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## The Glory of God and Church Growth

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## The Glory of God and Church Growth

Gary L. McIntosh

Early on the morning of July 4, 1952, thirty-four-year-old Florence Chadwick waded into the water off Catalina Island and began swimming toward California. Florence had already become the first woman to swim across the English Channel—both directions! Now she was attempting to become the first woman to swim the twenty-one miles to the west across the Catalina Channel.

The distance of the channel posed no difficulty for Florence, as she was more than prepared physically for the challenge. A world-class swimmer, Florence was destined to be a member of the long-distance swimming hall of fame. Yet, this day was to prove difficult due to the heavy fog that hung over the California coast. Like many mornings in California, fog blanketed the coastline as Florence stepped into the water along Catalina Island to begin her historic attempt. Several boats carrying her support team moved along with her as she swam into the channel. Some of her team went along to provide protection from the sharks, which needed to be driven away with rifle shots over the next few hours. Her mother and her trainer rode in one boat to provide encouragement to Florence when the swimming became difficult.

After swimming for nearly fifteen hours in the bone-chilling water, Florence asked to be helped into one of the boats. Physical fatigue was not a problem, but the icy waters had numbed her to the point of desperation. As she peered through her goggles to see the shoreline of California, all she could see was dense fog. On most days in Southern California, the fog lifts between 10:00

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a.m. and noon. For some reason, this day was different, and the fog had not lifted by the time Florence neared the shore. Realizing that Florence was very close to achieving her goal, her mother and her trainer urged her to continue swimming. Fighting on for nearly another hour, Florence continued to look for the California coast, but all she could see was thick fog.

After swimming for fifteen hours and fifty-five minutes, she asked again to be hauled out of the water into a boat. Fearing for her safety, her team agreed to her request and helped her into one of the boats. When the boats arrived on the shore of the California coast, Florence was devastated to learn that she had been only one-half mile from her goal. Later that day a reporter asked her why she had failed in her bid to swim the channel. She reportedly replied, "It was the fog. Look, I'm not excusing myself, but if I could have seen land, I know I could have made it."

Two months later, Florence was back on Catalina Island ready to make a second attempt at swimming the Catalina Channel. Once again the fog covered the channel as she made her way into the water and began her struggle against the elements. Like before, the water was biting cold, and the fog never lifted. But, this day was different. This day Florence succeeded in becoming the first woman to swim the Catalina Channel. She even beat the men's record by two hours. Following her swim, she met with many newspaper reporters. During the questioning, one reporter asked what had been the difference between her first failed attempt and this second victorious one. She commented, "I made it this time because the shore was in my heart."<sup>1</sup>

#### *The Ultimate Goal*

Florence Chadwick's failure in her first attempt to swim the Catalina Channel was not due to the cold water, the dangerous sharks that lurked nearby, nor the twenty-one mile distance. She failed because of the fog. The fog had obscured her view, her thought, and most of all, her heart. In short, she failed because she lost sight of her ultimate goal.

Preparing for a long-distance swim required the setting and accomplishment of numerous small goals. Permission had to be obtained from the proper authorities to attempt the swim. Equipment had to be procured, volunteers recruited, and schedules coordinated. A training timetable had to be arranged that would bring Florence to a peak point of readiness on the day of

attempted crossing of the channel. These and other short-term goals were required, but they all fundamentally aimed toward the accomplishment of one ultimate goal. On July 4, 1952, the ultimate goal for Florence Chadwick was to reach the shore of California. Even though she accomplished many of her smaller goals, she failed in the ultimate one. It was only when Florence was able to keep her ultimate goal clearly in mind and heart that she succeeded.

Achieving biblical church growth requires a similar discipline in keeping the right priority clearly in mind. There are a great number of goals that a church should seek to accomplish: winning the lost, building up the saints, preaching the Word, seeking justice, developing leaders, and many more. But, there is only one ultimate goal: bringing glory to the life-giving God.

#### The Ultimate Goal

Life-giving churches see their ultimate goal as bringing glory to the life-giving God.

Formally stated in 1647 in the Westminster Confession, it is now commonly accepted in the Christian church that “Man’s chief and highest end is to glorify God, and fully to enjoy Him forever.”<sup>2</sup> Giving glory to God (Greek, *doxaso*, from *doxa*) means giving Him credit for who He is, i.e., acknowledging His attributes and unchanging essence. The glory of God is essentially what He actually is and our recognition of that actuality is giving glory to Him. Giving God glory happens in a multitude of ways, e.g., in our thoughts, work, songs, actions, prayers, lifestyles, etc. Basically, whatever we do and say communicates our opinion of God to Him and to others. All we do either brings Him glory or dishonor. As Paul stated to the Corinthians, “Whatever, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31).

The necessity of giving glory to the life-giving God is one of the main themes throughout the Bible. “God Himself is a glorious being. Glory belongs to Him as light and heat belong to the sun.”<sup>3</sup> God works in the lives of His people to bring glory to Himself. As He says regarding Israel’s affliction, “Behold, I have refined you, but not as silver; I have tested you in the furnace of affliction. For My own sake, for My own sake, I will act; For how can My name be profaned? And My glory I will not give to another” (Is 48:10-11). Therefore, His people are to give God glory.

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As David says when giving thanks, "Ascribe to the LORD, O families of the peoples, Ascribe to the LORD glory and strength, Ascribe to the LORD the glory due His name" (1 Chr. 16:28-29). God's people are to give Him glory throughout all time. As even the twenty-four elders attest at the end of the age, "Worthy art Thou, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power; for Thou didst create all things, and because of Thy will they existed and were created" (Rev 4:11). The prime end of all things is the glory of God. It is only as we adopt this as our ultimate priority as individuals and corporately in our churches that we will live and function in complete harmony with the purposes of God.

Even the life-giving Savior's ultimate purpose in coming to earth was to bring glory to His Father. After entering Jerusalem riding on a donkey, the multitudes met Jesus with cries of Hosanna! Shortly after, Jesus spoke to the people and said, "Now My soul has become troubled; and what shall I say, 'Father, save Me from this hour?' But for this purpose I came to this hour. Father, glorify Thy name. There came therefore a voice out of heaven: 'I have both glorified it, and will glorify it again'" (Jn. 12:27-27). Later Jesus predicted that one of His disciples would betray Him. After Judas had left the Lord's Supper, Jesus took the opportunity to explain, "Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in Him" (13:31). Shortly thereafter, Jesus lifted His voice to heaven in prayer, and we listen into the intimate conversation and discover how committed Jesus was to fulfilling His ultimate purpose of bringing glory to God. "Father," Jesus says, "the hour has come; glorify Thy Son, that the Son may glorify Thee....I glorified Thee on earth, having accomplished the work which Thou hast given Me to do. And now, glorify Thou Me together with Thyself, Father, with the glory which I had with Thee before the world was" (Jn. 17:1-5).

The church, of course, must fulfill the ultimate priority of its life-giving Head. Writing to the church in Rome, Paul encourages the believers to bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not just please themselves. Christ is to be our example. Even He did not please Himself, but sought to please His Father. Why is this important in the church? Paul explains his thoughts with these words, "Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus; that with one accord you may with *one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus*

*Christ*" (Ro 15:1-6, emphasis mine). As church members persevere together in loving care to one another, the church with "one voice" brings glory to God.

Works of kindness, such as providing financial support in times of need, also is a way the church brings God glory. Writing to the Corinthians concerning their gracious financial gift to the Macedonian believers, Paul tells them that, "Because of the proof given by this ministry they will glorify God for your obedience to your confession of the gospel of Christ" (2 Cor. 9:13).

In his second letter to the Thessalonians, Paul tells the believers how proud he is of them for their faith in the middle of persecution. Such trials are an indication of God's righteous judgment that will fall on unbelievers as well as believers. God allows the faithful to suffer persecution "in order that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in Him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Thess. 1:11-12).

Even the use of spiritual gifts has as their end the eventual glorification of God. The apostle Peter writes, "As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God . . . so that, in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory and dominion forever and ever" (1 Pet 4:10-11).

Paul's letter to the Ephesians is the clearest expression of the ultimate priority of the church. Beginning in chapter one, Paul declares three times that the work of the Godhead in the church is directly related to God's glory. The Father's work of blessing, choosing, predestinating, and adopting is "to the praise of the glory of His grace" (Eph 1:6). Our redemption through the Son's blood, whereby we receive forgiveness and inheritance, is "to the praise of His glory" (12). We are sealed in Christ with the Holy Spirit as a pledge of our inheritance "to the praise of His glory" (14). Paul then sums up the first half of his letter with these conclusive words: "Now to Him who is able to do exceeding abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever" (Eph 3:20-21).

### *Glorifying God*

How does a church bring glory to God? There are numerous ways this is to be done. We glorify God by worshiping Him, "for we are the true circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God

and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh" (Phil 3:3). Indeed "an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers shall worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers" (John 4:23). As members of the body of Christ, we are to present our bodies as "a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God" as a spiritual act of worship (Rom 12:1). Living a godly life also brings glory to God because we have been chosen to be "holy and blameless before Him" (Eph 1:4; see also Col 1:22).

As living stones in the church, we are to "offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Pet 2:5). Using a similar thought, the writer of Hebrews says, "Through Him then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name" (Heb 13:15). Being thankful brings glory to God, as the psalmist declares, "Whoso offereth the sacrifice of thanksgiving glorifieth me" (Ps 50:23 KJV).

Perhaps the most direct statement on how to glorify God was made by Jesus when He said, "By this is My Father glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples" (John 15:8). Bearing fruit is important to God because "it is of the very essence and outflow of His life."<sup>4</sup> "Wedded with this is the concept that God, the giver of all physical life, is also the source of all spiritual life and fruit."<sup>5</sup> God is a life-giving God, and bearing fruit attests to His divine involvement. In addition, bearing fruit brings a completeness to glorification that began with the Savior. God is glorified in two acts of work: the work of Christ and the work of the believers in bearing fruit. "There is an air of completeness and of certainty about it. The disciples will surely glorify the Father by their continual fruit-bearing."<sup>6</sup>

According to Christ, bearing fruit is a primary way for His disciples to bring God glory. But, what exactly is fruit? There are two dominant possibilities: character and converts. The first possibility is that Christ is referring to the "fruit of the Spirit" listed in Galatians. "But, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (5:22-23). In support of this view is the fact that Christ mentions some of the same words from the fruit of the Spirit list, such as peace (Jn. 14:27), love (15:9), and joy (15:11), in His allegory of the vine. Each of these words, and the others found in the listing of the fruit of the Spirit, are attitudes that should be found in obedient Christians. This is a plausible explanation, and one that

is held by a number of students of the Bible. However, while fruit clearly refers to Christian character traits in Galatians, it does not appear to be what Christ had in mind based on the larger context of John's gospel.

A better explanation for the meaning of "fruit" in John 15 appears to be that it represents new converts or disciples. John's purpose in writing his gospel is to show that Jesus Christ is the life-giving Savior who came to bring eternal life to all who would believe in Him (see Jn. 20:30-31). An illustration of Christ's concern for new converts is seen in his conversation with His disciples after conversing with the woman of Samaria (Jn. 4:1-38). While the Samaritan woman was away in the village, the disciples of Jesus came and "marveled that He had been speaking with a woman" (4:27). "He discerned that their primary interest was in satisfying their own personal, physical needs rather than satisfying the spiritual needs of others. He seized the golden opportunity to share with them His own sense of priority which elevated the Father's interests above all else" (31-34).<sup>7</sup> "My food," Jesus stated, "is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to accomplish His work" (34). The Father's work was Christ's death on a cross, as a provision for the salvation of all people. As Jesus spoke with His disciples, He saw that the Samaritan woman was making her way back with a large crowd from the village. So He used the opportunity to give a living demonstration to His disciples of what He wanted from them. Contrasting the concepts of harvesting grain and harvesting souls, Jesus pointed to the coming crowd and said, "lift up your eyes and look on the fields, that they are white for harvest. Already he who reaps is receiving wages, and is gathering fruit for life eternal" (35-36). The "fruit" Jesus was referring to were the new converts who came through the testimony of the Samaritan woman and Christ's own teaching. A point that is unmistakable from the following verses that report, "And from that city many of the Samaritans believed in Him because of the word of the woman who testified . . . and many more believed because of His word" (39-41, see also Matt 9:35-38).

Another indication that Christ was using the word "fruit" to mean new converts appears later in John 15. Jesus told His disciples, "You did not choose Me, but I chose you, and appointed you, that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask of the Father in My name, He may give to you" (16). While this statement is made in the

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midst of Christ's discourse on the disciples' need to love one another, it seems apparent that He was talking about winning new disciples to Him when He spoke of bearing fruit that should remain. That, of course, was the whole point of choosing and appointing the twelve. Christ did not appoint the twelve just to form a loving band of believers, although their love for each other was certainly important. No, Christ's appointment of the twelve was to disciple the nations (see Matt 28:16-20) which involved making new converts (fruit). In His famous prayer found in John 17, Jesus mentions His commission of the twelve disciples when He prays, "As Thou didst send Me into the world, I also sent them into the world" (17:18). Then, thinking ahead to the people who would be converted because of the disciples' obedience to His commission, He adds, "I do not ask in behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word" (20). John records the disciples' commission following the resurrection of Christ in chapter 20 verse 21, "Peace be with you; as the Father has sent Me, I also send you." Reading further in chapter 15 of John, we see that the role of the Holy Spirit in empowering the witness of the twelve is expounded, "When the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father . . . He will bear witness of Me, and you will bear witness also" (26-27). Why did Christ select and appoint His disciples? Why did He send the Holy Spirit to empower them? To win new converts to Christ, converts that would remain His followers.

Within the gospel of John it seems fairly clear that "fruit" means new converts. This usage of the word "fruit" also has support in other New Testament books. For example, the apostle Paul wrote to the Romans, "And I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that often I have planned to come to you . . . in order that I might obtain some fruit among you also, even as among the rest of the Gentiles" (1:13). At first glance, it may appear that Paul is talking about spiritual fruit, but a continued reading of the chapter points out that he is talking about converts. In verses 15 and 16 Paul explains, "Thus, for my part, I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome. For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God, for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek."

It is likely that Paul was thinking of new converts when he spoke of the "first fruits of Achaia" (1 Cor. 16:15). With his vast knowledge of the Old Testament Scriptures, no doubt Paul had

in mind Leviticus 23:10 that instructs the people of Israel, "When you enter the land which I am going to give to you and reap its harvest, then you shall bring in the sheaf of the first fruits of your harvest to the priest." The people of Israel were to give the Lord the first part of the harvest, the first fruits, as a token of the full harvest yet to come. By saying the "first fruits of Achaia," Paul meant they were the first converts of that region, and more converts were to come!

Christ came to glorify God the Father by dying on the Cross so that many people would be saved through His name. The image of the Lord as the living vine and the church (believers) as the branches is a perfect picture of the necessity of making countable disciples as an act of bringing glory to God.

There is one more point that needs to be made, however. "Fruitfulness appears in obedience, which is a sure mark of the believer as disobedience is a mark of the unbeliever."<sup>8</sup> We are reminded in John 15 that fruit bearing comes from God alone, "for apart from Me you can do nothing" (5) and "the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine" (4). "He who abides in Me," Jesus declares, "and I in him, he bears much fruit" (5). Bearing fruit requires that each of us abide in Christ. What it means to abide is explained in verse 10: "If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love," Christ says. The word "abide" alludes to being obedient and is repeated by the apostle John in another book in a similar context when he writes, "And this is His commandment, that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, just as He commanded us" [see Jn. 15:12-17]. "And the one who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him" (1 Jn. 3:23-24). Abiding is a life-long journey of getting to know God, His Word, and learning to walk in obedience to all His commands.<sup>9</sup> However, in the context of John 15, it seems likely that the main focus of abiding is directed toward obedience to the Lord's commission to be witnesses (Acts 1:8) and to make disciples (Matt 18:16-20). Those who are obedient will "prove to be [Christ's] disciples" by bearing much fruit.

The ultimate priority of the church is not its growth, *per se*, but the glory of God. Biblical church growth is similar to happiness. We never find happiness by searching for it. Happiness is only discovered as a by-product of some other endeavor. As we commit ourselves to our families, work, and a great purpose in life, happiness finds us. Our priority must always be to bring

glory to our life-giving God. It is as we invest our lives, energies, and pursuits of this ultimate goal that biblical church growth will come to our churches as a by-product of our investment. Bringing glory to God, however, is not a nebulous idea that frees us to live a life of limited action, but one that involves specific expectations. It is expected that as members of Christ's body we will obediently follow Christ by worshiping Him, growing in our personal character, offering Him praise, and living holy and blameless lives. Even more specifically, it means we are to be obedient to Christ's command to make disciples, bearing fruit that will remain.

*Prayer*

Grant, we beseech You, to each of us Your special blessing as we study how to extend the church, how to multiply congregations, how to increase units of the redeemed, units of peace and justice in all peoples, all tribes, all castes, all classes of society that praise and thanksgiving to Your glory may resound from every city and hamlet throughout the earth. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

—Donald A. McGavran<sup>10</sup>

Writer

McIntosh, Gary L., Address: Talbot School of Theology, 13800 Biola Ave., La Mirada, CA 90639. Title: Professor of Christian Ministry & Leadership. Web site: *www.mcintoshcgn.com* Gary earned a B.A. degree in Biblical Studies (1970), a M.Div. in Pastoral Studies (1975), and a D.Min. in Church Growth Studies (1982). He is the author or coauthor of eleven books. This article is excerpted from his forthcoming book with Baker Books scheduled for release in Spring 2003. Tentatively titled, *Biblical Church Growth*, the book will present a biblical and theological view of church growth principles.

NOTES

1. Adapted from "Never Lose Sight of Your Goals," *Words for All The Glory of God and the Church* 73 *Journal of the American Society for Church Growth*, Spring 2002 Occasions (Paramus, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1988), 188.

2. Larger Catechism, Q. 1.

3. Lewis Sperry Chafer. *Systematic Theology* (Dallas: Dallas Semi-

nary Press, 1948), 172.

4. James E. Rosscup. *Abiding in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973), 64.

5. Rosscup, 67.

6. Leon Morris. *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971), 672.

7. Rosscup, 84.

8. Merrill C. Tenney. *John: The Gospel of Belief* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 228.

9. The concept of “abide” is more complex than what is presented in this chapter. For brevity, I have used the basic understanding of the idea. For a full discussion of the word, it is recommended that the reader see Rosscup’s *Abiding in Christ*, Chapter 11: “Things involved in abiding.”

10. Donald A. McGavran. Audio tape collection 178, T32 – January 3, 1979 (Wheaton: Billy Graham Center Archives).