church Growth Movement but disagree when categorizing the various expressions of church growth thought, use different demarcating dates in tracing diversification, and have not identified a common cause undergirding diversification. I synthesize various strands running through the history of the Church Growth Movement and isolate contributing factors to diversification through critical interaction with a contemporary of Donald McGavran—Lesslie Newbigin.

Though ministering at the same time and within the same vocation as McGavran, Newbigin produced a strikingly different ecclesiology by emphasizing the missionary nature of the church while intentionally avoiding a cultural relationship that was relevant to the point of syncretism or irrelevant to the point of isolationism. Newbigin pointed to three emphases within McGavran's original thinking that were problematic: the relations of numerical church growth to the message of the kingdom, the meaning of conversion and its relation to both discipling and what McGavran called *perfecting*, and McGavran's understanding of how the church interacts with the culture.[1] Newbigin's conception of the relationships among gospel, church, and culture is the most important church growth critique he offered because it served as the foundation for understanding how a church can slip into a position of either syncretism that overvalues culture or a position of irrelevance that undervalues culture.

McGavran originally observed isolationist tendencies in the church and incorporated culturally driven methodologies to combat ecclesiological irrelevance. Later, church growth thinkers devolved into a syncretistic pragmatism that, over time, rendered the church as irrelevant as the church McGavran sought to combat. Scant academic interaction exists between church growth advocates and the particular critique offered by Lesslie

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[1] Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission,* Revised Edition (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 124.

Newbigin; I use this critique to show what factors in McGavran's original thinking precipitated diversification within the Church Growth Movement. I argue the emphasis later church growth manifestations placed on syncretistic methodologies subsequently isolated churches from their context; and that undue cultural dependence resulted in isolation rather than contextualization.

MODERNITY AND THE CHURCH

Modernity emerged during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, distinct from either classical or medieval culture and emancipating humanity from its bondage to ecclesiastical and theological authority.[2] This period of intellectual discovery known as the Enlightenment increased man's confidence in himself and in his own ability due to significant epistemological and scientific advances.[3] Fleischacker argued that the Enlightenment posed a challenge to religious traditions and pre-modern assumptions because of man's newfound confidence.[4] Developments in this time period included a revolt against authority and subsequent pursuit of autonomy, reason's ability to separate fact from opinion, the recognized reliability of nature, humanistic optimism, belief in human ingenuity and progress, and civil tolerance.[5] Baum identified two precipitating causes of modernity: immanent humanism and scientific reductionism. Immanent humanism excluded reference to God and relied on practical reason rather than religious faith in its pursuit of a just and peaceful world. This immanent humanism negatively affected ethical validity in the realm of truth; values were interpreted as mere sentiments while ethics were reduced to a utilitarian calculus employed in the service of one's own self-interest.[6]

   A major implication of modernity was the dichotomization of faith and knowledge—facts were elevated to supreme importance through rationalization, objectivity, and verifiability. Values and religious beliefs were relegated to mere superstition and subjectivity, while human ability alone was

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2   James Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought Volume 1: The Enlightenment and the Nineteenth Century* (2nd ed.) (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1997), 6.

3   Andrew Hoffecker, "Enlightenments and Awakenings: The Beginning of Modern Culture Wars," *Revolutions in Worldview: Understanding the Flow of Western Thought*, ed. Andrew Hoffecker (United Kingdom: P & R Publishing, 2007), 240.

4   Samuel Fleischacker, "Enlightenment and Tradition: The Clash Within Civilizations," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 42 (2007): 351.

5   Livingston, 6–10.

6   Gregory Baum, "The Churches Challenged by the Secularization of Culture," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 46 (2011): 345–346.

seen as reliable.[7] Bolger itemized modernity's bifurcation: "religion from politics, business from the family, the mind from the body, the community from society, science from religion, and the individual from everything else."[8] This dichotomization of faith and knowledge compartmentalized existence into sacred and secular spheres: religious belief was permissible only in the sacred sphere while the rest of existence flourished in the secular sphere.

The topic of mission provides an interesting nexus between the church and modernity. As modernity created a religious sphere that pushed faith to the periphery of society, the church became a religious institution addressing only spiritual matters rather than the entirety of life.[9] Specifically, following the end of World War II and lasting until well into the 1950s, mission efforts within the church were understood as an ingathering and extension of the church. Congregational energies were consumed with maintaining buildings, accumulating new members, and supporting new programs. Sociologically, congregations grew increasingly isolated and estranged from the centers of work, leisure, power, and influence.[10]

As a result of these congregational developments, mission efforts of the church took on a predominantly geographical emphasis—mission activity was something done for a specific time in a specific location. Mission stations became a prominent strategy, mirroring the bifurcated modernistic paradigm by providing a gathering place for Western Christians to meet while ministering in non-Western countries; the mission station church was merely an extension of the Western church through which ingathering could take place overseas. No thought was given to contextual appropriateness or the potential obstacle of cultural irrelevance. As indigenous peoples converted to Christianity, they were separated from their cultural groupings and segregated into the life of the mission station compound.[11]

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[7] W. Shenk, "The Culture of Modernity as a Missionary Challenge," *The Church Between Gospel and Culture: The Emerging Mission in North America (Gospel & Our Culture)*, ed. George Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 70.

[8] Ryan Bolger, "Practice Movements in Global Information Culture: Looking Back to McGavran and Finding a Way Forward" *Missiology: An International Review* 35 (2007): 182.

[9] Ibid.

[10] John Hendrick, "Congregations with Missions vs. Missionary Congregations," *The Church Between Gospel and Culture: The Emerging Mission in North America (Gospel & Our Culture)* ed. George Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 299.

[11] Bolger, 182–183.

Western culture became the vessel for the gospel as mission station churches unwittingly created isolated pockets of Western Christian subculture, forcing believers to identify with Western values but live among and interact with indigenous people groups who were neither Western nor Christian. Conversion to Christianity meant converting to Western culture and experiencing significant cultural distance between Christians and indigenous non-believers.

THE CHURCH GROWTH MOVEMENT IN AMERICA

McGavran published *Bridges of God* in 1955 to address the theological, ethical, missiological, and procedural concerns arising from the intersection of the church and modernity; its publication provided insight where there had previously been a vacuum of both knowledge and training. As the Church Growth Movement matured, two arms developed: McGavran's School of World Mission represented international missiology while both the Institute for American Church Growth and Wagner's Charles E. Fuller Institute for Evangelism and Church Growth represented North American Missiology. The American arm branched further into the Popular Church Growth Movement, characterized by Systems Research, Survey Research, Polling Research, and Anecdotal Research.[12]

This American arm of the Church Growth Movement began to take on a different tenor than that which McGavran originally intended. McGavran relied on statistical, sociological, and numerical methods only for evangelistic accountability, but Peter Wagner further developed the use of social sciences and social scientific method, proposing "consecrated pragmatism" as a means of practically implementing the Great Commission without compromising doctrinal and ethical principles of the Word of God.[13] Wagner's consecrated pragmatism relied on cultural, historical, and theological sources. Culturally, Wagner utilized popular methods extant within a given culture; if raising funds happened most efficiently through direct mailers, then a church imitating popular methods of direct mail advertising was not only acceptable, but also preferable. Historically, it was prudent to observe which methods of evangelism God had blessed and which methods he had not. Theologically, Wagner relied on the Bible and noted its examples of successful and reproducible strategies; Nehemiah's ability to rebuild the wall

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[12] Gary McIntosh, "Why Church Growth Can't Be Ignored," *Evaluating the Church Growth Movement* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan. Kindle Edition, 2010).

[13] Scott McKee, "The Relationship Between Church Health and Church Growth in the Evangelical Presbyterian Church" (D. Min. Diss., Asbury Theological Seminary, 2003), 26.

of Jerusalem in 52 days using volunteers was one example of Biblical pragmatism.[14] Peter Wagner, along with Win Arn, introduced these insights to American ecclesiological circles after they were first gleaned from missionary efforts in the global south. Denominational leaders, mission executives, and entrepreneurial pastors from across the United States flocked to conferences, seminars, and seminary classes in order to learn how to use these principles in reaching the lost in their communities at home and abroad.[15]

Despite the widespread and longstanding academic pedigree originally accompanying the Church Growth Movement, by the 1990s, church leaders eager to learn about church growth thinking stopped looking to professors for influence and inspiration and instead looked to other successful pastors who had grown large congregations employing church growth principles. When this happened, American pastors appeared to take the forms of church growth but not the philosophy. Church growth advocates soon focused on method instead of missiology, leading to an application of a mission technique rather than a philosophy of mission.[16] When pastors saw churches growing, they studied the growth itself rather than the fundamental church growth principles driving growth. It was easier, more direct, and more reproducible to imitate a method instead of understanding what made that method effective and why. If one growing church placed a coffee bar in its narthex, other churches followed suit without understanding what purpose the coffee bar served. If a pastor sincerely desired fruitful ministry, a growing church was assumed to be ministering in certain successful ways that, upon imitation, would bear similar fruit.

Despite McGavran's original desire to synthesize theology, theory, and practice, church growth resources that offered purely practical, step-by-step instructions were increasingly in high demand: books, workbooks, tapes, videos, seminars, conferences, and consultations spread rapidly. Methodological imitation emphasizing form over philosophy ultimately left pastors disappointed as they realized they could not merely implement culturally based and sociologically driven pragmatic formulae that had been successful at other churches. Amid improper implementation of church growth

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[14] Charles Wagner, *Church Growth and the Whole Gospel: A Biblical Mandate* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1981), 72–73.

[15] Alan McMahan, "Church Growth by Another Name: Challenges and Opportunities for the Future of a Movement," *Great Commission Research Journal* 1(2009): 11–12.

[16] Ed Stetzer, "The Evolution of Church Growth, Church Health, and the Missional Church: An Overview of the Church Growth Movement From, and Back to, Its Missional Roots" (Paper presented at the 50th anniversary celebration of Donald McGavran's Bridges of God, 2005), 12. Retrieved from www.christianitytoday.com/assets/10231.pdf.

thinking rooted in form rather than philosophy, interest in the Church Growth Movement waned.[17]

A 1994 study of 150 ministry leaders—46 church executives, 29 pastors, and 75 church growth leaders—asked participants to categorize the Church Growth Movement as concerned with either improved methods, numerical growth, or faithfulness to the Great Commission. The study found 21% of pastors identified the Church Growth Movement as concerned primarily with improved methods; another 21% chose numerical growth, and 18% chose faithfulness to the Great Commission. Responses of church executives paralleled those of pastors: 25% selected improved methods while 23% selected numerical growth, and 23% selected faithfulness to the Great Commission. In contrast, 43% of church growth leaders identified faithfulness to the Great Commission as the primary identity of the Church Growth Movement while only 26% selected improved methods. Further, 50% of executives, 48% of church growth leaders, and 57% of pastors felt the Church Growth Movement had plateaued.[18] Ultimately, the Church Growth Movement faded as a dominant ecclesiological methodology in America.

THE CHURCH HEALTH MOVEMENT IN AMERICA

Rick Warren provided a nomenclature for America's new dominant ecclesiological methodological focus, affirming, "The key issue for churches in the Twenty-First Century will be church health, not church growth."[19] Asserting church growth happens when church health is pursued, Warren emphasized prioritizing the health of a local church body and assumed growth would follow: "When congregations are healthy, they grow the way God intends.... If your church is genuinely healthy, you won't have to worry about it growing."[20] McKee expanded on this thinking: "Focus on health, and growth will come. Quality brings quantity. Growing churches are assumed to be healthy, especially in contrast to what are pejoratively called 'maintenance' churches."[21] Warren proposed a list of church health markers he viewed as a) well-rounded, holistic indicators of spiritual growth, and b) more informative than purely numeric indicators.[22] A church needed

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[17] McMahan, 12.

[18] Gary McIntosh, "Thoughts on a Movement" (Paper presented at the ASCG Annual Meeting, 1994), 10.

[19] Rick Warren, *Purpose Driven Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 17.

[20] Ibid.

[21] McKee, 36.

[22] Rick Warren, "Comprehensive Health Plan: To Lead a Healthy Church Takes More Than Technique" *Leadership* 18 (1997): 22–29. Retrieved from http://www.christianitytoday.com/le/1997/summer/7l3022.html.

to grow relationally warmer through fellowship, spiritually stronger and deeper through discipleship and worship, broader through ministry, and larger through evangelism. Warren preferred the term *church health* because he saw it as more specific and more telling.[23] Size provided no information about the health of a congregation, but a healthy congregation will naturally grow.

To date, Christian Schwarz' *Natural Church Development* is accepted as the most popular work on church health.[24] Schwarz' popularity and credibility stems from the extensive research he conducted, which included one thousand churches in thirty-two countries on five continents.[25] Schwarz' definition of health emphasized empowered leadership, gift-oriented ministry, passionate spirituality, functional structures, inspiring worship services, holistic small groups, need-oriented evangelism, and loving relationships.[26] Further research analyzed a multitude of church health authors and found similar emphases across the entire movement. McKee summarized the entire church health movement with eight characteristics: effective structures, authentic community, transforming discipleship, engaging worship, mobilized laity, wholehearted spirituality, empowering leadership, and intentional evangelism.[27] While continuity within the church health movement is expected, comparison of the church health and Church Growth movements reveals a similar and surprising degree of continuity.

Despite Warren's articulation, Schwarz' popularity, and other manifestations of the church health movement, McIntosh observed Schwarz' eight essential qualities of church health were merely re-affirmations of previous church growth values.[28] Church growth principles had become so deeply imbedded in church health leaders that they did not realize they were actually employing church growth insights. Table 1 shows striking continuity when comparing Warren's and Schwarz' professed church health values with seven church growth vital signs as summarized by Van Engen.[29] Herein lies a fundamental connection: while the church health movement in America was a reaction to the perceived shortcomings of the Church Growth Movement, it was not that much of a departure. Christian Schwarz proclaimed himself a church health advocate, but he more accurately represents later church growth thinking.

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[23] Ibid.

[24] McIntosh, "Why Church Growth."

[25] Stetzer, 14.

[26] McKee, 46.

[27] Ibid., 33.

[28] McIntosh, "Why Church Growth."

[29] Charles Van Engen, "Centrist View," *Evaluating the Church Growth Movement* ed. Gary McIntosh (Grand Rapids: Zondervan. Kindle Edition, 2010).

TABLE 1

Continuity Between the Church Growth and Church Health Movements

Church Growth	Rick Warren	Christian Schwarz
Membership from one homogeneous unit	Warmer through fellowship	Loving relationships
Provides adequate services to members	Stronger through discipleship	Holistic small groups
	Deeper through worship	Inspiring worship service
Well-mobilized laity	Broader through ministry	Gift-oriented ministry
Proven evangelistic methods	Larger through evangelism	Need-oriented evangelism
Dynamic leadership		Empowered leadership
Properly arranged Biblical priorities		Passionate spirituality
Structural balance		Functional Structures

Similar confusion appears when considering Warren's specific explanation of why he moved away from the Church Growth Movement:

> I stopped using the phrase around 1986 because of the things I didn't like about the church growth movement. I don't like the incessant comparing of churches.... Another thing I didn't like was the movement's tendency to be more analytical than prescriptive. A lot of the church growth books were not written by pastors; they were written by theorists.[30]

Yet, the church health movement affirms original Church Growth Movement principles. McGavran was eager, more than anything else, to connect theology and theory with practice—the very thing Warren accuses the Church Growth Movement of not doing! From whence did Warren's critique arise? Nowhere does McGavran promote the thinking Warren decried; neither theoretical reliance nor congregational comparison is a principle one could glean from McGavran. What happened?

DIVERSIFICATION

Inspired by McGavran's intense desire for accountability in evangelistic efforts, the Church Growth Movement worked. Perhaps it worked too well (if one can say that) because what church growth thinking produced in America were churches large enough to garner popular attention and invite

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[30] Rick Warren, "Comprehensive Health Plan."

imitation. What, then, precipitated methodological diversification among those who came after McGavran?

Towns observed the introduction of church growth thought brought with it an explosion of megachurches.[31] Larger churches were not necessarily healthier or more fruitful, but they certainly exerted considerable influence on their neighborhoods and elicited significant media attention. Other pastors inspired by the apparent success of megachurches sought to influence multitudes and attract financial resources in the same way megachurches could. Later, church growth advocates, no doubt smitten with success (and understandably so, given the eagerness with which they desired to see the gospel take root in the hearts, minds, and lives of those who did not believe) turned church growth principles into formulaic expressions dependent on human ingenuity rather than divine initiative.

Indeed, church growth practitioners appeared to develop an evangelistic model that relied on human intelligence, ingenuity, and creativity. George Barna's 1988 publication of *Marketing the Church* was a deviation from the substance of McGavran's original thought in favor of a pure public relations and marketing campaign strategy.[32] Church growth devolved into setting goals, developing methodologies, and evaluating those methodologies in light of what appeared to work.[33] Guinness details several instances of purely methodological practice. One church growth consultant proclaimed he could put five to ten million baby boomers back in church within a month by doing three things: a) advertise, b) let people know about product benefits of the church, and c) be nice to new people. Another consultant proclaimed the advent of technology would significantly decrease the amount of supernatural intervention required on the part of the Lord. A research study asserted the first rule of church growth was that a church would never grow beyond the limits of its parking lot. Guinness conceded there was much practicality in sociological research and subsequent methodological implementation, but he noted they were modernistic insights that must remain subservient to the authority of Scripture. Guinness concluded, "The church of Christ is more than spiritual and theological, but never less."[34] Additionally, apparently successful methodologies did not always prove reliable upon closer inspection. Ellas and Yeakley, for example, criticized Christian Schwarz' research as being pseudoscientific and lacking hard data; they asserted his

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[31] Elmer Towns, "The Beginning of the Church Growth Movement," *Journal of Evangelism and Missions* 2 (2003): 13–19.

[32] McIntosh, "Why Church Growth."

[33] Gailyn Van Rheenen, "Reformist View," *Evaluating the Church Growth Movement* ed. Gary McIntosh (Grand Rapids: Zondervan. Kindle Edition, 2010).

[34] Os Guinness, *Dining with the Devil: The Megachurch Movement Flirts with Modernity* (Grand Rapids: Hourglass Books, 1993), 38–39.

claim to have discovered universally applicable principles for church growth was a grandiose accomplishment no researcher would ever make.[35]

Pastors who saw the success of early church growth churches identified such success with formulaic marketing strategies and cultural observation practices and endeavored to reproduce the same. In each of these examples, one sees a subtle syncretism at work: church growth practitioners relied heavily on culturally-informed practices that placed too much authority on human ingenuity and too much weight in cultural relevance. In this sense, church growth proponents were modernistic in their reliance on internal human logic and external observation. Sociological research—such as the cultural observation method advocated for in Wagner's consecrated pragmatism and the examples offered by Guinness—was originally intended as a buttress to church growth thinking but instead became a cornerstone.[36]

Eventually, methods occurring at the popular level made their way into academic research. David Hesselgrave's 1988 analysis of the thematic content of book reviews and articles published in the major mission journals—*Missiology, International Review of Missions,* and *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*—confirmed an absence of theological foundations and asserted contemporary missiology gave more attention to social science and history than theology.[37] Rainer agreed:

> Since 1988 most of the literature identified with church growth has been concerned with methodology; methodology of worship; methodology of marketing; methodology of leadership; methodology of evangelism; etc. It is easy to understand why critics are screaming that a new idolatry is being promoted by the Church Growth Movement. Methodology, once subservient to and a tool of theology, would now appear to be an end instead of a means.[38]

Church growth proponent Aubrey Malphurs further admitted an accurate criticism of the Church Growth Movement was its overemphasis on practical, pragmatic, and methodological elements.[39] Indeed, many pastors heard the success of church growth advocates and copied their methods without reflecting on the principles inherent therein.[40] Guder agreed, arguing, "The Church Growth Movement addresses evangelism more methodologically than theologically; it focuses largely on how we do evangelism, since the

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[35] John Ellas, and Flavil Yeakley, "Review of Natural Church Development: A Guide to Eight Essential Qualities of Healthy Churches, by Christian Schwarz," *Journal of the American Society for Church Growth* (Spring 1999): 81, 93.

[36] Van Rheenen, "Reformist View."

[37] McIntosh, "Why Church Growth."

[38] Thom Rainer, "Celebration of Criticism," *Global Church Growth* 30 (1993): 6.

[39] Aubrey Malphurs, *Planting Growing Churches for the 21st Century* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1992), 27.

[40] Stetzer, 13.

'why' of mission is assumed with the principle that God desires the numerical growth of the church."[41] Guder concluded,

> We simply may not assume that our formulations of the gospel, as familiar and time-tested as they may be, exhaust the fullness and the scope of God's great good news, culminating in the life, death, resurrection, and mission of Jesus Christ. Evangelism will depend upon our answer to the questions: What is the gospel? What is the fullness of the apostolic message? What is salvation? What does the church's gospel mission intend? What is the *missio Dei* ("mission of God") that defines the identity, purpose, and way of life of the church?[42]

Effectiveness had become a key factor in determining the evangelistic success of church growth thinking and human ingenuity in methodological efficiency the means.

These principles created reimagined mission station churches rather than gospel-formed people movements.[43] While McGavran's original framework emphasized conversion and the consequential ethical shifts in one's lifestyle, later church growth thinking operated within a fundamentally vertical approach that relegated salvation to an individual, private, and completed transaction. One's "savedness" was of primary importance while little attention was paid to the past, present, and future work of salvation occurring within both individual and corporate contexts. The gospel assumed in later manifestations of church growth theory is soaked with the privatized and individualized assumptions of late Christendom.[44] Instead of engaging the world with a holistic gospel affecting one's salvation and lifestyle, church growth thinking perpetuated the modernistic bifurcation of public and private by relegating salvation to a privatized sphere of existence. This inward-focused isolationism renders modern churches little more than antiquated and nostalgic museums, compounds one must enter to hear the gospel.[45] Van Engen pointed to Christian Schwarz' Natural Church Development as representative of a church growth descendent exhibiting isolationist tendencies by observing Schwartz' eight essential qualities—empowered leadership, gift-oriented ministry, passionate spirituality, functional structures, inspiring worship services, holistic small groups, need-oriented evangelism, and loving relationships—lack any reference to culture or context.[46] With the exception of need-oriented evangelism, the qualities concern almost

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41 Darrell Guder, "Evangelism and the Debate over Church Growth," *Interpretation* 48 (1994): 147.

42 Ibid., 148.

43 Bolger, 184, 191.

44 Guder, 150.

45 Bolger, 184.

46 Van Engen.

exclusively the internal life of a congregation and display little or no awareness to contextualization or local cultural engagement.

Church health proponents like Rick Warren argued the Church Growth Movement emphasized numerical growth as a primary indicator of effective spiritual fruit and instead prioritized congregational health, which then became a standard later imitators emphasized. Eventually, church health thinking devolved into the pursuit of a methodology grounded in congregational health and succumbed to the same isolationist pitfalls as church growth thinking.

> By emphasizing ecclesiology, with a limited Christology and an
> absent missiology, the Church Health Movement stepped outside
> of the scriptural and theological foundations leading to blindness
> to the world outside the church walls. Churches which focused on
> church health were struggling with how they ought to "do church"
> in order to be healthy, not by whom and to whom they were sent.[47]

The Church Growth and church health movements each reacted against a perceived fault in preceding ecclesiological practices; though they pursued different avenues to get there, both streams produced congregations increasingly isolated from their context. Table 2 summarizes both the Church Growth and church health movements in regards to the perceived shortcomings against which they reacted. In a sense, the reliance on culturally informed techniques such as marketing, logistics, demographical research, and methodological ingenuity stemmed from a syncretism that overvalued cultural sources of authority. Syncretism led to methodological copycatting

TABLE 2

Comparing the Church Growth Movement and the Church Health Movement

	Reacted Against	Emphasized Instead	Result
Church Growth Movement	Isolationist and complacent mission station churches	Evangelistic accountability, culturally informed sociological research	Methodological and purely pragmatic copycatting regardless of context
Church Health Movement	Methodological and pragmatic copycatting within the Church Growth Movement	Church Health, maturity of believers, effective church functions	Inward focus that cared for the health of the members to the exclusion of a church's context; irrelevance

[47] Stetzer, 15.

that, in time, rendered those very practices obsolete. As cultural sources of authority shifted, failure to shift methodological practices accordingly rendered congregations increasingly isolated and irrelevant. Reliance on culture led to isolation from culture.

The application of these principles created static churches that organized social services and evangelistic programs as a function of methodologically inspired program-driven activity rather than true spiritual formation efforts. Though McGavran's initial thinking promoted centripetal mission efforts that sent missionaries out with the gospel, church growth thought devolved centrifugally into church compounds attracting nonbelievers; evangelistic efforts emphasized bringing people into a fixed location to hear the gospel rather than going out and engaging them in their own context. Despite the initial emphasis on contextualization, the diversification of church growth thinking resulted in churches that were contextually isolated rather than contextually sensitive.

Centrifugal thinking was successful when the surrounding context shared a common cultural heritage, namely, Christendom. However, Hunsberger observed that by the late 1980s, the church's former privileged position in Western societies under the Christendom model had disappeared and would not return.[48] We can reasonably conclude, therefore, that church growth thinking is an inadequate strategy given the collapse of Christendom. Desperately seeking to incorporate a means of ministry antithetical to mission station churches, McGavran inadvertently inspired the very types of organizations he sought to replace. Mission station churches created Christian subcultures among unreached people by serving as an extension of the Western church in non-Western settings; as indigenous peoples converted to Christianity, they were separated from their cultural groupings and segregated into the life of the mission station compound.[49] In similar fashion, contemporary manifestations of church growth thinking create isolated Christian subcultures in a post-Christendom context; thus, the onus rests with the non-churchgoer to cross cultural boundaries when attending church.

Differing Views on Diversification

The literature presents a number of possibilities when trying to categorize and classify diversification within the Church Growth Movement. Towns proposed three phases of church growth thought—one including

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[48] George Hunsberger, "The Newbigin Gauntlet: Developing a Domestic Missiology for North America," *The Church Between Gospel and Culture: The Emerging Mission in North America (Gospel & Our Culture)* ed. George Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 6.

[49] Bolger, 182–183.

McGavran, Wagner, Eddie Gibbs, and himself, a second including Rick Warren, Bill Hybels, and John Maxwell, and a third including the plethora of churches, pastors, authors, denominations, and research institutes who have specialized in certain niche aspects of the Church Growth Movement. Towns contended it was this third stage most responsible for diversification in church growth thinking.[50] McIntosh (2003) drew clear distinctions between a technical understanding of church growth and a popular understanding; technical church growth is anything related to the principles and theories arising from Donald McGavran while popular church growth is anything that purports to help grow a church.[51]

Tucker argued that the loss of McGavran's leadership led to diversification within the Church Growth Movement and highlighted five separate streams of church growth thinking. The *McGavran Church Growth with a global focus* stream relied on social sciences, pragmatism, and contextualization but never relied on these tools over the biblical record. The *McGavran Church Growth with an American focus* stream mirrored the first stream but displayed an inherently American emphasis. The *American Popular Church Growth* stream was seeker driven and prioritized the felt needs of the unchurched rather than the biblical mandate for evangelism. *Third Wave Church Growth* depended on C. Peter Wagner and emphasized the normalcy of signs, wonders, healings, miraculous gifts, and Holy Spirit power encounters. The *American Neo-Orthodox Church Growth* stream was comprised of mainline liberal churches that prioritized sociological, pragmatic, and contextualization while rejecting what they felt were McGavran's narrow views on biblical authority, Christology, and soteriology.[52]

Tucker recognized five streams of church growth thinking, but Rainer recognized four epochs. *The McGavran Era* (1955–1970) is most recognizable as the season during which McGavran exerted direct influence and leadership on the Church Growth Movement. The *Identity Crisis Era Part I* (1970–1981) was a span of time during which church growth proponents carried McGavran's original framework into a distinctly American context. During *The Wagner Era* (1981–1988), C. Peter Wagner became the Church Growth Movement's leading spokesperson and the first to defend church growth thinking against a myriad of detractors who criticized early American manifestations. *Identity Crisis Era Part II* (1988–present) is most recog-

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[50] Elmer Towns, "Effective Evangelism View," *Evaluating the Church Growth Movement* ed. Gary McIntosh (Grand Rapids: Zondervan. Kindle Edition, 2010).

[51] Gary McIntosh, "A Critique of the Critics," *Journal of Evangelism and Missions* 2 (2003): 47.

[52] Sonny Tucker, "The Fragmentation of the Post-McGavran Church Growth Movement," *Journal of Evangelism and Missions* 2 (2003): 26–32.

nizable today since the most common characteristics of churches adhering to church growth principles are numerical emphasis, contemporary worship, and seeker-sensitive focus.[53]

In addition to a myriad of opinions concerning how to classify the various categories of church growth thinking following McGavran, disagreement exists as to when such diversification occurred. Tucker argued the Church Growth Movement lost its identity in 1988 as McGavran's health failed and his influence diminished.[54] Towns argued diversification began in 1980 when church growth thinking shifted from the classroom (led by academics) to local churches (led by practitioners).[55] Bolger noted the Church Growth Movement lost its association with Donald McGavran in the 1990s as church growth became synonymous with powerful marketing and large suburban megachurches.[56] It is not likely one single classification of diversification within the Church Growth Movement accurately presents a comprehensive lineage. Rather, each of the various categorizations together illustrates some aspect of how the streams divided. Regardless, a clear and compelling understanding of why diversification occurred requires further investigation. Lesslie Newbigin— a missionary and contemporary of McGavran—is foundational to this further investigation.

NEWBIGIN READS MCGAVRAN

A missionary in India for forty years and a contemporary of Donald McGavran, Lesslie Newbigin was equally as passionate about proclaiming the gospel as McGavran but disagreed with him concerning technique and method of proclamation. McGavran developed the primary church growth components while serving in India, but Newbigin began to think differently about the mission of the church upon returning to his native England and seeing Western society through the eyes of an outsider; immersion in an Eastern context uniquely prepared him to observe the ways in which the gospel is at the same time embedded in and disparate from a given culture. Further, Newbigin's experience as a Western missionary in a non-Western context gave insight into cross-cultural communication by challenging the

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[53] Thom Rainer, "Assessing the Church Growth Movement," *Journal of Evangelism and Missions* 2 (2003): 54–57.

[54] Tucker, 25.

[55] Elmer Towns, "The Beginning of the Church Growth Movement," *Journal of Evangelism and Missions* 2 (2003): 17–18.

[56] Bolger.

worldview implicit in language and forcing him to balance both syncretism and irrelevance.[57]

More than formulae based on methodological technique and cultural research, Newbigin considered the fundamental assumptions at work in evangelism and asked how the church could faithfully proclaim the gospel in a society that was increasingly antithetical to the gospel despite the church's fundamental identity having traditionally been informed by the surrounding culture.

> How, then, can there be a genuine encounter of the gospel with this culture, a culture that has itself sprung from roots in Western Christendom and with which the Western churches have lived in a symbiotic relationship ever since its first dawning?[58]

For the church to effectively witness to the lordship of Jesus in contemporary society, it must not merely offer an alternative means of existence as isolationist church growth proponents inadvertently did, but instead demonstrate the holistic and all-encompassing reality of the gospel. Newbigin differentiated between *declaratory* churches that discussed and interpreted the work God has done in and through history and *performatory* churches that realized their place within the kingdom. Performatory churches understood that they were to play an active, facilitating role as God brings history to its goal of redemption and reconciliation.[59] With this reading, it is not unfair to categorize McGavran as declaratory and Newbigin as performatory; McGavran's efforts resulted in the very alternative existence he sought to avoid while Newbigin pursued the gospel in all its facets and nuances. Newbigin pointed to three emphases within McGavran's original thinking that were problematic and prevented performatory ministry: the relation of numerical church growth to the message of the kingdom, the meaning of conversion and its relation to both discipling and what McGavran called *perfecting*, and the relationships among gospel, church, and culture.[60]

The Church Growth Movement made numerical growth of the church into one of the most important aspects of authentic evangelistic mission.[61] McGavran was correct to ask why the church did not possess a more burn-

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[57] Michael Goheen, "Gospel, Culture, and Cultures: Lesslie Newbigin's Missionary Contribution" (Paper presented at the Cultures and Christianity A.D. 2000 International Symposium of the Association for Reformational Philosophy, 2000), 1–2. Retrieved from http://www.biblicaltheology.ca/blue_files/Gospel,%20Culture,%20 Cultures,%20Newbigin.pdf.

[58] Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 9.

[59] Newbigin, *The Gospel*, 131.

[60] Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 124.

[61] Guder, "Evangelism," 152.

ing concern for the multiplication of believers and more evidence of its happening. Indeed, in reading the New Testament, one recognizes joyfulness in the rapid growth of the church; however, what is absent in Scripture is evidence that numerical growth of the church was a matter of primary concern. The church is least recognizable as the church when it pursues growth through artificially contrived means such as marketing campaigns, technological manipulation, and pseudoscientific research; when numerical growth is prioritized and utilized as a means of assessment, the church more closely resembles a military operation or commercial sales drive.[62] Guder distinguished between a yearning for growth and an undue emphasis upon numerical growth, arguing yearning for numerical growth is a true mark of the church while the actual amount of numerical growth is a matter of historical, sociological, political, anthropological, religious, and cultural factors and does not point to the trueness of the church.[63] Having made numerical growth the sole determining factor of successful evangelism, as the Church Growth Movement matured and diversified, its proponents developed methodological processes that promoted numerical growth as a standalone metric of evangelistic success.

Newbigin also criticized McGavran's desire to separate conversion from obedience, arguing conversion necessarily involved the whole person. Originally, the announcement of the gospel ("the reign of God is at hand") led immediately and comprehensively to a call to be converted ("repent"), a call to believe in the present reality of God's reign, and a call to follow Jesus. All of these belong together as part of a single action rather than divided into quantifiable subsections.[64] Later church growth thinking adhered to McGavran's separation between conversion and perfection, allowing churches to perpetuate a bifurcated and isolationist existence.

> The impact of the gospel upon the world is viewed as a second stage, linked with the idea of "perfecting." The horizontal relationships of the gospel are to follow after the vertical. The most important thing is to get people saved (and counted) and into growing churches, and thus all methods and techniques of evangelization are to be single-mindedly focused upon that purpose. Conversion tends also to be viewed in a reductionist fashion, as a one-time event leading to incorporation into the church. Conversion as continuing response to the claims of Christ (Rom. 12:1–2) and growth as continuing evangelization of the faithful are viewed as perhaps too complicating an approach. These things can come later.[65]

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62 Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 126–127.

63 Guder, "Evangelism," 152–153.

64 Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 135.

65 Guder, "Evangelism," 150.

McGavran's distinction between "discipling" and "perfecting" strains the tension between the personal and ethical dimensions of conversion. If the two functions are seen as separate, can the implications of the two be separated in the event of conversion? The gospel by which converts are discipled is always a call to repentance—to following Jesus and doing the will of God.[66]

Instead, Newbigin underscored the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit and the supremacy of Jesus Christ in conversion: if the church that bears the gospel also defines the ethical implications of conversion, missionary activity simply becomes church activity.[67] When personalized and privatized salvation is centralized, the church becomes a consequence of salvation rather than the context.[68] It is the Holy Spirit who "brings the truth and power of the gospel home to the hearts and minds of people outside the church and gives them free insights into the will of God, by which the church itself is corrected and its understanding of the gospel is enlarged."[69]

Finally, Newbigin (1995) took issue with what he called the inability of church growth proponents to recognize and honor the differences of culture, arguing, "the consequence of this failure is that conversion separates the converts from their own culture, robs them of a great part of their human inheritance, and makes them second-class adherents of an alien culture."[70] McGavran, argued Newbigin, ascribed absolute value to particular forms of social organization—something that is both historically naïve and theologically intolerable.[71]

This critique is notable since contextualization played such a prominent role in McGavran's original thinking.[72] Newbigin admitted the existence of customs, traditions, and norms for conduct upon which humans rely for guidance. However, these customs, traditions, and norms are neither changeless nor absolute.[73] McGavran subscribed to the cultural homogeneity of modernity and advocated for unique indigenous churches such that each people group had its own church within its own culture and location.[74] Mission station churches represented a high view of Western culture, ven-

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[66] George Hunsberger, *Bearing the Witness of the Spirit: Lesslie Newbigin's Theology of Cultural Plurality* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 191.

[67] Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 137.

[68] Craig Van Gelder, "The Covenant's Missiological Character," *Calvin Theological Journal* 29 (1994): 190–191.

[69] Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 137.

[70] Ibid., 141.

[71] Ibid., 142.

[72] Tucker, 24.

[73] Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 143.

[74] Bolger, 189.

erating its way of life as superior to all other cultures.[75] Later church growth thinking expressed a similar hubris by viewing culture as something one could identify, target, and reach.[76]

McGavran's overreliance on cultural sources of authority combined with the emphasis later church growth advocates placed on effective methods yielded a church more reminiscent of a modern organization than a missionary congregation. Ministers in the contemporary church receive payment for the work they do within the church walls. Churches do not invest in people movements outside the walls of the church, and all money goes to preserve the church rather than pursue people movements. Mission is done with a plan, and programs increase numbers rather than equip members to foster movements outside the church.[77] Christians view themselves as consumers of church activity rather than as the church itself and consumers for whom religious goods and services are provided by the institutional church. Evangelism, then, devolves into membership recruitment.[78] Methods become goals, and proper program execution is mistaken for faithful ministry.

Newbigin recognized contemporary cultural pluralism called for a more culturally sensitive church. He envisioned:

> A fellowship of churches open to and rooted in all the cultures of humankind within which they are severally placed, and so renewing its life through ever-fresh obedience to Christ as presented in the Scriptures that is becomes an increasingly credible sign, instrument, and foretaste of God's reign over all nations and all things.[79]

Cultural sensitivity and contextual appropriateness are necessary requirements for the church because they are not ultimately determinative in evangelism—the gospel is. The church "must be understood in terms of God's salvific purpose for all of creation. The gospel creates the mission of the church, and the church is sent into the world to be the community of witness of God's healing love."[80] Such a church recognizes the location of a congregation is not a particular place (mission station) or people (people movement), but a social space of connections. In this sense, churches must

75 Ibid., 183.

76 Darrell Guder, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 73.

77 Bolger, 183.

78 George Hunsberger, "Sizing up the Shape of the Mission," *The Church Between Gospel and Culture: The Emerging Mission in North America (Gospel & Our Culture)* ed. George Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 339.

79 Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 150.

80 Guder, "Evangelism," 153.

be flexible enough to gather, disperse, connect, and disconnect with great fluidity, capable of morphing into many different configurations. Homogenous units do not exist in global flows, and followers of Jesus must learn how to relate with fellow kingdom agents by forming "church" in many different flows and practices.[81] This flexibility is necessary in contemporary society considering each human community's exposure to a wealth of cultural diversity. Jesus, as he is met in Scripture, has a purpose to unite every aspect of every culture to himself in a unity that transcends, without negating, the diversities of culture.[82]

Newbigin looked at previous evangelistic efforts and noted, "We must start with the basic fact that there is no such thing as a pure gospel if by that is meant something which is not embodied in a culture."[83] The Christian who carries the gospel unwittingly carries his native culture as well. "The missionary does not come with the pure gospel and then adapt it to the culture where she serves: she comes with a gospel which is already embodied in the culture by which the missionary was formed."[84] Newbigin proposed a three-cornered relationship between the gospel, the church, and a particular culture.[85] Hunsberger illustrated this relationship and expanded on it by showcasing the dynamics emerging along each axis of the triangle: the *conversion encounter* axis between gospel and culture, the *missionary dialogue* axis between culture and church, and the *reciprocal relationship* axis between church and gospel (see Figure 1). The gospel is relevant in a specific culture insofar as it is embodied in terms that culture understands; embodiment without challenge leads to syncretism, while challenge without embodiment leads to irrelevance. Avoiding both syncretism and irrelevance allows the church to pursue a biblical vision of Christian community that is relevant in any context without relying on a specific cultural presentation.[86] The gospel must always embody and challenge the culture equally.

McGavran's descendants within the Church Growth Movement failed to completely or successfully embody the gospel in a particular culture because they did not offer a challenge to go along with the embodiment, instead accepting culturally informed methods without question or critique. Appropriating culturally approved methods such as demographical research, logistical needs, and media advertising but never filtering them
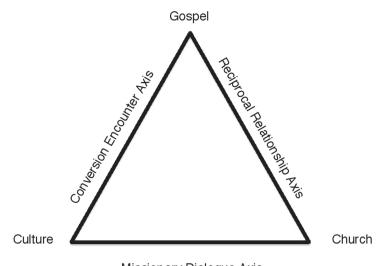
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[81] Bolger, 189.

[82] Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 149.

[83] Newbigin, *The Gospel*, 144.

[84] Ibid.

[85] Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 147.

[86] Hunsberger, "The Newbigin Gauntlet," 8–10.

FIGURE 1.

Newbigin's Three-Cornered Relationship Between the Gospel, the Church, and the Culture

through the lens of Scripture set later church growth practitioners adrift in the morass of culturally grounded human ingenuity. Numerical growth was assumed a requisite sign of evangelistic fruit, but as Newbigin[87] and Guder[88] both showed from Scripture, the desire for numerical growth did not necessarily result in the appearance of numerical growth.

Lesslie Newbigin pursued an ecclesiology that intentionally prioritized the gospel's transformational power, the church's contextual sensitivity, and an ongoing cultural dialogue. Donald McGavran pursued an ecclesiology that emphasized effective numerical growth, a methodology that separated conversion and obedience, and a sociocultural hermeneutic that distorted the relationships among gospel, church, and culture. Each of these three emphases in McGavran's thinking were contributing factors that, when distorted over time and interpretation, resulted in the contemporary manifestation of modernistic bifurcated mission station churches. While McGavran may not have intended to influence the organizational identity of Western churches in this way, the foundations he laid established an inevitable course of meth-

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[87] Newbigin, *The Open Secret*.
[88] Guder, "Evangelism."

odological dilution over time. Despite McGavran's attempt to redeem modernistic isolated mission station churches, diversification within the church growth thinking produced the very type of organization he vilified.

CONCLUSION

Donald McGavran, a devoted follower of Jesus and faithful missionary for many years, conceived his earliest ecclesiological thoughts while on the foreign mission field but never considered America a mission field itself. Eager to see the church faithful in fulfilling its call, he relied on modern sociological principles to further the church's evangelistic and missionary efforts. McGavran's epistemological descendants replicated technique and applied abstract church growth principles without contextual consideration, creating segmented and isolated churches—a manifestation of Christian subculture—operating with a modernistic bifurcated worldview. McGavran's emphases inadvertently led to a diluted and distorted American church that duplicated the bifurcated mission station McGavran initially sought to replace.

McGavran's goal was to increase the effectiveness and influence of the church; his thinking presumed an inherent centrifugal and attractional nature of the church appropriate for a predominantly Christendom-informed sociocultural context. Rather than engaging people groups with the gospel, too often contemporary church growth adherents create isolated Christian subcultures in the midst of a society that is no longer influenced by Christendom. McGavran's inability to extricate himself from the legacy of modernity manifests itself in a variety of ways through later church growth adherents.

Lesslie Newbigin, a contemporary of McGavran and equally experienced missionary, exhorted the church to lay aside its privatized isolationist existence and properly pursue the relationships among gospel, church, and culture. Returning to Western Christianity after forty years of ministry in an Eastern context uniquely prepared him to observe the ways in which the gospel is at the same time embedded in and disparate from a given culture.

The church must not assume it is the sole locus of God's activity in the world but should recognize God is already sovereignly working in unique cultures throughout the world. Once the church seeks to partner with God in the work he is already doing rather than initiating that work and expecting his blessing therein, the gospel is able to be embedded in a given culture insofar as it accepts those cultural elements that promote relevance while challenging those cultural elements that entail syncretism. The sociological research and methodological reliance of the Church Growth Movement were syncretistic in their acceptance of cultural practices and did not submit those practices to Scripture. Logistical and pragmatic considerations

are not wrong but must not become more authoritative than Scripture. The late modern world is culturally diverse and intimately connected; seeking contextually appropriate gospel embodiment while avoiding either cultural syncretism or isolationist irrelevance is a biblically faithful approach to multicultural evangelism and mission.

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