

WHY ARE WE HERE? HARVEST THEOLOGY, SEARCH THEOLOGY, AND CHRIST'S VISION FOR REDEMPTION

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Abstract

Varying voices cry out for attention concerning how churches should engage the culture and the world with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In this article, attention will be given to understanding what Donald McGavran called Harvest Theology and Search Theology, as well as the biblical foundations for theology and authority. This work also describes the key role that vision plays in church transformation and further explores how Search Theology and Harvest Theology measure up to Christ's vision for ministry and to the Great Commission. The article concludes with a plea to pastors and congregations urging them to fulfill Christ's vision for ministry.

WHY ARE WE HERE?

A number of years ago, a pastor traveled to the state mental hospital to preach to those housed there. He began his message with a rhetorical question, "Why are we here? Why are we here?" Before he had the opportunity to proceed, a tiny voice from the back of the room squeaked out an answer, "Because we ain't all there." That pretty well ended the meeting!

Church leaders also need to ask that question. “Why are we here? Why does the church of Jesus Christ exist?” Shortly after becoming an interim pastor of a declining church, I asked the church body, “Why does this church exist? What is its purpose?” The chair of the church board, one who was well schooled in the Scriptures, responded, “We don’t have a clue. Can you help us out?” I responded, “There’s an outside chance.” Together, we began to rediscover the purpose of this church.

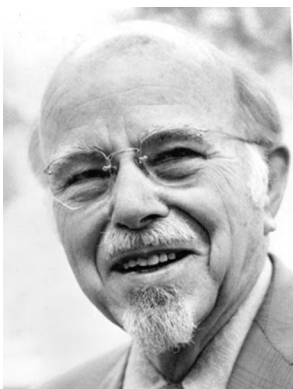
By walking through a five-step process in this article, I hope to answer the question, “Why are we here?” First, my desire is that we gain a basic understanding of Harvest Theology and Search Theology as understood by Donald McGavran. Second, I would like to direct us to the biblical foundation of our theology and authority. Third, regardless of our theological perspective, churches must be driven by vision and align themselves with Christ’s vision for ministry. Fourth, in light of our discoveries in the vision and mission, we want to probe more deeply into our understanding of the biblical basis for Harvest Theology and Search Theology. Fifth, we desire to apply the truths of this article to our personal and corporate churches lives.

HARVEST THEOLOGY AND SEARCH THEOLOGY

Introduction to Donald McGavran

The theme of the 2014 Great Commission Research Network Conference focused on Donald McGavran’s view of “Harvest Theology” versus his view of “Search Theology.” The distinction between Harvest Theology and Search Theology is the focus of this article. As we begin this section, I would like to include a couple of photos relating to Donald McGavran. The first is an online photo of Dr. McGavran.¹

Donald McGavran
December 15, 1897–July 10, 1990



¹ <https://www.google.com/search?q=donald+McGavran&espv=2&biw=1366&bih=624&tbm=isch&tbo=u&source=univ&sa=X&ei=PONGVMzMFZGoyASNu4DYCA&>

The second is a photo of Dr. Gary McIntosh at the McGavran family cemetery plot and Donald McGavran’s “Temporary Resting Place,” Frost Cemetery, Columbiana County, Ohio.



Dr. Gary McIntosh at Donald McGavran’s “Temporary Resting place.” Note the inscription on the headstone, *Mathetesate panta ta ethne*—the Greek transliteration of Matthew 28:19, “Make disciples of all nations.”

One thing is certain—Donald McGavran’s passion was making disciples. That was the impetus and yearning of his life. In his book, *Understanding Church Growth*,² McGavran raised the issue of “Search Theology” versus “Harvest Theology.” I admit, I had to dust off my copy, which I purchased during my seminary days in the early 1980s, to refresh myself on the subtleties of both Harvest Theology and Search Theology.

The following paragraph outlines McGavran’s pilgrimage as a missiologist. The events described molded him as a man and shaped his theology of missions. We need to read this paragraph with the understanding that the events depicted in the article all took place during the Fundamentalist/Modernist controversies of the early twentieth century.

In the formative years of his childhood, mission was held to be carrying out the Great Commission, winning the world for Christ, and saving lost humanity. This was the view McGavran held when he returned to the United States for his higher education. While attending Yale Divinity School, McGavran was introduced to the teachings of the influential Christian professor H. Richard Niebuhr. According to McGavran, Niebuhr “used to say that mission was

² Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, revised ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980).

everything the church does outside its four walls. It was philanthropy, education, medicine, famine relief, evangelism, and world friendship.” McGavran espoused this liberal view of mission when he went to the mission field in 1923. As he became involved in education, social work, and evangelism in the real world of India, however, he gradually reverted to the classical view that mission was making disciples of Jesus Christ. Commenting on this change he wrote, “As my convictions about mission and church growth were being molded in the 1930s and ‘40s, they ran headlong into the thrust that mission is doing many good things in addition to evangelism. I could not accept this way of thinking about missions. These good deeds must, of course, be done, and Christians will do them. I myself was doing many of them. But they must never replace the essential task of mission, discipling the peoples of earth.”³

The passion to make disciples clearly drove Donald McGavran. However, he was concerned about missiologists’ movement away from Harvest Theology toward Search Theology. In order to understand these terms, let us define them.

Harvest Theology

Harvest Theology concerns itself with making disciples, not simply sowing gospel seed. Perhaps Harvest Theology can best be described by McGavran’s own words as he describes mission as, “Enterprise devoted to proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ, and to persuading men to become His disciples and dependable members of His church.”⁴ I believe his definition of mission defines his Harvest Theology. Therefore, the mission is not just simply proclaiming the Gospel or playing Christian cowboys where we lasso people with the Gospel, throw them to the ground, put Jesus’ brand on them, and then turn them loose. Harvest Theology requires the church to produce fully developed followers of Jesus Christ—“disciples and dependable members of His church.”

Search Theology

Search Theology differs from Harvest Theology in the following way:

Yet at this critical time many Christians are firmly committed to a theology of seed sowing, which might also be called a theology of search . . . It maintains that in Christian mission the essential thing is not the finding, but going everywhere and preaching the gospel—for which there is some excellent biblical authority.⁵

³ Donald A. McGavran, “My Pilgrimage in Mission,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 10 (2) (1986): 53–57.

⁴ McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 26.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 27.

McGavran argued that a shift towards Search Theology occurred because of the following four reasons outlined and summarized below:

1. Indifference toward the Gospel at home (in the U.S.) and hostility abroad.
2. Increasing relativism.
3. The vast disparity in wealth between the West and Afericasia [McGavran's term for Africa, Asia and Latin America].
4. The small growth in church membership. This shift demanded a change in terminology in order to justify the church's existence.⁶

Thus, according to McGavran, changing culture shifted the church's view of mission.

THE FOUNDATION FOR AUTHORITY

That brings us to the question—how are we to practice mission today? Certainly, North America, Western Europe, the former Soviet Union, Australia, and New Zealand desperately need spiritual transformation. It is incumbent upon us not to look to the latest fad or the newest tactic used by successful churches that are reaching people for Christ (though we can learn much from them). Rather, we must return to our biblical roots as we examine this question. As we examine the question of Search versus Harvest, I would like to share two quotes that point us back to Word of God, the ultimate source of truth.

In reference to the propensity of theologians to quote the church fathers, Charles Haddon Spurgeon said, "It's time to stop quoting the Fathers and begin listening to the Grandfathers (the Apostles)!"⁷ In other words, the fathers are not the source of spiritual authority—the apostles are!

As Martin Luther wrestled for the truth, he said, "I ask for Scriptures and Eck offers me the Fathers. I ask for the sun and he shows me his lanterns. I ask where is your Scripture proof? And he adduces Ambrose and Cyril . . . with all due respect, to the Fathers I prefer the authority of Scriptures."⁸ This statement reflects Luther's theology, *Sola Scriptura*, a return to the authority of the Scriptures alone—a theology of biblical authority that permeated the Reformation.

⁶ Ibid., 26–28. This is a summary of the four reasons McGavran saw for the shift away from Harvest Theology. It ought to be noted in our day that relativism is taking the West by storm, hostility to the gospel has taken up residence in North America, and wealth is shifting toward Asia. It appears to this author that in America, many are doing neither Search nor Harvest Theology. Believers are often more concerned about self-preservation, not the proclamation of the gospel!

⁷ Earl D. Radmacher, *What the Church is All About* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1978), 27.

⁸ Ibid., 27.

In order to explore the question of Search versus Harvest, I would like us to return to our roots. We ought to be driven, not by tradition, not by expediency, but by the Author and Finisher of our faith!

MINISTRY, VISION, AND CHRIST'S VISION FOR MINISTRY

I would also like us to submit that true transformation of a declining church must be driven by vision. In order to do that, I would like to demonstrate that vision drove the transformational leaders, including our Savior, in Scripture. Therefore, the key to understanding these transformational leaders requires that we grasp the visions that drove them.

Visionary Leadership from the Pages of Scripture

I would like us to note that every transformational leader that I have studied in the Word of God could be characterized as a visionary leader. The key to remember is this—vision drove each of these leaders to accomplish the work of God. Here are a few examples of the vision that moved the ancient heroes of the faith to action.

- Moses' vision was to take a nation of Hebrews and move them from the slavery of Egypt to the freedom of the Promised Land. Note the passion in Moses' words in Deuteronomy 8:7–10.⁹
- For the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, that flow out of valleys and hills; a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive oil and honey; a land in which you will eat bread without scarcity, in which you will lack nothing; a land whose stones are iron and out of whose hills you can dig copper. When you have eaten and are full, then you shall bless the LORD your God for the good land which He has given you.

After forty years in the wilderness, do you not suppose that Moses' portrait of the Promised Land would excite the Israelites? That is vision! In the case of Moses, the transformation required two stages: 1) the initial deliverance from Egypt by the hand of Moses and 2) the completion of the process under the leadership of Joshua, Moses' successor.

- The scars of Hezekiah's past (his father Ahaz caused his siblings to pass through the fire; they were offered as child sacrifices to Baal) drove him powerfully and emotionally (1) to separate the nation from the reprehensible deeds of his father and (2) to return Israel to spiritual fruitfulness through restored worship and consecration to the Lord God of Israel. His vision produced a national rebirth of Judah.

⁹ Scripture quotations are from the New King James Version. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

- Elijah’s vision was to destroy Baal worship and restore the nation to the worship of YHWH, the God of Israel. Elijah literally brought Israel to her knees!
- Nehemiah’s vision took place in two stages. Phase 1—a restored city accompanied by restored dignity for its Jewish inhabitants; Phase 2—a restored people serving the Lord and walking according to the Law of Moses.
- The apostle Paul’s vision reflects his understanding of Christ’s vision. Without tracing the development of his vision, I believe you will see how well this statement fits with the apostle’s ministry. “To glorify God by reaching a growing number of unreached people groups with the gospel through (1) preaching the gospel, (2) planting churches, and (3) developing an ever-expanding leadership base who would in turn (1) preach the gospel, (2) plant churches, and (3) develop an ever-expanding leadership base! And so it continues.”¹⁰ What a worthy challenge for us living in the 21st Century. Preach, plant, develop leaders, and then do it all over again and again and again.¹¹

The apostle Paul epitomizes both the search and the harvest. He searched, and when he found, he produced reproducing disciples.

Christ’s Vision for Ministry

“It is obvious that the Lord Jesus Christ is the supreme Agent of Transformation for all time. He changes individuals, churches, leaders, kings, and nations. His ultimate triumph over sin and death was achieved at the cross and through his subsequent resurrection and ascension. Listed below are a few passages that hint at his purpose, mission, and vision.”¹²

To Seek and to Save the Lost—Luke 19:1–10. This passage tells us that Jesus invited himself to lodge at Zacchaeus’ home. His action infuriated the religious elite, for Zacchaeus was a “sinner,” untouchable by their standards. Jesus responded to them, “The Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost.” In so doing, Jesus more than hinted at his vision for ministry. He desired to seek the lost regardless of their heritage or standing in the community.

One of the problems with our churches is a prevailing attitude of entitlement. Many have the same attitudes towards individuals as the religious elite of Jesus’ day. Here is a modern day example. The location is outside the United States, lest we become too convicted by our own darkened hearts! In 2009, I traveled to Vladivostok in the Russian Far East. (Vladivostok sits in eastern Asia where Russia, China, and Korea join geographically.) I was

¹⁰ Aubrey Malphurs and Gordon E. Penfold, *Re:Vision—The Key to Transforming Your Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014), 45.11

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 36–45. These are summary statements concerning vision from *Re:Vision*.

¹² *Ibid.*, 46.

sitting in a Chinese restaurant with my host for the trip. He made a startling statement. “Our biggest problem in Vladivostok is the population of illegal Chinese immigrants.” I thought to myself, “I just left this party in the United States, only the issue was not the Chinese!” I looked Yuri in the eyes and asked, “How many Chinese churches have you planted?” The silence was deafening. I continued, “Do you suppose that God has brought these Chinese people to Vladivostok in order for them to hear the Gospel, come to Christ, and return to their homeland as missionaries?”

All too often, we are blinded by the prejudices and preferences of our host culture rather than by Christ’s vision for ministry. He came to seek and to save the lost, including those who are not like us!

To Serve and Give His Life a Ransom for Many—Mark 10:45. This passage unveils a second piece to Christ’s vision for ministry. “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.” In the immediate context, the disciples are jockeying for position in the coming kingdom. Jesus informs them that it is not about position, but servanthood! Servanthood must characterize our ministry as it did Christ’s ministry. Note that servanthood is also tied with Christ’s salvific mission. Ministry is not just about serving but reaching people with the Gospel. Here is an illustration of a church that did well at serving but missed the saving proclamation of the Gospel!

In 2003, I participated in my first church consultation. The church had managed to whittle itself down from 130 to 30 in worship attendance over a ten-year period. One of the church’s ministries named the Clothing Exchange existed to allow people to come and exchange worn out items for newer, nicer ones. The church dedicated 8,500 square feet of space to this ministry. Bob Humphrey, founder of Fresh Start, inquired, “How many people have come to Christ in the past ten years through the Clothing Exchange?” The director of that ministry said, “Zero.” I will never forget Bob’s response, “Then all you are doing is helping people look good on their way to hell!” One could cut the silence with a knife.

Jesus’ vision was not just to serve people, but also to ultimately save them. Our service must be coupled with vision, a vision to see lost people connected with Jesus Christ their Savior. Otherwise, we are simply helping people look good on their way to hell!

To Have an Attitude of Selflessness—Philippians 2:5–8. Note also Christ’s selfless attitude.

Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.

The Lord could have claimed great things for himself. He could have simply destroyed his opponents. He chose rather to humble himself in order to accomplish His vision for ministry.

During the question and answer portion following my presentation at this Great Commission Research Network in Fort Worth, one of the students asked, “In your estimation, what three issues most hinder effective ministry in local churches?” I responded, “Church bullies, selfishness, and ultimately, a failure to allow Christ to be Lord over his own church. Revelation 3:20 shows us that our Savior is on the outside of his own body seeking entrance. Until churches allow Christ to rule, there will be no effective ministry.” Selfishness, perhaps more than any other trait, characterizes the church in America. The ultimate act of selfishness is usurping Christ’s rightful place as Head of the church. This mindset is diametrically opposed to Christ’s selfless attitude.

To Bring an Innumerable Multitude to Heaven—Hebrews 2:10 and Revelation 7:9. Christ’s objective is to bring “many sons to glory.” Christ envisioned multitudes of the redeemed journeying with him to heaven. Revelation 7:9 provides a prophetic portrait of the results of His vision. “After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.” Christ’s vision is not the salvation of a few, but of a vast multitude that no human can number!

The following illustration displays the attitude believers ought to exhibit in their department with lost people. This came by way of the author’s brother, Rev. J. L. Penfold.

In the early 1970s, there were three women heads of state—Golda Meir of Israel, Indira Gandhi of India, and Mrs. Bendra-Nike of Ceylon, now known as Sri Lanka. Their people elected the first two. Mrs. Bendra-Nike became Prime Minister of Ceylon when her husband was shot and killed in cold blood by, of all people, a Buddhist monk. The monk was caught red handed, tried, and sentenced to death. (Ceylon is the most Buddhist of all nations per capita.) However, a Christian pastor who was also a friend of the Prime Minister went to see the monk in his death cell.

The Christian asked the monk how he was doing. He said, “I feel terrible. I have acted counter to all I have taught.” Buddhism teaches oneness with nature and with one another.

To lock in his witness, the pastor asked if Buddhism was helping the monk. He said, “No! Buddhism only condemns me.” Then the Christian asked if he would like to meet One who could forgive. The monk said, “There is no such person.”

“Ah, but there is,” said the pastor. He told the Buddhist of God’s raising up his chosen with whom he established his covenant.

However, he added that Israel was not to be an end in themselves. In the fullness of time, One was coming who would be the Savior of the world. He told him of Christ's death on the cross for the sins of the world, including yours and mine.

The monk asked, "Can he forgive murder?"

"Yes."

"Even murder of the Prime Minister?"

"Yes."

Then the monk asked the *a priori* question, "Can you forgive me? The Prime Minister was your friend. I murdered not just the Prime Minister but your friend."

The Christian said, "My Lord forgave you from the cross. I can do no less. Now is there any reason for you to not seek His forgiveness? To become one of His followers?"

"No," said the monk.

Then, they knelt for prayer, a Buddhist monk and a Christian pastor. Two Christians rose from prayer. I have wondered if the new birth ever took place in conditions much more unusual—Ceylon, the most Buddhist of countries, and a monk's death cell. It happened, though.

The pastor left a Bible with the monk and told him to particularly read the four gospels. The new Christian read about baptism and asked to be baptized. The pastor officiated at his baptism. The monk began to tell his story and witness to his faith. The day of his execution, the headline was the same in every newspaper in Ceylon, "Buddhist Priest Dies as Christian Because Jesus Forgives; Buddhism Does Not."

How many monks make up our Zacchaeus list? As a church, we must once again recapture Christ's vision for ministry to reach the unreachable, the untouchable, and the outcast. The Gospel must become the Gospel for all, not just for people "like us." If we do, then perhaps God will once again unveil his favor upon the church in America.

The Eternal Consequences of Christ Vision—Philippians 2:9–11, Revelation 5:13. These two passages illustrate the eternal consequences of Christ's completed vision. Both speak of all creation giving praise to our Sovereign King.

Therefore, God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Philippians 2:9–11

And every creature which is in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them, I heard saying: "Blessing and honor and glory and power be to Him who sits on the throne, And to the Lamb, forever and ever!" Revelation 5:13

The results of Christ's work are stunning. Every knee will bow and confess, and every creature will praise Christ. That means that not only the redeemed but every creature, every person, will also confess and praise the triune God forever!

Christ's Vision for Ministry. Though words can never adequately comprehend him and his work, we believe the following statement captures the essence of the vision of our Lord Jesus Christ on his mission of redemption. "**His vision was, in accordance with his covenants and promises, to bring an innumerable company of believers to glory (Heb 2:10, Rev 9:7) from every nation, tribe, people and language through His finished work, resulting in the thunderous ovations of praise, honor, and glory due the Triune God from all creation for all eternity!** We can say, with the hymn writer, 'Hallelujah, what a Savior!'"¹³

We must recognize Christ's vision and adapt it to our own ministry context. The following incident spoke volumes to me in my early days of full-time ministry.

Frustration stalked me as a young pastor on Memorial Day weekends. I noticed that people stayed away from church in droves. However, something happened Memorial Day weekend in 1984 that proved to be an eye-opening time in my life. I walked into the auditorium my first Memorial Day weekend in my second pastorate, and there were more people in the pews than any Sunday during the year. I was shocked. It turns out, that community loved class reunions, and those reunions took place Memorial Day weekend. Year after year, our largest services normally fell on that weekend. We hosted more guests than regulars that Sunday. It finally dawned on me that our church was a "missionary sending church." That is, young people came to Christ in the church, grew, developed in the faith, and then moved on to other churches across the country. Nearly all the people who attended from out of town Memorial Day weekend had significant responsibilities in their own churches. I finally realized that the ministry of our church extended far beyond our average Sunday crowd. Over the years, the church trained and sent hundreds of people who, in turn, make a difference for Christ in the communities where they resided. So as a church, we began

¹³ Ibid., 47.

to re-envision our ministry. It stretched from here to eternity. We intentionally concentrated on developing the next generation of leaders regardless of whether they stayed in town or moved to another part of the country or the world. The church never grew large (we resided in a small, shrinking community), but the ministry influence continues to this day all around the country while stretching into eternity. This, of course, is Christ's vision for ministry. In order to revision, we must first see Christ's vision clearly.¹⁴

Allow yourself to focus on the big picture. Let your vision stretch from here to eternity. Do not concern yourself with building your little fiefdom, your little kingdom. Join the King in building his Kingdom!

How do we respond to Christ's vision for ministry and Paul's adaptation of Christ's vision? It is quite simple. JOIN HIM! SURRENDER ALL YOUR PREFERENCES, YOUR WILL, AND YOUR COMFORT TO HIM, FOR HIM, AND FOR HIS VISION. You will never regret it!

That now brings us back full circle. How does his vision affect the question of Harvest or Search Theology?

A DEEPER UNDERSTANDING OF HARVEST THEOLOGY AND

SEARCH THEOLOGY

Should we involve ourselves in Harvest Theology or Search Theology? I would answer with a resounding, "Yes!" We should involve ourselves in both. Consider the account of the Gadarene demoniac in Luke 8:26-40, which supports both Search and Harvest Theology. As you recall, this demon-possessed man was uncontrollable. Public officials tried repeatedly and unsuccessfully to apprehend him. Jesus arrived on the scene, cast out the legion of demons into the pigs, and the demons destroyed about 2,000 pigs. If you will indulge me a bit, this was the beginning of deviled ham. There was a run on the stock market and on the Chicago Board of Trade—pork bellies took a dive!

What happened next was remarkable. The people of the region asked Jesus to leave. They were not receptive to the Gospel. According to Harvest Theology, Jesus should have shaken the dust off his feet, abandoned them, and let them stew in their own rebellion. However, in this case, Jesus worked outside his normal mode of operation. Rather than commanding the demoniac to "follow Me," he asked his new follower to, "'Return to your own house, and tell what great things God has done for you.' And he went his way and proclaimed throughout the whole city what great things Jesus had done for him" (Luke 8:39).

¹⁴ Ibid., 47.

Initially, the Gadarenes resisted the Gospel. Jesus left the cured man behind as a witness to his fellow citizens. This is an example of Search Theology. However, when Christ later returned to this same region, “the multitude welcomed Him, for they were *all awaiting Him*” (emphasis by the author) (Luke 8:40). The testimony of the formerly demon-possessed man had an enormous effect on the populace. This is Harvest Theology in action. Christ made provision to preach both to the resistant (Search Theology) and to responsive people (Harvest Theology). We must do the same.

Here is a brief list of passages that speak to both Harvest and Search Theology.

| Harvest Theology | Search Theology |
|---|---|
| Matthew 9:37–38 (Pray the Lord of the harvest) | Mark 16:15 (Preach the Gospel to every creature) |
| Matthew 28:18–20 (Make disciples of all nations) | Acts 1:8 (Witnesses to Jerusalem, Judea-Samaria, and the uttermost part of the earth) |
| Mark 10:14 (Shake the dust off your feet) | Acts 8:4 (They went everywhere preaching the Gospel) |
| Acts 13:51 (Shake the dust off your feet) | Luke 15 (Parable of the searching shepherd, the searching woman, and the searching father) |

This is an abbreviated list. Many other passages could be added on both sides of the equation. Once again, we see that we must be involved in both Harvest and Search Theology.

McGavran advocated Harvest Theology. He focused on making disciples. He was not content to just make converts, but “to persuading men to become His disciples and dependable members of His Church.”¹⁵ He also recognized biblical imperative for Search Theology. He clearly states, “. . . many Christians are firmly committed to a theology of seed sowing, which might be called a theology of search. It arose in the era of missions just ending. It maintains that in Christian mission, the essential thing is not the

¹⁵ McGavran, 26.

finding, but *going everywhere and preaching the gospel—for which there is some excellent biblical authority*¹⁶ (emphasis by the author).

Dr. Charles Van Engen, while teaching with Dr. Gary McIntosh in my Doctor of Ministry cohort at Talbot Seminary, emphasized the importance of both Search and Harvest Theology. “For years missionaries tried with little success to penetrate Mexico’s interior. Nevertheless, mission teams repeatedly crossed the border to carry out missionary activities to the border towns and villages. After many years of diligent work, the gospel began to make inroads into Mexican society. Today, after many years of effort, the ministry of the gospel is flourishing in Mexico.”¹⁷ This practice constituted Search Theology that eventually led to the harvest.

APPLYING THE TRUTH TO OUR GENERATION

Many of our churches and church leaders are idling in neutral. They promote neither Harvest nor Search Theology. Often churches focus on doing good deeds (and good deeds are necessary and needed). However, doing good deeds without proclamation of the Gospel is incomplete. What must be done to change the spiritual climate in our churches? I would like to suggest a two-fold plan. The first involves pastors and the second the congregations of Jesus Christ.

Pastors

Pastors can no longer be people pleasers, placating the crowds and patronizing the multitudes. Pastors must reclaim the heart described by the apostle Paul in 1 Thessalonians 2:4, “But as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, even so we speak, *not as pleasing men, but God who tests our hearts*” (emphasis mine). We, as pastors, must serve Christ first, our congregations second. It is a difficult thing to do the hard things of ministry, but that is exactly what Christ demands. Pastors must recognize that they are accountable to Christ (Hebrews 13:7, 17, Revelation 2-3). Until pastors begin to lead, churches will continue to flounder.

Pastors must be

- Leaders with conviction
- Visionary
- Wholly surrendered to God

John Wesley recognized this dire need when he said, “Give me one hundred preachers who fear nothing but sin, and desire nothing but God, and I care

¹⁶ Ibid., 27

¹⁷ Dr. Chuck Van Engen in Dr. Gary McIntosh’s Doctor of Ministry Cohort, *Growing and Multiplying Churches in North America*, Biola, Talbot School of Theology, La Mirada, CA, January 2008.

not a straw whether they be clergymen or laymen; such alone will shake the gates of hell . . .”

Congregations

Congregations must once again adapt a Pauline vision of glorifying God by reaching a growing number of unreached people groups with the Gospel through (1) preaching the Gospel, (2) planting churches, and (3) developing an ever-expanding leadership base who would in turn (1) preach the Gospel, (2) plant churches, and (3) develop an ever-expanding leadership base! As we do so, the church will reclaim our rich heritage of searching, finding, and discipling those who come to faith in Christ.

SUMMARY

Our Lord Jesus Christ has appointed us to preach the Gospel to those who have not heard and to those who have heard and not believed (Search Theology), to plant churches (Harvest Theology), and develop an ever-expanding leadership base (Harvest Theology) who produce fully devoted disciples (Harvest Theology) who will preach, plant, and produce leaders who in turn will preach, plant, produce . . . and so it continues. If we do this, the church will expand, disciples will be produced, and God will be greatly glorified and magnified. Ultimately, all creation will rock heaven with unfettered praise to our God and our King for all eternity. To God be the glory, great things He has done!

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About the Author

Gordon came to Christ in 1969 while attending Colorado State University. He planned to become a consulting engineer. God had other plans. Gordon began pastoral ministry in 1980. He has pastored four churches and completed one intentional interim ministry. He serves as director of Fresh Start Ministries engaging in church consulting and leadership development in the U.S., Eastern Europe, and Asia. Gordon graduated from Colorado State (B.S. and M.S. in Civil Engineering), from Dallas Seminary (Th.M), and from Biola (D.Min). He is co-author of *Re:VISION—The Key to Transforming Your Church*. He and his wife Beth have three children and three grandchildren. He may be reached at gordonpnfld@gmail.com.