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## History Revisited: Learning from Charles H. Spurgeon's Commitment to Conversion Growth

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O'Neal: History Revisited: Learning from Charles H. Spurgeon's Commitment

	<i>Dominant Cultured Model</i>	<i>Multicultural Model</i>	<i>Black Contextualized</i>
Provides a safe environment that esteems members as equals and enables them to contribute to their culture and society.	May provide a safe cultural environment that esteems Black members. Without intentionality and partnerships, it is limited in its ability to contribute to the Black community.	May provide a safe cultural environment that esteems Black members. Without intentionality and partnerships, it is limited in its ability to contribute to the Black community.	This model most naturally esteems the culture of its Black members and is best suited to contribute to the Black community and speak out to society as a whole from a Black cultural perspective.

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**HISTORY REVISITED: LEARNING FROM CHARLES H.  
SPURGEON'S COMMITMENT TO CONVERSION GROWTH**

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T. Michael O'Neal, Jr.

**abstract**

Donald McGavran and Peter Wagner, the early leaders of the Church Growth Movement (CGM), longed to see conversion growth as the primary source of church growth. Yet one of the common criticisms of church growth today is its lack of emphasis on conversion growth. This article discusses this criticism and argues that the church can learn from Charles H. Spurgeon's commitment to conversion growth, calling church growth back to its theological and missiological roots.

A church-centered emphasis on effective evangelism was at the heart of the Church Growth Movement (CGM) and its founders. The term *church growth* is a term that Donald McGavran introduced in the 1950s. He preferred to use this term because he believed many missionaries in his day misunderstood biblical evangelism. Sadly, many of these missionaries penetrated society with their good deeds, but few concentrated on discipling the lost peoples of the world (Matt 28:18–20).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Donald A. McGavran, *Effective Evangelism: A Theological Mandate* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1988), 64–68.

theological issue. Wagner explains thus:

The *theological issue* suggests that the central purpose of missions was to be seen as God's will that lost men and women be found, reconciled to himself, and brought into responsible membership in Christian churches. Evangelism was seen not just as proclaiming the gospel whether or not something happened, but as making disciples for the Master.<sup>2</sup>

McGavran believed that God's overriding desire is to see the redemption of lost men and women.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, he concluded that the church's primary type of growth should not be biological or transfer growth. These types will never win the lost peoples of this world or fulfill the Great Commission. As McGavran wrote, "Too often ministers and lay leaders and professors in theological schools, as well, limit their expectations to growth from biological or transfer sources. These are important. Nevertheless, until substantial conversion growth as defined above occurs, the astronomical numbers of the unreached remain very largely unreached."<sup>4</sup> Church growth, then, commands a commitment to soul winning. McGavran said the following:

Church growth depends on winning converts. Churches grow from nothing but converts—people who believe on Jesus Christ intensely enough to break with their past sins and cleave to Him as Lord and Saviour. . . . Church growth occurs more readily where churchmen believe that it makes an eternal difference whether one is a Christian or not and whether one's community is Christian or not.<sup>5</sup>

Wagner made the same theological argument. In the early years of the movement, the CGM addressed biological and transfer growth, but it was most concerned with the kind of growth that produces born-again citizens in the kingdom of God. Wagner stated, "The major burden of the Church Growth Movement has been to assist new conversion growth, the kind of church growth that most nearly parallels true kingdom growth."<sup>6</sup> Behind every church growth statistic, Wagner insisted, someone should check to see if true conversion growth is taking place. Only this kind of growth prevents lukewarm churches and keeps healthy churches growing.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Wagner wrote these words in the preface of Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., rev. and ed. C. Peter Wagner (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1990), ix. Italics in original.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>4</sup> McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 43–44. McGavran defined conversion growth as the type of growth which "results from winning the lost" (44).

<sup>5</sup> Donald A. McGavran, *How Churches Grow* (London: World Dominion Press, 1959), 58.

<sup>6</sup> C. Peter Wagner, *Church Growth and the Whole Gospel: A Biblical Mandate* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981), 10.

<sup>7</sup> C. Peter Wagner, *Your Church Can Be Healthy* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1979), 120.

One common criticism of the modern CGM is its shift away from a focus on conversion growth. As Thom Rainer observes, “My concern is that, in our understanding of the purpose of the Church Growth Movement of today, we have remembered McGavran’s heart for the church, but we have forgotten his passion for evangelism. We speak of the growth of the church, but often we speak in terms of total numerical growth rather than true conversion growth.”<sup>8</sup> Greg Laurie, author of *The Upside Down Church*, also addresses this undesirable shift.

More and more pastors today are looking for ways to boost numbers. The past two decades have witnessed a dramatic increase in the number of “megachurches”—congregations of one thousand or more—around the country. Professionals have labeled the trend the “church growth movement.”

But we have to ask what these trends mean for the church as a whole. Are we witnessing a second era of Christians who are really shaking up their world? Or are believers just shuffling their club memberships around to get the latest, most attractive deal?<sup>9</sup>

The concerns of Rainer and Laurie are legitimate. In his thought-provoking book, *Stealing Sheep: The Church’s Hidden Problems with Transfer Growth*, William Chadwick raises the same issues, relating the problem of transfer growth to the CGM. “It appears that transfer growth is the actual source of much of the church growth movement’s success, both in the United States and around the globe.”<sup>10</sup> J.D. Payne, a professor and missiologist, sees transfer growth as a major problem in contemporary church planting. In a recent interview conducted by researcher Ed Stetzer, Payne points out that church growth in the Scriptures was about conversion growth, not transfer growth. Therefore, he contends, “We must stop praising and rewarding transfer growth church planting strategies/methods and begin to focus on highly reproducible, multiplication strategies that lead to the making of disciples from out of the harvest fields.”<sup>11</sup>

Will the modern CGM help lead churches back to the priority of conversion growth? I believe that a look at the priority of conversion growth in Charles Spurgeon’s ministry can serve as a model to those church growth leaders who are willing to accept such a challenge. Tremendous value is found in studying, retelling,

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<sup>8</sup> Thom S. Rainer, “Church Growth at the End of the Twentieth Century: Recovering Our Purpose,” *Journal of the American Society for Church Growth* 6 (1995): 64.

<sup>9</sup> Greg Laurie, *The Upside Down Church* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1999), 41.

<sup>10</sup> William Chadwick, *Stealing Sheep: The Church’s Hidden Problems with Transfer Growth* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 75.

<sup>11</sup> Ed Stetzer, “Discovering Church Planting,” December 10, 2009 [online]; accessed 8 June 2010; available from <http://www.edstetzer.com/2009/12/jd-payne.html>; Internet.

O'Neal: History Revisited: Learning from Charles H. Spurgeon's Commitment and Interpreting History. One of the greatest benefits of studying history is that one can learn lessons from the past that apply to the present and future. Thus, the purpose of this article is to show how the ministry of the nineteenth-century "Prince of Preachers" was committed to conversion growth and how an analysis of this commitment can call the modern CGM back to the heart of its founders.

### **spurgeon on conversion growth**

As the evidence below will show, Spurgeon spoke frequently about church growth. However, the growth that Spurgeon sought was not just any source of growth. He was interested in the source of growth that adds new citizens to the kingdom of God and new believers to the local church. Indeed, Spurgeon's focus on conversion growth emulated the focus of the Savior "to seek and save the lost" (Luke 19:10).<sup>12</sup> This focus of Spurgeon and his ministry is apparent in the following areas of this discussion: the mandate of church growth, kingdom growth as conversion growth, local church growth as conversion growth, and growth statistics under Spurgeon's ministry.

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### **spurgeon on the mandate of church growth**

Without question, Spurgeon considered the growth of the church as a God-given mandate, insisting that the growth should come as a result of adding true converts to the local church and making disciples by the local church. Why did Spurgeon believe so strongly in the mandate of church growth? A look at his high view of the local church and his view on the church's primary purpose will help answer this question.

**A high view of the local church.** Spurgeon believed in the invisible church, the body of all believers in the kingdom of God. He also believed strongly in the visible church, the local body of believers gathered together in order to fulfill God's purposes on earth. From Spurgeon's perspective, though the spread of the gospel should also occur in arenas outside of the local church, the local church is the primary vehicle through which converts are made *and* disciplined.

For example, he compared churches with missionary societies, arguing that God chooses to work mainly through the local church in order to fulfill His mission. Spurgeon noted the church's responsibility for missions.

The Lord will work, not by committees, but by his Churches. The Church must do her own work, and when all our Churches are thoroughly aroused to this

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<sup>12</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version.

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fact, and every congregation shall send out its own men, pray for their own  
men, and support their own men, we shall see greater things than we have every  
dreamed of, and “the kingdoms of this world will become the kingdoms of our  
Lord, and of his Christ.” But it lies with the Church.<sup>13</sup>

After emphasizing that Paul and the baptized believers of the early church formed  
churches everywhere they went, Spurgeon commented thus:

I very greatly delight in the preaching in the theatres. You know how heartily I  
rejoice in the preaching of Christ anywhere. But there is a lack in all this labor;  
the corn is sown, but there is nobody to see to it afterwards; nobody to gather  
it in. The way in which all this ought to be carried on is, not by Associations,  
but by the Church. The Church of God is the true mother of converts; it is  
from her womb that they must be born, and at her breast they must suck, and  
on her knees must they be dandled.<sup>14</sup>

Spurgeon contended that no true professor of Christ should attempt to live life  
apart from the local, visible church. When reading about the early church of the  
apostles and their practices, Spurgeon could not help speaking about the priority  
they placed upon visible church involvement and fellowship. “It is quite clear, too,  
that believers in those days did not try to go to heaven alone. There has been a  
great deal said in these days about being simply a Christian and not joining any  
particular church—a piece of cant mostly, and in all cases a mistake.”<sup>15</sup> Not  
joining a local body of believers is a mistake, Spurgeon warned, because the  
biblical fellowship and evangelistic ministry suffer. He spoke to his congregation of  
the potential consequences.

Consider the matter, and reflect that if it would be right for you to remain out  
of church fellowship, it must be right for every other believer to remain in the  
same condition, and then there would be no visible church on earth at all, and  
no body of people banded together to maintain the Christian ordinances.  
Christian fellowship, especially in the breaking of bread, and the maintenance  
of an evangelistic ministry, would become an impossibility, if no one openly  
avowed the Savior’s cause.<sup>16</sup>

**The primary purpose of the local church.** In addition to his high view of the  
local church, Spurgeon’s view on the church’s primary purpose also contributed to  
his convictions concerning the mandate of church growth. Because the conversion

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<sup>13</sup> Charles Haddon Spurgeon, “What Meanest Thou, O Sleeper?” (1862), *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, vol. 8, in *The Charles Haddon Spurgeon Collection* [CD-ROM] (Albany, OR: Ages Software, 1998), 634.

<sup>14</sup> Charles Haddon Spurgeon, “Confession with the Mouth” (1863), *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, vol. 9, in *The Charles Haddon Spurgeon Collection* [CD-ROM] (Albany, OR: Ages Software, 1998), 503.

<sup>15</sup> Charles Haddon Spurgeon, “Additions to the Church” (1874), *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, vol. 20, in *The Charles Haddon Spurgeon Collection* [CD-ROM] (Albany, OR: Ages Software, 1998), 258–59.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 259.

O'Neal: History Revisited: Learning from Charles H. Spurgeon's Commitment of souls was his life's aim, Spurgeon saw church missions primarily as a soul-saving business.<sup>17</sup> In his final address to his fellow pastors at the Pastors' College Conference, just one year before his death, Spurgeon said, "We want a church of *missionary* character, which will go forth to gather out a people unto God from all parts of the world. A church is a soul-saving company, or it is nothing."<sup>18</sup> According to Spurgeon, churches with a "missionary character" are churches that take soul winning seriously, with an understanding that God saved them so that He could use them to save others. Spurgeon remarked later in the same address, "Every saved man should be, under God, a savior; and the church is not in a right state until she has reached that concept of herself. The elect church is saved that she may save, cleansed that she may cleanse, blessed that she may bless. All the world is a field, and all the members of the church should work therein for the great Husbandman."<sup>19</sup>

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Because the church is so instrumental to God's mission, Spurgeon recognized the importance of knowing the purposes for which the church exists. The church, Spurgeon believed, is not a social club or a political organization, but "exists only for the Lord Jesus to accomplish His ends and purposes among the sons of men."<sup>20</sup> With a reference to Acts 1:8, he supposed that the missional purpose of the church was an aggressive task and a worldwide necessity.

The Christian Church was designed from the first to be aggressive. It was not intended to remain stationary at any period, but to advance onward until its boundaries became commensurate with those of the world. It was to spread from Jerusalem to all Judea, from Judea to Samaria, and from Samaria unto the uttermost parts of the earth.<sup>21</sup>

God's primary purpose for the Metropolitan Tabernacle, Spurgeon asserted, was to seek and find lost souls. This passion for the priority of evangelism through the church was evident in the following words from his first Sunday evening sermon at the Tabernacle:

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<sup>17</sup> For several quotes concerning Spurgeon and his life's primary work, see T. Michael O'Neal, Jr. "An Analysis of the Ministry of Charles H. Spurgeon, with Implications for the Modern Church Growth Movement" (Ph.D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2006), 2-3. This article is adapted from a portion of Chapter 2 of my dissertation, a chapter that highlights Spurgeon's view on the relationship between conversion growth and discipleship.

<sup>18</sup> Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *The Greatest Fight in the World*, in *The Charles Haddon Spurgeon Collection* [CD-ROM] (Albany, OR: Ages Software, 1998), 30. Italics in original.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>20</sup> Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *Teaching of Nature in the Kingdom of Grace*, in *The Charles Haddon Spurgeon Collection* [CD-ROM] (Albany, OR: Ages Software, 1998), 97.

<sup>21</sup> Charles Haddon Spurgeon, "Metropolitan Tabernacle Statistics," *The Sword and the Trowel* 1 (1865-1867): 64, in *The Charles Haddon Spurgeon Collection* [CD-ROM] (Albany, OR: Ages Software, 1998). In Acts 1:8, Jesus commissions His disciples with these words: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."



I beseech you never cease to pray that here God's Word may be a quickening, a convincing, a converting word. The fact is brethren, we must have conversion work here. We cannot go on as some Churches do without converts. We cannot, we will not, we must not, we dare not. Souls must be converted here, and if there be not many born to Christ may the Lord grant to me that I may sleep in the tomb of my fathers and be heard of no more. Better indeed for us to die than to live, if souls be not saved.<sup>22</sup>

Comparing the visible church to the woman who sought and found her lost coin (Luke 15:8–10), Spurgeon said, “Note that seeking became *a matter of chief concern* with the woman. . . . So with the church of God, her chief concern should be to seek the perishing sons of men. To bring souls to Jesus, and to be saved in him with a great salvation should be the church's great longing and concern.”<sup>23</sup>

Later in this same sermon, Spurgeon again stressed the church's vital role in soul saving. “*The woman herself found the piece of money.* It did not turn up by accident, nor did some neighbor step in and find it. The Spirit of God himself finds sinners, and the church of God herself as a rule is the instrument of their recovery.”<sup>24</sup>

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Considering churches as instruments of recovery, Spurgeon insisted that churches must continually grow, and the growth would begin with evangelism. In the case of the Metropolitan Tabernacle, Spurgeon understood that it was a church that was blessed to be a blessing. He shared the following words of hope for “church increase” with his congregation in 1881: “All things should encourage this church, and the same rule applies to every church that God blesses—to seek larger increase.”<sup>25</sup> In proportion as a church grows, Spurgeon maintained that “it must seek to grow more, because growth is necessary to the most healthy state of life.”<sup>26</sup>

### kingdom growth is conversion growth

Spurgeon thought that the growth of the local church or any other visible body of ministry must contribute to kingdom growth. In fact, he questioned whether churches are anything more than purposeless organizations if they fail to advance the kingdom of Christ. Churches do not grow, he argued, for their own sake. He told his students, “There is such a thing as selfishness in our eagerness for the

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<sup>22</sup> Charles Haddon Spurgeon, “Temple Glories” (1861), *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, vol. 7, in *The Charles Haddon Spurgeon Collection* [CD-ROM] (Albany, OR: Ages Software, 1998), 403.

<sup>23</sup> Charles Haddon Spurgeon, “The Lost Silver Piece” (1871), *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, vol. 17, in *The Charles Haddon Spurgeon Collection* [CD-ROM] (Albany, OR: Ages Software, 1998), 40. Italics in original.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 44. Italics in original.

<sup>25</sup> Charles Haddon Spurgeon, “Church Increase” (1881), *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, vol. 46, in *The Charles Haddon Spurgeon Collection* [CD-ROM] (Albany, OR: Ages Software, 1998), 572.

<sup>26</sup> Spurgeon, “Metropolitan Tabernacle Statistics,” 64.

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aggrandizement of our own party; and from this evil spirit may grace deliver us!

*The increase of the kingdom is more to be desired than the growth of a clan.*<sup>27</sup>

In Spurgeon's view, God's kingdom, the invisible church, only advances when Christ rescues sinners "from the domain of darkness" and transfers them "to the kingdom of his beloved Son" (Col 1:13). At a London Association meeting, for instance, Spurgeon led his hearers to pray for the conversion of sinners and the increase of the kingdom. "We must now give up the rest of the meeting to the one great prayer for the conversion of sinners; may the Lord guide our brethren to draw close to the throne, for after all we shall not think we have a blessing, unless we see the increase of the Church."<sup>28</sup>

Another example of how Spurgeon believed that kingdom growth is conversion growth comes from his special concern for the spread of the gospel in and around London. To Spurgeon, London was "in some respects the very heart of the world," and a city in desperate need of more preachers and new churches.<sup>29</sup> Hence, his passion was to see kingdom growth, as expressed in the following words from an article simply titled "London": "For our own part we cannot live if Christ's kingdom does not grow, we hunger and thirst to see men saved. How can they hear without a preacher? The preacher must be sent among them, and they must be evangelized, and then churches will be formed, from which the light will be yet further spread."<sup>30</sup>

### **local church growth is conversion growth**

Not surprisingly, whenever Spurgeon mentioned the growth of the local church, he often referred to the addition of converts to the church. He explained clearly to his college students, "We do not regard it to be soul-winning to steal members out of churches already established, and train them to utter our peculiar Shibboleth: we aim rather at bringing souls to Christ than at making converts to our synagogue. . . . We count it utter meanness to build up our own house with the ruins of our neighbors' mansions."<sup>31</sup> In one of his later sermons (1890), Spurgeon commented on the difference between genuine church growth and growth of "no worth."

If we add to our churches by becoming worldly, by taking in persons who have never been born again; if we add to our churches by accommodating the life of

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<sup>27</sup> Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *The Soul-Winner: How to Lead Sinners to the Savior* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1963), 16. Italics added.

<sup>28</sup> Charles Haddon Spurgeon, "London Association," *The Sword and the Trowel* 1 (1865–1867): 211, in *The Charles Haddon Spurgeon Collection* [CD-ROM] (Albany, OR: Ages Software, 1998).

<sup>29</sup> Charles Haddon Spurgeon, "London," *The Sword and the Trowel* 11 (1875): 147.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 147–48.

<sup>31</sup> Spurgeon, *The Soul-Winner*, 15.

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the Christian to the life of the worldling, our increase is worth nothing at all; it  
is loss rather than gain. If we add to our churches by excitement, by making  
appeals to the passions, rather than by explaining truth to the understanding;  
if we add to our churches otherwise than by the power of the Spirit of God  
making men new creatures in Christ Jesus, the increase is of no worth  
whatever.<sup>32</sup>

In Spurgeon's day, apparently, churches faced the problem of excessive transfer  
growth. Spurgeon's words make known his awareness of this source of growth in  
his day, calling it "a wretched business."<sup>33</sup> The Tabernacle dealt with this issue  
frequently because people throughout London were curious to hear the popular  
preacher and willing to leave their churches to join the famous Tabernacle. After  
proposing the question of whether or not Spurgeon's success depended "primarily  
on transfer growth rather than conversions," Michael Nicholls writes, "Whenever  
there is a new work of God some Christians, bored or frustrated with their own  
church situations, seek to be involved in what appears to be marked by success. So  
London Christians, individually or in small groups, sought either membership at  
the Metropolitan Tabernacle or Spurgeon's advice."<sup>34</sup>

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Though Spurgeon encouraged aspiring transfers to make peace with their  
former churches, some refused. In such cases, he resolved not to let them drift, but  
to use them "for the increase of the church."<sup>35</sup> However, his priority was to gather  
the unchurched who "have not been previously connected with a body of  
believers" or "attended any house of prayer."<sup>36</sup> Indeed, his heart's desire was to see  
churches strengthened primarily through the rescuing of souls. "Far rather would  
we be busy, looking after perishing souls, than cajoling unstable ones from their  
present place of worship. To recruit one regiment from another, is no real  
strengthening of the army; to bring in fresh men, should be the aim of all."<sup>37</sup>

It so happens that the young Spurgeon had a few words of warning and advice  
for members of other churches who attended his Sunday morning service. "Many  
of you have no business here this morning. You ought to be in your own places of  
worship. I do not want to steal away the people from other chapels; there are

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<sup>32</sup> Charles Haddon Spurgeon, "Harvest Joy" (1890), *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, vol. 38, in *The Charles Haddon Spurgeon Collection* [CD-ROM] (Albany, OR: Ages Software, 1998), 432.

<sup>33</sup> Charles Haddon Spurgeon, "Essentials Points in Prayer" (1887), *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, vol. 35, in *The Charles Haddon Spurgeon Collection* [CD-ROM] (Albany, OR: Ages Software, 1998), 47. Also see O'Neal, "An Analysis of the Ministry of Charles H. Spurgeon, with Implications for the Modern Church Growth Movement," 14–15.

<sup>34</sup> Michael Nicholls, "Mission Yesterday and Today: Charles Haddon Spurgeon, 1834–1892," *Baptist Review of Theology* 2 (1992): 47.

<sup>35</sup> Charles Haddon Spurgeon, "Report of College Work," *The Sword and the Trowel* 5 (1877–1879): 387, in *The Charles Haddon Spurgeon Collection* [CD-ROM] (Albany, OR: Ages Software, 1998).

<sup>36</sup> Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *Autobiography*, 2:148, in *The Charles Haddon Spurgeon Collection* [CD-ROM] (Albany, OR: Ages Software, 1998).

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

O'Neal: History Revisited: Learning from Charles H. Spurgeon's Commitment enough to hear me without them. But though you have sinned this morning, hear while you are here, as much to your profit as possible."<sup>38</sup> Eight years later (1863), Spurgeon preached one Sunday morning at Cornwall Road Chapel in Bayswater on how to encourage the minister. One of the habits he mentioned was consistent church attendance. He shared the following words:

You can encourage him *by very constant attendance*. By the way, looking round here, I think I know some of the persons present who belong to neighboring chapels. What business have you here? Why did you leave your own minister? If I see one come into my place from the congregation of another brother in the ministry, I would like just to give him a flea in his ear such as he may never forget. What business have you to leave your minister? If everyone were to do so, how discouraged the poor man would be. Just because somebody happens to come into this neighborhood, you will be leaving your seats. A compliment to me, you say. I thank you for it; but now, in return, let me give you this advice: these who are going from place to place are of no use to anybody; but those are the truly useful men who, when the servants of God are in their places, kept to theirs, and let everybody see that whoever discourages the minister they will not, for they appreciate his ministry.<sup>39</sup>

Obviously, Spurgeon had little respect for transfer growth, for he insisted that true joy in Christian ministry comes from the conversion growth only granted by the grace and power of God. Preaching on Isaiah 9:3 as his text, he concluded,<sup>40</sup>

The joy that we ought to have to-night, the joy of any growing church, will be joy such as God gives. That is the kind of joy we desire to have. If anybody wishes to see the church grow that we may excel other churches, that is not the joy that God gives. If we like to see converts because we are glad that our opinions should be spread, God does not give that joy. If we crave converts that we may steal them from other people, God does not give that joy, if it be a joy. I do not think God is the lover of sheep-stealers, and there are plenty such about. We do not desire to increase our numbers by taking Christian people away from other Christian communities. No, the joy which God gives us is clear, unselfish delight in Christ being glorified, in souls being saved, in truths being spread, and in error being baffled.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Charles Haddon Spurgeon, "Paul's First Prayer" (1855), *The New Park Street Pulpit*, vol. 1, in *The Charles Haddon Spurgeon Collection* [CD-ROM] (Albany, OR: Ages Software, 1998), 228.

<sup>39</sup> Charles Haddon Spurgeon, "Encourage the Minister" (1863), *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, vol. 9, in *The Charles Haddon Spurgeon Collection* [CD-ROM] (Albany, OR: Ages Software, 1998), 766. Italics in original.

<sup>40</sup> According to the RSV, Isaiah 9:3 states, "Thou hast multiplied the nation, thou hast increased its joy. . . ." The ESV, NASB, and NIV translate similarly to the RSV. Spurgeon began this sermon by noting that this version was correct compared to the AV, which reads, "Thou hast multiplied the nation, and not increased the joy."

<sup>41</sup> Spurgeon, "Harvest Joy," 434.

Still, an important question remains. Did Spurgeon's church, the largest evangelical church in the world by the 1890s, grow mostly through transfers or converts? When he arrived at the New Park Street Chapel, the membership totaled 313. By the end of 1860, the membership had quadrupled to 1,494.<sup>42</sup>

Unfortunately, the church did not record the number of baptisms until 1863, but the words of Spurgeon and others indicate that these rapid additions came predominantly by way of conversion growth. In December 1859, for instance, Spurgeon rejoiced over God's blessing at New Park Street over his first six years. "For six years the dew has never ceased to fall, and the rain has never been withheld. At this time, the converts are more numerous than heretofore, and the zeal of the church growth exceedingly."<sup>43</sup> Of the New Park Street years (1854–1860), McCoy's dissertation affirms, "Though baptism statistics are not available for these years, it is reasonable to think that a substantial percentage of those added to the church were new converts."<sup>44</sup>

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For the purpose of this article, a look at the statistics from the Tabernacle provides pertinent information, as presented in Table 1. Of the statistics reported from 1863 through 1891, it took an average of seventeen Tabernacle members to win one person to Christ per year (17:1 membership/baptism ratio).<sup>45</sup>

Another statistic is worthy of notice. Although the Tabernacle saw over 3,500 baptisms from 1879 through 1891, the total number of members remained close to 5,300 throughout those same years. An explanation for these numbers is that Spurgeon sent many members out to mission work, namely church planting.<sup>46</sup> As a "mother of churches," for example, the Tabernacle once dismissed seventy-five of its members to start a new church in another part of London.<sup>47</sup> Clearly, the church's primary goal was not to add to members to its roll, but to see souls saved. As Spurgeon declared, "It is with cheerfulness that we dismiss our twelves, our

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<sup>42</sup> Lewis Drummond, *Spurgeon: Prince of Preachers* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1992), 284.

<sup>43</sup> Charles Haddon Spurgeon, "Preface," *The New Park Street Pulpit* (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications, 1975), 5:v.

<sup>44</sup> Timothy McCoy, "The Evangelistic Ministry of C.H. Spurgeon: Implications for a Contemporary Model for Pastoral Evangelism" (Ph.D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1989), 203.

<sup>45</sup> Calculated from statistics cited in Drummond, *Spurgeon*, 286–87. This ratio is outstanding compared to the 85:1 ratio of the American church today. See Thom S. Rainer, *Surprising Insights from the Unchurched* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 23. My denomination (SBC) has a 46:1 ratio. See Rob Phillips, "Southern Baptists Report Gain in Baptisms, Decline in Membership for 2009," May 17, 2010 [online]; accessed 8 June 2010; available from [http://blog.christianitytoday.com/ctliveblog/archives/2010/05/southern\\_baptis\\_3.html](http://blog.christianitytoday.com/ctliveblog/archives/2010/05/southern_baptis_3.html); Internet.

<sup>46</sup> Drummond, *Spurgeon*, 285. Also see Rodney Earls, "The Evangelistic Strategy of Charles Haddon Spurgeon for the Multiplication of Churches and Implications for Modern Church Extension Theory" (Ph.D. diss., Southwestern Theological Seminary, 1989), 201. The Tabernacle also removed names from the membership roll because of non-attendance. See "Notes," *The Sword and the Trowel* 6 (1880–1882): 363, in *The Charles Haddon Spurgeon Collection* [CD-ROM] (Albany, OR: Ages Software, 1998). Also see pp. 79 and 616 of this source.

<sup>47</sup> Spurgeon, *Autobiography*, 3:220–21.

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**Table 1**

Metropolitan Tabernacle Statistics, 1863–1891

<i>Year</i>	<i>Membership</i>	<i>Baptisms</i>	<i>Ratio</i>
1863	2,555	311	8.2/1
1864	2,937	381	7.7/1
1865	3,293	438	7.5/1
1866	3,458	359	9.6/1
1876	4,938	317	15.6/1
1877	5,045	296	17.0/1
1879	5,290	305	17.3/1
1880	5,284	314	16.8/1
1881	5,310	279	19.0/1
1882	5,427	267	20.3/1
1883	5,341	310	17.2/1
1884	5,399	310	17.4/1
1885	5,314	267	19.9/1
1886	5,351	284	18.8/1
1887	5,315	240	22.1/1
1888	5,275	218	24.2/1
1889	5,354	310	17.3/1
1890	5,328	288	18.5/1
1891	5,311	182	29.2/1

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twenties, our fifties, to form other churches. We encourage our members to leave us to found other churches; nay, we seek to persuade them to do it. We ask them to scatter throughout the land to become the goodly seed which God shall bless.”<sup>48</sup>

In summary, throughout his ministry at the Tabernacle, Spurgeon recognized that only a church that actually grows through conversions is a church that becomes a serious threat to the Enemy. Reflecting upon the first twenty-five years of his ministry at the tabernacle, Spurgeon acknowledged that his church’s conversion growth was a direct invasion upon Satan’s territory. He wrote,

There have not been leaps of progress and then painful pauses of decline. On and on the host has marched, gathering recruits each month, filling up the gaps created by death or by removal, and steadily proceeding towards and beyond its maximum, which lies over the border of five thousand souls. One year may have been better than another, but not to any marked extent; there has been a level of richness in the harvest field, a joyful average in the crop. Unity of heart

<sup>48</sup> Charles Haddon Spurgeon, “The Waterer Watered” (1865), *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, vol. 11, in *The Charles Haddon Spurgeon Collection* [CD-ROM] (Albany, OR: Ages Software, 1998), 293. Also see “Notes,” *The Sword and the Trowel* 10 (1874): 93. This “Notes” section of *The Sword and the Trowel*, the magazine which Spurgeon edited, admitted, “But so long as souls are saved, we had sooner send them to other places than retain them, for our church is large enough already.”

Great Commission Research Journal, Vol. 2, Iss. 2 [2011], Art. 6 has been accompanied by uniformity of prosperity. Work has not been done in spurts, enterprises have not been commenced and abandoned; every advance has been maintained and has become the vintage ground for yet another aggression upon the enemy's territory.<sup>49</sup>

Certainly, Spurgeon believed that this "aggression upon the Enemy's territory" occurs when true converts become members of a church fellowship and missionaries to the world.

## history revisited

As shown in the discussion above, Spurgeon and the CGM founders shared an unmistakable passion to advance the kingdom of God. They also recognized that this advancement would come only through the conversion of lost sinners who became committed followers of Christ. So what is the lesson for the modern CGM? What can church growth leaders learn from Spurgeon's commitment to conversion growth?

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The modern movement's lack of emphasis on conversion growth may stem from a weak theological foundation. Rainer affirms, "No comprehensive and clear theological and biblical foundation for all that church growth embraces has been written. Without a cogent biblical foundation, future generations will delve into methodologies without understanding their biblical legitimacy."<sup>50</sup> Consequently, church growth proponents endorse methods with little regard for conversion growth.<sup>51</sup> God is a missionary God, and the church is to reflect His heart and nature as it serves as the body of Christ (1 Cor 12). Jesus commanded the church to share His gospel with the nations (Acts 1:8).

The modern CGM can benefit from remembering how Spurgeon valued conversion growth. Under his leadership, the Tabernacle became a soul-winning church that was not satisfied unless it saw people converted. In learning from Spurgeon, the movement can return to its theological and missiological roots, giving conversion growth the priority it deserves. Such a return is the hope of Charles Van Engen.

The Church Growth movement itself must revisit Donald McGavran's missiological priorities, which recognized that numerical growth is not the goal of mission; it is a desired by-product. As McGavran would say it, "It is God's

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<sup>49</sup> Charles Haddon Spurgeon, "Twenty-Five Years Ago," *The Sword and the Trowel* 5 (1877–1879): 530–31, in *The Charles Haddon Spurgeon Collection* [CD-ROM] (Albany, OR: Ages Software, 1998).

<sup>50</sup> Thom S. Rainer, "Strategies for Church Growth" in *Missiology*, ed. John Mark Terry, Ebbie Smith, and Justice Anderson (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1998), 497.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

O'Neal: History Revisited: Learning from Charles H. Spurgeon's Commitment will that men and women become disciples of Jesus Christ." In McGavran's missiology, conversion was always primary. May we all together seek new and increasingly effective means whereby women and men so loved by God may be introduced to our living Savior Jesus Christ through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Donald McGavran would want us all to remember that there are 4.5 billion people speaking thousands of languages and representing multitudes of cultural mosaics who yet do not know Jesus Christ. This is our agenda for the twenty-first century.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Charles Van Engen, "A Centrist Response," in *Evaluating the Church Growth Movement: 5 Views*, ed. Paul E. Engle and Gary L. McIntosh (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 194.



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