

# Church Growth Theology

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*Arthur F. Glasser*  
*Fuller Theological Seminary*

## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to present those elements of Evangelical Theology that are foundational to the Church Growth perspective. No attempt shall be made to incorporate the whole range of Evangelical doctrinal formulation under the rubric of Church Growth Theology. This paper shall only discuss those elements that conceivably are of special interest to missiologists.

## THE HERMENEUTICAL PROBLEM

Church Growth Theology is based on the fundamental principle that Scripture alone is the only infallible rule of faith and practice. The biblical record and biblical interpretation of redemptive history is alone normative for mankind.<sup>1</sup> There is no other Word of God. Inspired prophets interpreted to Old Testament Israel God's covenant with Abraham and his seed, and spoke in various ways of the fact that all nations would be blessed through him. Inspired apostles interpreted to the New Testament Church the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, whereby He became Himself the blessing of the Abrahamic covenant – good news for all mankind. The acts and words of God in both testaments are foundational.

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1 We are not unmindful of the flaw in regarding the simplistic formula: “revelation through history” as the only hermeneutical guidelines of the Old Testament (James Barr in *Interpretation*, 17, 1963, pp. 193-205). God's verbal communication in and through historic events as well as in the Wisdom Literature (unrelated to events) make His revelation in the Old Testament a complex process.

Had they not occurred there would have been not Scripture, no normative interpretation, and no Church Growth Theology.

So then, we do not salute the Bible as a general source of religious information. Rather, we are deeply committed to the reality of its plenary inspiration. The Bible, and the Bible *alone* is the Word of God written. We make this bold affirmation because we have confronted Jesus Christ, the living Word, in our hearts. Carnell succinctly summarized our conviction when he states:

The Bible is the Word of God ‘out there,’ whether or not anyone is confronted by it; but it does not address the heart as the Word of God until Christ is met in personal fellowship (Carnell 1959:33, 34).

In holding this position we are firmly persuaded that we adhere to the traditional orthodox view of Scripture. This means that we must add that if any man would confront the Living Word, Jesus Christ, he must expect the locus of confrontation to be Scripture, and Scripture alone. We bow to the scandal of the canon. We are not among those who would extend that locus to include extra-biblical material, no matter how logical, persuasive or popular it might be. When M. M. Thomas confidently argues “that the religious fellowship within the Church and human fellowship in secular society are both created by the Gospel and are within the reality of Christ and the history of salvation in the world,” he is following a hermeneutic that undercuts the unique authority of Scripture (Thomas, 1971, 38).

When we speak of the Gospel of God – His good news for mankind – we are speaking of the Word of God from Genesis to Revelation. We have liberty neither to add to this corpus nor to subtract from it (Rev. 22:18-19). It represents the whole counsel of God. We affirm with Jesus Christ that Scripture cannot be broken (John 10:35). It constitutes the law of God and is to be received as such by all who submit to His Lordship. We appeal to Christ and His apostles for authentication of the indefectible authority of the Old Testament. We likewise appeal to the apostles for authentication of the indefectible authority of the New Testament. What they wrote the early Church received, and we do likewise today.

Church Growth Theology has a somewhat modified Reformed hermeneutic. We recognize that Scripture was written over fifteen centuries by at least thirty authors from all ranks and classes of society. Its unfolding of the divine disclosure moves through several distinct cultures. But we do not follow Luther’s hermeneutic that makes Jesus Christ the *Rule of Faith*.

“In plain words or involved words ... Scripture contains nothing but Christ and described the Old Testament in the following fashion:

Here shalt thou find the swaddling clothes and the manger in which Christ lies. Poor and of little value are the swaddling clothes, but dear is Christ, the treasure that lies in them (Farrar 1961:333).

We take strong exception to this since such a hermeneutic can lead one to adopt a subjective preference for some passages and reject others. Thus, the truth of God can be distorted and truncated at will. We believe that all parts of the Bible are equally inspired. Each part should be permitted to make its contribution to one's understanding of the mission of the people of God in our day.

To set forth the perspicuity of Scripture in which clear passages control the meaning of the more difficult ones, is wholly arbitrary. It makes it possible for the Bible, instead of being the rule of faith to which the Church conforms, to become a nose of wax which can be made to say whatever the Church, comprised as it is by men who have not yet become perfect, want it to say so that they can use the Bible to justify what they wish to go on doing (Fuller 1969: IX-19).

So then, we are loathe to hurry from the Old Testament to the New Testament, contending that latter “interprets” the former. We do not skim the Gospels and settle down in the Epistles, contending that they “interpret” them. Church Growth Theology states that each part of Scripture must be given opportunity to say its piece, to fit into the other parts so that the unity and coherency of the divine revelation is made apparent. In this, we follow Calvin far more than Luther. Church Growth Theology takes the Old Testament as seriously as it takes the New Testament.

## THE OLD TESTAMENT

Many insights have been drawn from the Old Testament, which bear on Church Growth Theology. The following have been selected for their importance to our theology and their relevance to the current debate on *Humanization and Mission*.

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## Creation

The Gospel offers sinful man the possibility of his becoming a “new creation through the sovereign activity of the Spirit in his heart.” This Good News’ can only be understood aright if it is related to God as the Creator of the universe, to man as His creature and to human history, which His creative activity has launched. God is supreme and unique. No people are either superior in origin and essence or exempt from His jurisdiction. Indeed, all men are accountable to Him alone and, the worship of all other gods is totally abhorrent to Him. This dogma is central to apostolic preaching, and therefore, central to Gospel proclamation today. It also strikes at the roots of racism and nationalism, the curse of the 20th century – the sins Christians never confess. Its missiological implications are enormous.

## Cultural Imperative

We cannot fully understand either the temporal or eternal implications of the Evangelistic Mandate Christ gave His Church, without the perspective of the Cultural Mandate that God pressed upon the human race prior to the Fall. God is concerned with man’s social existence in this world: marriage (procreating), work (sowing, tilling and guarding), and government (ruling). When He called Adam to vice-regency over this world, this marked the beginning of a stream of obligation embracing family and community, law and order, culture and civilization that widens and deepens as it courses through Scripture. God holds man fully responsible for this world. His concern is always for the common man, the “stranger within the gates,” the widow and the orphan. The Bible devotes far more attention to the need for social justice and deliverance from tyranny than it does the warning against the destructive dimensions of anarchy. Indeed, the “routine of participation in human civilization is the very arena of obedience to God” (Walhout 1963:520). This mandate, presupposing as it does the unity of the human race, represents the determination of God that all men participate in service on behalf of His world. It has never been abrogated. Its concerns range from nation building to peacemaking, from the struggle to preserve ecological balance in nature to the removal of those structures in society that dehumanize man.

## The Fall

In order to appreciate the tenacity with which the Church Growth movement defends mission as biblically defined; one must enter into the

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Mystery and good news of the Cross. This necessitates that he face the awful reality of human sin. Sin alienates, defiles, distorts, and destroys. When man willfully broke fellowship with God and selfishly chose a separate existence he deliberately rejected the cultural task (“under God and for His glory”) and abdicated responsibility for this world. From henceforth the inclination of his heart was toward disintegration and chaos. Corruption and disruption characterize his relation with God, with woman, with brother and with environment. The judgment that followed the Fall proclaimed God’s sovereignty. Because of man’s defiance of God, we should not expect a holy, loving God to superintend history for man’s contentment, but rather to redeem man and restore the order He originally intended, this is what Scripture clearly reveals. Nothing is more in conflict with Scripture than the man-centeredness that ignores God and His will and makes the humanization of fallen society the goal of mission. Church Growth Theology stands resolutely against the myth of human innocence and the heresy that man’s personal conversion to God need not be the central concern of mission today.

## The Gospel

The New Testament is abundantly clear on the point that believing Jews in the Old Testament dispensation enjoyed forgiveness and salvation through the redemptive work of God in Christ (Romans 3:25; 4:7,8; Hebrews 9:15; etc.). Indeed, Church Growth Theology believes that without the Old Testament perspectives the message of the Cross is largely incomprehensible. The Decalogue and the Sinaitic covenant proclaims the holiness of God and the sinfulness of sin. Supplemented by the Levitical instruction on worship, vicarious sacrifice, blood atonement, and the Aaronic priesthood, they enable one to sense the awful necessity for the Cross. We agree with Brunner who said that apart from the Old Testament “the love of God in Christ can only be mystically, sentimentally or esthetically grasped” (quoted by Wright 1961:27). The more we seek to follow the apostolic norm of living “according to Scripture” (1 Cor. 4:6), the more conscious we become of the lostness of man and his need for self-abandonment to God’s mercy and the more distressed we become with those who dismiss the concern for personal salvation as Pietism and selfishness.

## Israel and Election

If fallen man is to be delivered from his fallenness and restored to fellowship with God as well as to right relationships with other men

and his environment, the impulse must come from God. The instinctive bent of man is to refuse rather than seek reconciliation. Early in human history, then, God began to reach out for man. His election of Abraham, His covenant of redemption with him. His formation at Sinai of a new community out of Abraham's descendants to be a spectacle unto salvation among the nations – these divine acts are of the very essence of God's redemptive purpose in history. By them He set Israel apart from the nations. She was to represent His kingship and His first fruits in the world. She was to be a servant people to reveal His glory and thereby draw the nations into His Kingdom.

Church Growth Theology believes that the Church's mission to disciple the nations must be related to this Old Testament ideal of a religious nation – not an ethnic people – open to receive all those from without that desire to join her in the worship of the true God (Exodus 12:47-49, I Kings 8:41-43, etc.). The divine intent in election was to confer responsibility as well as privilege. Israel was called to be God's example. His prophet and His priest among the nations. But she abused her election and chose the way of particularism, withdrawal, and preoccupation with her own survival. 'Judaism became exclusive instead of aggressive, a little garden walled around instead of a great missionary force' (Rowley).

In like manner, the Church today can turn inward, become preoccupied with its own corporateness and inner life and neglect to disciple the nations. When ecclesiastical preoccupation transcends the Christological concern for outreach the Church is in mortal danger. The Church Growth Movement cannot but stand against this retreat from mission. Its tension with the World Council of Churches does not arise from any blanket condemnation of all that the WCC is seeking to do. Indeed, many conciliar activities are worthy of commendation. But one of its friends has observed:

The whole enterprise has gradually become a gigantic system of interchurch aid with little evangelistic outreach in many places, and it is bogged down in the maintenance of denominational machinery and institutions (Beaver 1968:82).

This judgment may sound severe. One can argue that it tends to overlook the theological implications of the fusion at New Delhi of the International Missionary Council with the World Council of Churches, and the deliberate effort in conciliar circles to make mission an essential and final criterion of the ecumenical church (Mackay 1964:32ff). And yet,

in the years since New Delhi (1961), Christian mission has been redefined in such a way that it has become something in which recognizable missionaries and a Gospel that negates other religions as essentially false or fatally inadequate are considered to be things of the past” (Kromminga 1970:33f). On the basis of compelling theological reasons, the Church Growth Movement has found no alternative but to participate in the current debate for the integrity of the mission of the people of God.

## **The Exodus and Restoration**

Two historic events in the Old Testament dramatized God’s redemptive concern for His people. In turn, they are used as analogies to pictorialize the saving work of Christ. The Exodus from Egypt and the Restoration from Babylon reveal the desire of God for the political and social emancipation of His people. By them He intimated that a more cosmic deliverance of mankind was coming (Isaiah 49:1-7; 53:1-12; John 12:33; etc.). Moses and Cyrus were His instruments to deliver the people of God from human tyranny and oppression by spectacular power and royal decree. In like manner, through the sacrificial labor and redemptive death of His Servant, the Christ, He would save His people from a greater captivity and a more bitter bondage the captivity of the prince of darkness and the bondage of sin and death.

The Church Growth Movement finds no biblical warrant for the current, truncated concept of salvation, which makes political and social emancipation the ultimate objectives of mission. Shadows should never be confused with substance. Indeed, to represent theologies of revolution as the “relevant” Christian Gospel for our day is to distort the will of God for men. On occasion, the Church Growth Movement has been accused of retreating from the world because of its refusal to follow the theologians of violence and man the barricades with them. We glory in our intransigence. Actually, we are very much in the world, but we refuse to transform mission into that which helps hatred and evil to proliferate. Mission, biblically understood, means suffering with those who suffer and seeking out with them the one way of salvation – bearing witness before God and man to the consequences of injustice and sin, and proclaiming the redeeming love of God, displayed through Jesus Christ crucified and risen (Ellul 1969:175). Mission, in the biblical sense, is to beseech men on His behalf to be reconciled to God (II Cor. 5:20).

Concluding this section, we would affirm our awareness of the exclusivism of the Old Testament, its revelation of the “otherness” of God – His jealousy and wrath as well as His loving kindness, and its demand

that all men submit to Him in repentance and faith. He alone is God. Before Him all other gods are idols. Because of this exclusivism we are prepared to take seriously all that Jesus and the apostles taught when they upheld its authority and used it to buttress their precise definition of the mission of the Church.

## THE NEW TESTAMENT

Christianity suddenly erupted in the world of the first century (c. 30 A.D.) as the proclamation of a band of Jewish men that a series of recent events concerning Jesus of Nazareth were the final decisive acts of God in history, whereby He was able to forgive men their sins and call them to vital relationship and fellowship with Himself.

### Two Mandates, Not One

Jesus gave as proof of Messiahship in His involvement in social service and His preaching of the Good News of the Kingdom (Luke 4:16-22; 7:18-23). He healed the sick, fed the hungry, delivered those who were possessed and forgave the sins of the penitent. He also taught the teachable. His humble status, carpentry shop, lifestyle, and Gospel proclaimed that all men are sacred to God. Indeed, His life and ministry demonstrated and proclaimed man's continuing obligation to carry out the cultural mandate.

The Palestine of Jesus' day was occupied by the Romans. They tampered with Jewish customs, offended Jewish pride, and oppressed the citizenry. Many felt their only hope lay in terrorism and armed insurrection (The *Zealots*). Some withdrew to the wilderness to wait for the end (The *Essenes*). Others played the power game with the Romans (The *Herodians* and *Sadduces*). And there were the proud, cold, orthodox, sitting on their hands (The *Pharisees*). Most were looking for a nationalistic Messiah to deliver them by force. But Jesus rejected all the options they represented. His alternative to revolutionary violence was *The Way of Self-Giving Love*, which He detailed in the Sermon on the Mount. True, on occasion He acted in the pattern of contemporary protest (John 2:13-15; 7:37-53; 12:10-19). By His Cross, however, He repudiated forever the use of the sword to further the purpose of God (John 18:36; James 1:20). He practiced the non-resistance he taught (Matt. 5:39). And His way is ethically normative for His people (1 John 2:6; Phil. 1:29; 2:5f). Christians are to be as revolutionary as He was revolutionary in meeting human need, in dealing with those who offend, in grappling with the abuses arising

from racial and class prejudice, in rendering to Caesar the things which are Caesar's, and in challenging all forms of injustice. Christians are to serve as He served. Christians are to be "The Salt of the Earth."

However, in all their constructive social criticism, contributions to change, and positive help to mankind, Christians dare not forget that nothing whatever can replace the redemptive Gospel – the good news that guilty men in their confusion and selfishness, alienation and guilt, can be made new through Jesus Christ. Christians are to be "The Light of the World." To this we now turn.

## The Kingdom of God

At the heart of Jesus' preaching was the announcement that the final, redeeming act of God was about to take place and that He had come to perform it. "The time is fulfilled, and the reign of God has drawn nigh," (Mark 1:15). In the Old Testament this Kingdom was the great future hope of the people of God. With the coming of Jesus, however, it was a power already at work in the present, "exercising its force," (Matt. 11:22), "coming upon" men (Matt. 12:23; Luke 11:20), and "in their midst" (Luke 17:20). It was not political, but redemptive; not national, but universal. It would come to eschatological consummation in the Last Day with the end of the redemptive purpose of God.

On one point, Jesus was particularly innovative and decisive. He called His hearers to repentance, to the renunciation of all other loyalties, to the unconditional acceptance of the will of God for their lives *and* to the task of recruiting others. This is the startling distinctive call of the new covenant. No longer are the people of God to be turned inward like Israel – a worshipping and welcoming community in the midst of the nations. They are to go out to where men were and tell them the "Good News of the Kingdom, a present reality in their midst. While they would receive future rewards for this partnership in mission, in this world they would only know personal deprivation – "blood, sweat, and tears." They were not to be preoccupied with the limited objective of their national or cultural survival. In the words of Isaiah they were not "to restore the preserved of Israel. Rather their calling was to be "a light to the nations that (His) salvation may reach to the end of the earth" (Isaiah 49:6).

All this is of profound significance to Church Growth Theology. We cannot get away from the close identification of this dominant theme of Jesus' ministry with the Great Commission, which He gave His Church after the resurrection. Indeed, Luke summarized His post-resurrection

ministry under this rubric, “the Kingdom of God” (Acts 1:3). The task of calling men to the Kingdom is the supreme task of the Church – not to reform society, but to do far more, to summon men to the rule of God and its righteousness. “The Church is called to take up the destiny of the true Israel, Servant Israel, and become the missionary people of the Kingdom of God,” (Bright 1953:233).

Church Growth Theology finds in the New Testament no brace talk of winning the world for Christ in order thereby to usher in His Kingdom. Rather, the mandate is to preach, witness, and persuade men to become Christ’s disciples. Those who respond experience what He called the new birth and enter His Kingdom (John 3:5). As children of the Kingdom they constitute His Church. But they are not the Kingdom, nor can they produce it. Rather, they enter into mission and persuade others to believe. As they labor they pray: “Thy Kingdom Come!” In the cosmic moral struggle of our day there is no neutrality. One has either come under the rule of the King or he has not. And the task of the Church is to see that the opportunity to believe and obey is extended to all men.

Church Growth Theology makes much of the Kingdom of God. Within this parameter it stresses the following:

### **A. The Importance of the Individual**

The New Testament neither criticizes nor relativizes the concern for the existence and future of the individual. Indeed, it legitimizes it! “What good can it do a man to gain the whole world at the price of his own soul” (Mark 8:36 Phillips). Those who challenge our emphasis on individual salvation in preference to the community have an insuperable exegetical problem on their hands. Of course, within the personal perspective the Kingdom does point to a universal goal. As Berkouwer well states:

To oppose the “personal” or “individual” to the “universal” or “cosmic” is to create a false dichotomy. The universal encapsulates the personal, and during the time when the Lord has not yet returned, attention must also be focused on the life and death of the individual (1972:62).

### **B. The Kingdom and Mission**

There is an essential and indissoluble connection between the eschatological expectation of the Kingdom and the call to mission today

(Matt. 24:14, Mark 10:13. etc.). “The Church that fails to understand its mandate in this area inevitably becomes tangled in its own outlook on the meaning of the present dispensation” (Berkouwer 1972:133). Forsyth clearly saw this:

The Gospel is our business. The Kingdom is the Lord's. We thought we were charged with both, and it is more than we can bear. It is the Gospel that is put into our hands. ‘Go, preach it to every creature.’ Ours is the Gospel, the Spirit, the Church, but His is the Kingdom, the power, and glory forever (quoted by Webster 1955:179).

It is God's intent that the worldwide missionary obedience of His Church shall dominate the last days and become the focal point of all the signs of Christ's Return. The Church Growth Movement eschews all scanning of the times for signs of the coming End that exclude active participation in mission. This Gospel of the Kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world, as a testimony to all nations, and then the End will come” (Matt. 24-14). Only this sign really matters, not the new State of Israel, the rise of totalitarianism or apostasy in the Church. Church Growth men cannot grow complacent while there are still two billion in this generation who have yet to hear of God's love in Jesus Christ.

### **C. The Universality of Outreach**

Much can be said about God's concern for all mankind, revealed in the Old Testament. In Jesus' day this concern was absent from the Jewish community. Indeed, the particularism of the Jews of Jerusalem and Judea in the time of Jesus was an unmitigated tragedy. He sought to correct this distortion by reaffirming the universal. He desired to be supreme in all the earth and to rule over all its kingdoms. We infer this from His disclosure of the Devil's assault on his inner heart in the account of the Temptation. As Hugh Martin puts it:

The whole basis of his teaching was implicitly universal. His message about the nature of God's kingdom and the conditions of entrance contains nothing that makes it characteristically Jewish. The Beatitudes say nothing about racial qualifications, and the Lord's Prayer voices the needs of humanity. The love of God and the love of man were to Him the sum of the commandments. The assertion of the Fatherhood of God and of the infinite value of every human soul demands international

brotherhood as their essential outcome. Religion to Him is primarily a relation between Father and child. What He emphasizes as foundational depends on no national considerations. ‘Whosoever’ is His characteristic gospel word (Martin 1946:41).

Church Growth Theology is committed to the Gospel of God’s Kingdom. It is ‘broader than the measure of man’s mind.’ Indeed, the love of God that it reveals cannot but be universal. The gift of His Son is too great for anything less than all mankind.

## The Church

The first reference to the Church in the New Testament discloses Christ’s determination to build it and His assurance that “the power of death shall not prevail against it” (Matt. 16:18). This affirmation reminds us that the Church is of God and of men. Its nature is mysterious for it reflects the interplay of God’s activity with man’s activity in the ongoing of its communal life and mission (Minear). God is always present, but the Church’s human weakness is always apparent. It is Christ’s Body and His army, standing between Him and the devil. It has a glory even while it lives and serves on the edge of the abyss. Obviously, space forbids any detailed treatment of so vast a subject. We can only indicate a few elements that are of particular significance to Church Growth Theology.

### A. Its Mission is of God ... “I will build My Church ...”

Church Growth is no human enterprise. Indeed, the redemption of the world is so uniquely the concern of God that when Jesus issued the Great Commission He repeatedly promised His abiding presence through the coming of the Spirit that His people might be co-laborers with Him (Acts 1:4,5; etc.). Church Growth writers have never presumed that the Church can be built and extended by skilled technicians, trained in the art of communication and ecclesiastical extension. In a memorable chapter entitled “Authentic Spiritual Fire,” Dr. McGavran wrote:

The growth of the Church is always brought about by the action of the Holy Spirit. As in the New Testament Church, so today, the Holy Spirit leads, convicts of sin, converts, builds up, selects missionaries and thrusts them out to ripened fields. The concern of Christians today must be to understand the workings of the Holy Spirit and to be open to His leading. We talk of factors producing

readiness to accept the Savior – but who produces the factors? It is largely the Holy Spirit of God. We but describe the way in which He acts. He up builds the Church, extends, and nurtures it. Men are the channel through which He works (McGavran 1959:55).

### **B. Its Mission Demands Growth ... “I will build My Church ...”**

Church Growth terminology includes differentiations between the growth of a single congregation (*expansion growth, membership growth, or numerical growth*), the growth of a number of congregations (*multiplying growth*), and the special kind of growth that takes place when Christians of one culture help to establish congregations in another culture (*bridging growth*). These varieties of growth are invariably accompanied with organizational development within the congregation and between related congregations (*organic growth*). Finally, the spiritual development of Christians involves the special category of *perfection growth*. Whereas Scripture is not explicit on the manner in which converts are to be incorporated into congregational life, it is strong in its emphasis on the importance of conversion growth (Matt. 18:3; Acts 3:25,26; 17:31; etc.).

The final reference to the Spirit and the Church in the New Testament finds them unitedly beseeching men to be converted to Christ, the Fountain of Life (Rev. 22:17).

### **C. Its Mission Necessitates Communication ... “I will build My Church ...”**

God is essential to the growth of the Church. So are people. God works in and through His people to bring others to His allegiance. On the human side no task is so difficult. Luzbetak reminds us that the Church has only one means at her disposal to bring about religious change (*conversion growth*). The means is communication. To be effective in communicating the Gospel, Christians must transmit it “on the proper wave-length – the sociocultural context of the receiving society” (Luzbetak 1963:16). This is consonant with the apostolic practice of being “all things to all men...for the sake of the Gospel” (1 Cor. 9:19-23). Only thereby will the Gospel have the best chance of remaining substantially unaltered and of being properly understood. This means effective persuasion, something utterly impossible without the use of “culturally meaningful premises, values and motives” (p. 17). Inasmuch as we are deeply persuaded that cultural relevancy is an indispensable in Gospel proclamation, the Church Growth

Movement is eager to harness the social sciences to the missionary task. If Moses in the wilderness felt it advisable to hire Hobab to “serve as eyes” for the Israelites to supplement the presence of God’s guiding pillar of Cloud and Fire, missionaries today should not be reluctant to learn from cultural anthropologists all tested and scientific approaches to communicating to man in his socio-cultural context (Numbers 10:26-36).

### **D. Its Mission Involves Conflict ... “the powers ... shall not prevail ...”**

When the missionary objective is defined as *conversion growth*, spiritual conflict is inevitable. Nothing less is involved than the divine activity that delivers men from the kingdom of darkness and transfers them into His Kingdom (Col. 1:13). The god-of-this-world is not indifferent to efforts designed to rob him of those over whom he exercises such carried and subtle control (1 John 5:19).<sup>2</sup> Power encounter is inevitable. There is “no way out in this war, no compromise, no friendly agreement to engage in dialogue, no mere Christian presence,” (Tippett, 1969:90). Only those energized by God can succeed in the light of this. The New Testament is replete with instruction on spiritual preparation, prayer warfare, right handling of the Word of God, and the exercise of faith (II Cor. 10:3-5). Mission activity that downgrades prayer, the exposition of the Scriptures, the use of the Sacraments and the courageous, loving confrontation of men with the Gospel is doomed to failure. Indeed, such activity betrays careless indifference to the growth of the Church.

### **E. Its Mission and Receptivity ... “I will build ...”**

People vary greatly in their response to the Gospel. Early in the history of the Church Growth Movement this factor came to prominence in its methodology. The slogan was win the winnable. The thesis was advanced that missionaries should be sensitive to this phenomenon. Areas of low receptivity should be only lightly occupied and missions were encouraged to concentrate every available worker among the receptive. Procedures were developed for discerning receptivity and ways were devised for adjusting methods, institutions, and personnel to reap the ripe harvests. Anthropological insight gave substance to the goal that was particularly desired – the promotion of “people-movements” in which a wave of multi-individual, mutually-interdependent conversions take place and a whole segment of the population moves Christward without dislocating its social cohesiveness.

2 Paul’s theology of the Church and her mission is significantly truncated if his extensive references to “the powers” are not included.

Concurrent with this, extensive studies were made of this phenomenon in the Apostolic Era. The biblical data was both extensive and impressive. The Great Commission spoke of disciplining the tribes, castes and families of mankind. The multitudes of Jews, whose coming to Christ is recorded in the early chapters of Acts, were part of a significant people movement that lasted for almost twenty years. Paul's missionary method was largely confined to winning the receptive Gentiles that had earlier forsaken their idols to cluster around Jewish synagogues.

Theologically, this makes sense. If we believe in the Holy Spirit without whose activity no man comes to Christ, and have come to terms with what Scripture teaches of election, we should expect that wherever He sends His witnesses they should expect to find the winnable to be won. Nothing is more encouraging than to be in the midst of a vast conglomerate population and encounter social segments whose *Kairos* has come and who readily respond to the Gospel invitation. Woe to the man who "quenches," "resists" or "grieves" the Spirit of God by failing to gather in the harvest which He has given.

### **F. Its Mission and Ministry ... "... My Church"**

This is the generation in which the laity are coming into their own. The old monarchic concept of the ministry as a profession is fading and it is increasingly being seen that the laity constitute the Church's cutting edge. Church Growth Theology is seeking to grapple with the boast of New Testament Churches that they had a diversity of ministries in order to perform a variety of essential functions.

Although the New Testament does not explicitly affirm that every Christian has a special ministry, each separate congregation takes on the aspect of a priesthood. There were at least a half-dozen continuing ministries (Romans 12; 1 Cor. 12; Eph. 4), which were regarded as necessary for the wholeness of the Body. All gifts were to be exercised in the freedom of the Spirit. "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good" (1 Cor. 12:7). They ranged from the elder-bishop-pastor who ruled the congregation and presided over its worship, to the "lower gifts" of tongues and healing. For the wider ministry of mission they included the apostle, prophet, and evangelist.

Leadership in the Church often reflected the natural order, since this gift is charismatic and not teachable. James, the brother of Jesus, was made a pillar apostle in the Jerusalem Church because the Church respected the natural order of the descent within the Jewish family of

David (Adolf Schlatter). Of all the gifts, the teaching function can be trained. The Church Growth Movement is currently seeking to enlarge its contribution to the training *in situ* of men having this gift, since the teaching ministry is essential to the ongoing of the Christian mission.

## CONCLUSION

One may contend that the above discussion is incomplete. We would agree. Three more issues should be raised. They follow:

- A. How can we resolve the tension that exists between biblical norms for expressing the unity of the Church and the anthropologically defensible validity of a people's desire to become Christians without crossing linguistic, class, or racial barriers?
- B. How can we preserve the positive insights that have been gathered over the years on the rightness of inter-religious dialogue and be true to the elenctic approach to religious encounter described and practiced by the Apostle Paul?
- C. How does Church Growth Theology with its orthodox view of the Bible as Authority come to terms with cultural diversity?

In response, we would state that the first question is answered by Dr. McGavran in his paper: "The Homogeneous Unit in Mission Theory."

The second question is very complex. To answer it adequately demands more space than this paper can provide. From what has already been written, however one can infer the direction of our reply. We are determined not to sacrifice the elenctic in order to achieve the dialogical. Too much is at stake.

The final question is answered in part in the Scriptures themselves. They reveal that the supra-cultural, unchangeable elements of God, disclosure and human response, are to be distinguished from the variables of culture, whether patriarchal, Hebrew or Greek.



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