

VOL. 1 • NO. 1 • SUMMER 2009  
**AN EXAMINATION OF THE COMPATIBILITY OF THE CHURCH  
GROWTH MOVEMENT WITH A CALVINISTIC SOTERIOLOGY**

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**abstract**

The purpose of this article is to establish that the strategic, missiological thinking of the Church Growth Movement is compatible with a Calvinistic soteriology.

The method for accomplishing this purpose involves, first, a clarification of terms. Both “Church Growth Movement” and “Calvinism” have been defined in myriad ways, and these not all equally valid. Thus, specific descriptions are included here. Next is a necessary discussion of the tensions that are perceived to exist between Church Growth and Calvinism. This is followed by a survey of kindred concerns and an exhibition of the common doctrinal ground shown to be held by parties in each camp, especially including McGavran’s theological convictions. Specific areas of compatibility are described in two sections that discuss first, the expected success of the Gospel, then receptivity and the Harvest Principle, respectively.

**introduction**

What has McGavran to do with Calvin? It seems that a perception exists that views Church Growth thinking and a Calvinistic soteriology as mutually exclusive, even

among some who are familiar with both orientations. This writer recently heard a Baptist pastor proclaim that Calvinism and missions form an oxymoron. While it is inappropriately simplistic to equate the Church Growth Movement with missions, the statement suggests the problem to which this article is addressed, namely, the question of the compatibility of the Church Growth Movement with a Calvinistic soteriology.

The specific purpose of this article is to demonstrate that the strategic missiological thinking of the Church Growth Movement is indeed compatible with a Calvinistic soteriology. The demonstration of the compatibility of the Church Growth Movement with a Calvinistic soteriology can be valuable for those sympathetic to either the Church Growth Movement or Calvinism. The Church Growth Movement has attempted to be ecumenical, at least among evangelical Christians. This may have been hampered by perceptions of the Church Growth Movement as an Arminian movement. This is not accurate.

34 To show that the Church Growth Movement shares some common ground with a Reformed understanding of salvation broadens the platform for the movement, opening the way for Calvinists to consider the tenets of Church Growth thinking. This would gain a larger hearing for the Church Growth Movement.

For Calvinists, the display of harmony between some of the missiological thinking of the Church Growth Movement to Calvinistic doctrine may help them to take their responsible place in the missions arena. The stigma of being non-evangelistic due to doctrine could be fought. Thus, there is value for Church Growth and for Calvinists in the demonstration of their compatibility.

It is necessary to clarify the terms “Church Growth Movement” and “Calvinistic soteriology.” For the purpose of this article, “Church Growth Movement” refers to the missiological theory built upon the concepts of Donald Anderson McGavran, particularly commencing with his 1955 book *The Bridges of God*,<sup>1</sup> and thoroughly stated in the movement’s classic text *Understanding Church Growth*.<sup>2</sup> Since McGavran’s death in 1990, several streams have emerged, each indiscriminantly referred to as “Church Growth.” This article is limiting the use of the term “Church Growth Movement” to principles in line with McGavran’s missiological theories for global missions.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Donald A. McGavran, *The Bridges of God: A Study in the Strategy of Missions* (New York: Friendship, 1955).

<sup>2</sup> For a brief summary of McGavran’s basic tenets, see C. Peter Wagner’s Preface to the Third Edition in Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., rev. and ed. C. Peter Wagner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), vii–xi.

<sup>3</sup> For an evaluation of the different branches of Church Growth since McGavran’s death, see Sonny Tucker, “The Fragmentation of the Post-McGavran Church Growth Movement,” *Journal of Evangelism and Missions* 2 (Spring 2003): 27–32.

Concerning “Calvinistic soteriology,” the noted acronym “TULIP” represents the five points of Calvinism that originated as a statement of the system at the Synod of Dort in 1619: total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and perseverance of the saints.<sup>4</sup>

The term “Calvinistic” rather than “Calvinist” has been employed here for the purpose of separating the idea of the sovereignty of God in salvation from any abuse of the system which removes human responsibility from the soteriological equation and which does not take seriously the missionary, evangelistic mandate of Scripture. Anthony A. Hoekema, a Calvinist theologian, defended genuine Dortian Calvinism regarding man’s responsibility: “The Canons [of Dort] are just as insistent on teaching the responsibility of man in his salvation as they are in underscoring the sovereignty of God.”<sup>5</sup> However, while this author believes that “Calvinism” does not include neglect of human responsibility or lack of missionary concern, the term “Calvinistic” better safeguards these concerns.

Further, the phrase “Calvinistic soteriology” allows for a sympathetic view toward the system of Calvinism, either as a whole or some specific parts of it, without demanding full agreement with the five points as described by the Synod of Dort. The use of the term “Calvinistic” may help to distinguish Calvinistic soteriology from fatalism and anti-missionary thinking, sometimes associated with the term “Hyper-Calvinism,” which should be understood as a different category altogether. There is clearly no compatibility between the Church Growth Movement and any anti-missions theology, thus inviting the use of the term “Calvinistic.”<sup>6</sup>

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## areas of tension

McGavran’s theories were not produced through exegesis; they were developed on the basis of his observations of missions in the field. In addition, concerning the use of Scripture by Church Growth writers, Charles Edward Van Engen noted that “too often the Movement seems to use texts simply to shore up Church Growth theory.”<sup>7</sup> It is no surprise, then, that theologians have identified problems in the Church Growth Movement concerning biblical and theological principles.

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<sup>4</sup> Paul P. Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago: Moody, 1989), 479.

<sup>5</sup> “Anthony A. Hoekema, “The Missionary Focus of the Canons of Dort,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 7, no. 2 (November 1972): 210.

<sup>6</sup> For the theology and history of Calvinism, see Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology*, 475–88; and W. S. Reid, “Calvinism,” in Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 201–3.

<sup>7</sup> Charles Edward Van Engen, *The Growth of the True Church: An Analysis of the Ecclesiology of Church Growth Theoy* (Amsterdam, The Netherlands: Rodopi, 1981; Ann Arbor, MI: UMI, 1995), 356–7.

## church growth's need for theological precision

The need to be biblical and theologically sound is recognized and embraced by members of the Church Growth Movement. Alan R. Tippett's *Church Growth and the Word of God* was an attempt to fill the biblical and theological void that remained even fifteen years after the publication of McGavran's *The Bridges of God*. Tippett wrote, "This little book attempts to outline the biblical foundations of church growth."<sup>8</sup> His description of the book as "little" provided a clue as to its potential for completely filling the void of an exegetical base for the Church Growth Movement. Harvie M. Conn referred to Tippett's work as a "devotional work."<sup>9</sup> Something on a larger scale is needed.

There is no shortage of works that interact with Church Growth principles on the theological level.<sup>10</sup> Almost all such works, however, are critiques. What is missing is a definitive exegetical theology of Church Growth. Charles Edward Van Engen noted the need for this:

The basic problem with evaluating Church Growth theory dogmatically is that the theory has never been worked out as a complete system of thought. . . . For someone to develop these broad categories of Church Growth theory in a systematic way would be a tremendous assistance to missionaries and missiologists, as well as a great help in giving increased theological foundation to Church Growth itself.<sup>11</sup>

Arthur F. Glasser has also noted the lack of a systematic statement of Church Growth theology. He observed, "Dr. McGavran's theological method does not involve the orderly unfolding of a system based on inner-evolved principles."<sup>12</sup> That the genesis of the Church Growth Movement was primarily methodological rather than theological is likely a source for at least some of the tensions between Church Growth thinkers and theologians, including those holding a Calvinistic perspective.<sup>13</sup> That the theological void has yet to be filled makes the continuation of such friction likely.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Alan R. Tippett, *Church Growth and the Word of God*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 8.

<sup>9</sup> Harvie M. Conn, "Looking for a Method: Backgrounds and Suggestions," in *Exploring Church Growth*, ed. Wilbert R. Shenk (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 82.

<sup>10</sup> For examples, see Conn, ed., *Theological Perspectives on Church Growth* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1976); Van Engen, *The Growth of the True Church*; Shenk, *Exploring Church Growth*.

<sup>11</sup> Van Engen, *The Growth of the True Church*, 513.

<sup>12</sup> Arthur F. Glasser, "An Introduction to the Church Growth Perspectives of Donald Anderson McGavran," in Conn, *Theological Perspectives*, 26.

<sup>13</sup> An example of how some of McGavran's methodological ideas seemed to be logically prior to his theological arguments is his view of discipling versus perfecting. He seems to have allowed his exegesis of Matthew 28:16-20 to be affected by his already full-blown ideas. For a critical evaluation of McGavran's use of Scripture in general see Shawn L. Buice, "A Critical Examination of the Use of Selected New Testament Passages the Writings of Donald A. McGavran and C. Peter Wagner" (Ph.D. diss., Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, 1996).

<sup>14</sup> The Church Growth Movement library is not altogether lacking in positive statements of the theology of Church Growth. For examples of such, see Tippett, ed., *God, Man, and Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 48-140, and Wagner, *Church Growth and the Whole Gospel: A Biblical Mandate* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981).

C. Peter Wagner, a pioneer of American Church Growth thinking, affirmed that the Church Growth Movement purposefully avoided being overly theological. This was in order to have the broadest audience possible for the Church Growth message. He explained, “Church growth principles have intentionally been kept as atheological as possible, on the assumption that they can be adapted to fit into virtually any systematic theological tradition.”<sup>15</sup> Tom Nettles, a Calvinist, countered Wagner’s assertion: “This principle may be harmless in some areas, but in others, when creating a theory that has to do with confronting sinners with the claims of God and the gospel, an atheological approach is inadequate simply because it *is* atheological.”<sup>16</sup> While critics should consider that more positive statements of Church Growth theology are likely forthcoming, the lack of theological precision still remains.

### **pragmatism**

One of the primary stimuli for McGavran’s original thinking was his observation that there typically exists among the efforts of churches and denominations much mission work with little expansion of the kingdom of God. This led him to his views regarding the necessity of pragmatism in mission methods. Wagner quoted McGavran discussing the value of pragmatism:

We devise methods and policies in light of what God has blessed—and what He has obviously not blessed. Industry calls this “modifying operation in light of feedback.” Nothing hurts missions overseas so much as continuing methods, institutions, and policies which ought to bring men to Christ—but don’t; which ought to multiply churches—but don’t; which ought to improve society—but don’t. We teach men to be ruthless in regard to method. If it does not work to the glory of God and the extension of Christ’s church, throw it away and get something which does. As to methods, we are fiercely pragmatic—doctrine is something entirely different.<sup>17</sup>

The argument is that pragmatism concerning how effective a missionary or evangelistic method proves to be is consistent with the truth of Scripture and reflects efficient obedience to the Great Commission. Wagner called this “consecrated pragmatism.”<sup>18</sup>

John F. MacArthur Jr. responded directly to McGavran and the pragmatic methods promoted by the Church Growth Movement. He rejected the kind of

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<sup>15</sup> Wagner, *Church Growth and the Whole Gospel*, 83.

<sup>16</sup> Tom Nettles, “A Better Way: Church Growth through Revival and Reformation,” in *Power Religion: The Selling Out of the Evangelical Church?*, ed. Michael Scott Horton (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 184.

<sup>17</sup> Donald McGavran, “For Such a Time as This,” unpublished address, Fuller Theological Seminary, 1970; quoted in Wagner, “Pragmatic Strategy for Tomorrow’s Mission,” in Tippett, *God, Man, and Church Growth*, 147.

<sup>18</sup> Wagner, *Church Growth and the Whole Gospel*, 69–86.

pragmatism which discards any method that does not work, for he believes that kind of thinking endangers biblical preaching, if the results are not desirable to the pragmatic minister. He argued:

Any end-justifies-the-means philosophy of ministry inevitably *will* compromise doctrine, despite any proviso to the contrary. If we make effectiveness the gauge of right and wrong, how can that fail to color our doctrine? Ultimately the pragmatist's notion of truth is shaped by what seems effective, not by the objective revelation of Scripture.<sup>19</sup>

While theologians of various soteriological convictions reject the results-oriented approach of Church Growth thinking, MacArthur specified Calvinistic soteriology and dependence on the power of the Word of God as the bases for his rejection of the pragmatism of the Church Growth Movement.<sup>20</sup>

The Church Growth Movement's emphasis on results harmonizes and issues forth from another tenet of the school—the theology of harvest. Claiming that proclamation evangelism is incomplete according to the desire of God, McGavran emphasized the finding of lost people over the searching for them. Obviously, searching is necessary for finding, but one can search and never find. The question relates to the goal of evangelism. McGavran maintained that the goal was the harvest of the lost into Christ's church—the finding, not the searching.<sup>21</sup> This goal is clearly consistent with pragmatism. In both, the emphasis is on results.

Duane Litfin offered an evaluation of this call to establish finding as the goal of evangelism through persuasion. His review is consistent with basic Calvinistic soteriology. He wrote:

Paul's concern about our human potential for achieving merely human results appears to be lost on many church growth advocates. In their pragmatic rush to use whatever "works," they apparently assume that as long as they avoid the "immoral," the "unfair" or the "fraudulent" they are free to use any method to achieve their goals. But a concern to avoid the immoral, unfair, and fraudulent scarcely rises above the pagans; noble-minded rhetoricians of Paul's day, such as Quintilian, would have concurred entirely. As a standard for our methodological-decision making in Christ's church, such concerns are necessary, but not sufficient. For a Christian there exists a crucial added

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<sup>19</sup> John F. MacArthur Jr., *Ashamed of the Gospel: When the Church Becomes Like the World* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1993), 78.

<sup>20</sup> For MacArthur's more positive description of how he personally views outreach, see "Our Sufficiency for Outreach: An Interview with John MacArthur, Jr.," *Leadership* 12, no. 4 (Fall 1991): 134–9. For another discussion on the rejection of pragmatism from a Calvinistic perspective, see Phil A. Newton, "My Journey Through the Church Growth Movement," *The Founders Journal* 30 (Fall 1997). <http://wwwFOUNDERS.org/FJ30/article2.html> (accessed 8 December 2006).

<sup>21</sup> McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 23–30.

dimension which the audience- and results-driven approach largely ignores. It is the concern for driving out the divine work of God by unduly crowding our human methods into the process.<sup>22</sup>

Litfin's concern reflects a major tension between the methodological fervor of the Church Growth Movement and those emphasizing the role of God in salvation, particularly those holding a Calvinistic soteriology.

### **areas of compatibility**

The above section demonstrates serious disjunction between points of the Church Growth Movement and a Calvinistic soteriology. Despite this friction, the current section demonstrates that there are points of agreement and compatibility between the two.

### **kindred concerns and dual memberships**

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A basic level of compatibility is exhibited in the emphasis placed on missions and evangelism by many who are Calvinist or Calvinistic. An example is John Piper. Piper is thoroughly Calvinist in his soteriology, yet is outspoken in his call for global missions and the spread of the Gospel. His book *Let the Nations Be Glad!: The Supremacy of God in Missions* is a classic missions text.<sup>23</sup>

Further, the fervent missionary work carried out by those with a Calvinistic soteriology evidences general compatibility between missionary zeal and a Reformed doctrine of salvation. John L. Nevius, the missionary most often esteemed for the establishment of a solid Christian foundation in Korea, has been described in such a way that both Church Growth thinkers and Calvinistic theologians would likely find his methodology amenable. Bruce F. Hunt wrote, "Dr. Nevius, a seasoned missionary, always criticized existing methods of mission work in the light of God's Word, and at the same time sought to find in God's Word the principles which should direct all missionary activity."<sup>24</sup>

Another Calvinistic theologian who carefully advocated evangelism is J. I. Packer. He interacted with Church Growth writings from a sympathetic standpoint, seeming to treat Church Growth writers as partners in evangelism. His *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* accented the role of God in bringing lost

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<sup>22</sup> Duane Litfin, "An Analysis of the Church Growth Movement," *Reformation and Revival: A Quarterly Journal for Church Leadership* 7, no. 1 (Winter 1998): 57-77.

<sup>23</sup> John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad!: The Supremacy of God in Missions*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003).

<sup>24</sup> Bruce F. Hunt, Preface to the Fourth Edition, in John L. Nevius, *The Planting and Development of Missionary Churches*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Philadelphia: Reformed and Presbyterian, 1958), iii.

souls to salvation, but it repudiated detached passivity on the part of the evangelist. While he stopped well short of endorsing the full-blown finding/persuasion model of evangelism advocated in Church Growth literature, Packer seemingly displayed compatibility with Church Growth concerns. He postulated, “Evangelism means exhorting sinners to *accept* Christ Jesus *as their Saviour [sic]*, recognizing that in the most final and far-reaching sense they are lost without Him.”<sup>25</sup> He added the Calvinistic emphasis by stating, “Evangelism is man’s work, but the giving of faith is God’s.”<sup>26</sup> He also referred to reaching people in their normal social groupings as evangelism that is closer to the apostolic age.<sup>27</sup> This is congruent with people movement thinking as well as the fundamental concepts of the homogeneous unit principle, key components of McGavran’s strategy.

40 From the Church Growth side, the mere presence of Calvinistic thinkers in the camp essentially proves that some degree of compatibility exists. Roger S. Greenway is a missions leader in the Christian Reformed Church. His dual membership is significant.

Another Calvinistic leader in the Church Growth Movement is Arthur F. Glasser. Wagner employed the fact of Glasser’s place in the Church Growth Movement as a Calvinistic thinker to demonstrate the very point being argued in this paper. He explained:

McGavran’s successor as Dean of the School [of World Missions at Fuller Theological Seminary] was Arthur F. Glasser, a Reformed Presbyterian, who sees church growth theology from the point of view of a “somewhat modified Reformed hermeneutic.” Through the years the Arminian-Calvinism issues latent here have never seemed to pose a problem. . . . My impression is that church growth cannot reasonably be labeled as Reformed or Wesleyan or Lutheran or Calvinistic or Pietistic or Pelagian or Arminian. It can, however, be labeled as evangelical.<sup>28</sup>

The implication is that nothing inherent in Church Growth thinking denies harmonization with any of the theological perspectives he listed, including the Calvinistic.

Hoekema responded to McGavran’s interaction with the faculty of Calvin Theological Seminary in the early 1970s regarding the need for missionary emphasis in creeds and confessions of faith, particularly those of the Presbyterian

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<sup>25</sup> J. I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1961), 39.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>27</sup> J. I. Packer, “What Is Evangelism?” in Conn, *Theological Perspectives*, 105.

<sup>28</sup> Wagner, *Church Growth and the Whole Gospel*, 83.



and Reformed denominations. While McGavran offered a serious critique in this exchange, the tone was sympathetic and reflected brotherly concern. Hoekema's reply to McGavran's call for creedal affirmations of the missionary mandate of the church is telling. He defended the Canons of Dort regarding the inclusion of necessary missiological theology, but he acknowledged the lack of emphasis on the necessity of mission activities. He summarized:

The sovereign work of God in saving his people is certainly stressed in the Canons of Dort. But the responsibility of man to bring the gospel message to all, particularly to those nations who have not yet heard it, does not receive equal emphasis. The Canons are strong on missionary theology; one could wish that they were equally strong on missionary responsibility.<sup>29</sup>

This mutual concern for both missionary theology and activity exhibits a point of compatibility between Church Growth missiology and Calvinistic soteriology.

### **shared conservative evangelical doctrine**

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The theological core of the Church Growth Movement was developed from generally conservative, evangelical convictions. Many who hold a Calvinistic soteriology do so within a platform of conservative evangelicalism. This does not mean that all adherents to Church Growth or all Calvinists are conservative evangelicals; that claim would almost certainly be false and superfluous to the point. That conservative evangelical doctrine exists in both camps—along with the overlap in membership—suffices to demonstrate compatibility.

McGavran claimed that Church Growth is evangelical. He described the doctrinal foundation of his Church Growth thinking:

Church Growth is basically a theological stance. God requires it. It looks to the Bible for direction as to what God wants done. It holds that belief in Jesus Christ, understood according to the Scriptures, is necessary for salvation. Church Growth rises in unshakeable theological conviction. . . . From the beginning the Church Growth Movement has been rooted in biblical, evangelical, conversionist theology.<sup>30</sup>

The Church Growth Movement, then, according to its founder, proceeded from a basically conservative evangelical theology.

Wagner specifically identified the theological nonnegotiables of the Church Growth Movement. Though he acknowledged the subjective essence of theology (perhaps to a fault) compared to the infallible revelation of God in the Bible, he listed seven theological tenets of Church Growth theology:

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<sup>29</sup> Hoekema, "Missionary Focus of the Canons of Dort," 219–20.

<sup>30</sup> McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 8–9.

1. The glory of God is the chief end of humans. 2. Jesus Christ is Lord. 3. The preaching of the gospel is the preaching of the Kingdom of God. 4. The Scriptures are the only normative authority for believers. 5. Sin, salvation and eternal death are eschatological realities. 6. God wills all to be saved from sin and eternal death. 7. God has given His people a responsibility for saving souls, and the Holy Spirit works through them to accomplish the task.<sup>31</sup>

These theological convictions, with some qualifications, are reflective of the doctrinal position of many who would ascribe to a Calvinistic soteriology.<sup>32</sup> The following paragraphs provide more specific evidence of theological common ground between the Church Growth Movement and a Calvinistic soteriology.

### **biblical authority**

Though many different denominations are welcome in the Church Growth camp, recognition of the Bible as God's inspired and reliable Word is required.<sup>33</sup> Tippett honored the Bible as "the word of God to man, the norm for discussion."<sup>34</sup> This harmonizes well with many who hold a Calvinistic soteriology.<sup>35</sup>

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### **the nature of god**

The topic of the Nature of God is seminal to both the Church Growth Movement and a Calvinistic soteriology. Two areas of agreement (among many) highlight this compatibility: God's grace in saving sinners and God's sovereignty over all.<sup>36</sup>

God is a saving God who desires to reconcile lost sinners to Himself. This truth was included in Wagner's list of theological convictions. McGavran emphasized that God is a finding God who desires that men be saved, i.e., reconciled to Himself.<sup>37</sup> Hoekema agreed, claiming, "The Canons [of Dort] express deep concern for the salvation of men. They show that it was God's eternal purpose to reconcile men to Himself in Jesus Christ."<sup>38</sup> How and to whom this reconciliation is applied is, of course, the issue that separates Calvinistic soteriology from other theories. The fact that there is salvation for any man, however, demonstrates compatibility.

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<sup>31</sup> Wagner, *Strategies for Church Growth: Tools for Effective Evangelism and Mission* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1989), 39–40.

<sup>32</sup> For discussions of Calvinist theology, see Reid, "Calvinism," in Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 201–3; Enns, *Moody Handbook of Theology*, 475–88.

<sup>33</sup> Donald A. McGavran, *Effective Evangelism: A Theological Mandate* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1988), 105.

<sup>34</sup> A. R. Tippett, *Verdict Theology in Missionary Theory* (South Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1973).

<sup>35</sup> Enns, *Moody Handbook of Theology*, 444–7, 475–88.

<sup>36</sup> A lengthy discussion of the attributes of God is beyond the purpose of the paper. However, McGavran's view of the attributes of God would generally harmonize with Calvin's. This is what is implied by the contention stated in this paper that the two groups generally share a conservative evangelical doctrinal base.

<sup>37</sup> McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 21; idem, "Missionary Confession," 133.

<sup>38</sup> Hoekema, "Missionary Focus of the Canons of Dort," 210.

Enns noted the centrality of the sovereignty of God to the whole doctrinal system of Calvinism. He wrote, “Calvin’s theology centers on the sovereignty of God, the other doctrines being tied to that premise,”<sup>39</sup> calling the doctrine “foundational to the entire system of Calvinism.”<sup>40</sup> Calvinists are not alone, however, in affirming the doctrine of the sovereignty of God. Wagner, though his understanding of how God’s sovereignty relates to the application of salvation to sinners would differ from most Calvinists, affirmed the doctrine. He wrote, “Salvation, the new birth, conversion, redemption, justification, and all that is involved in making a person a ‘new creature in Jesus’ is a unique work of the sovereign God, which he performs without any human help whatsoever.”<sup>41</sup> This statement would likely be heartily affirmed by those holding a Calvinistic soteriology, sounding much like a Calvinist affirmation of the doctrine of God’s sovereignty in salvation.

### **the uniqueness and necessity of jesus christ**

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Uniqueness and necessity means that Jesus Christ is alone in His identity as the Son of God, God Incarnate, and that there would be no salvation apart from the matchless work that He accomplished in His perfect life, vicarious atoning death, and bodily resurrection. The deity of Christ and His exclusivity as the way of salvation are affirmed by both the Church Growth Movement and Calvinistic soteriology. In addition, it is affirmed in both camps that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is to be preached to all nations as the means for salvation.

Patrick Julian Melancon noted McGavran’s insistence on the full humanity and the full deity of Christ, and that the Second Person of the Godhead was incarnate in the man, Jesus of Nazareth. Regarding the exclusivity of Jesus Christ as the way of salvation, McGavran “did not think any other path to salvation was valid and withstood the charges of narrow-mindedness and arrogance.”<sup>42</sup> This way of salvation, according to McGavran, included the necessity of the crucifixion as substitutionary atonement and the bodily resurrection of Jesus from the dead.<sup>43</sup> McGavran rejected the doctrine of universalism, highlighting the need for discipling the nations.<sup>44</sup>

From the Calvinistic perspective, Christology and soteriology are inseparable as well. Enns described Calvinist Christology as: “Jesus Christ is of one substance

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<sup>39</sup> Enns, *Moody Handbook of Theology*, 475.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 480.

<sup>41</sup> Wagner, *Church Growth and the Whole Gospel*, 82.

<sup>42</sup> Patrick Julian Melancon, “An Examination of Selected Theological Topics in the Thought of Donald A. McGavran” (Ph.D. diss., Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, 1997): 96.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 97–9.

<sup>44</sup> McGavran, “The Great Debate in Missions,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 5, no. 2 (November 1970): 169.

with the Father; became virgin born; as the God-Man became the Mediator, offering a perfect sacrifice. Christ purchased reconciliation for all those whom the Father has given Him.”<sup>45</sup>

Packer emphasized the necessity of Jesus Christ. He described the compulsion that Christians should feel to get the Gospel to those without Christ, since without Him, they are doomed, headed for an eternity in hell.<sup>46</sup>

Among advocates of Church Growth and Calvinistic soteriology, both of whose foundations included a high Christology, the uniqueness and necessity of Jesus Christ is a doctrine that is passionately held, though both groups likely include dissenters. This demonstrates compatibility.

### **optimism regarding the success of the gospel**

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Glasser, a Calvinistic Church Growth advocate, summed up how both the Church Growth Movement and Calvinistic thinkers could be optimistic regarding the success of the Gospel: “God wills the growth of His Church.”<sup>47</sup> If God is sovereign, as in a Calvinistic soteriology and the theological convictions of the Church Growth Movement, then what He wills to happen will happen. So the root of optimism concerning evangelism is the notion that growth will occur because that is what God wills. Glasser elaborated: “God will not be thwarted. He has decreed that in the last day His Son will be supreme in the universe and will be surrounded by a segment of fallen humanity He has redeemed through His Cross and conformed to Himself.”<sup>48</sup>

This same confidence is expressed by McGavran. He declared, “God searches until he finds. . . . He reconciles people to Himself.”<sup>49</sup> Tippet’s positive view of the success of the Gospel leading to the growth of the church is due to the consummation of all the promises of God.<sup>50</sup> Since God is ultimately the one who has promised the growth of the church through the success of the Gospel, success and growth are expected. Even though some contingency seems to exist with the pragmatic emphasis on methods that produce results, the optimism of the Church Growth Movement toward the success of the Gospel is a consequence of theological conviction.

From the Calvinistic standpoint, optimism may be too soft a term. Packer

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<sup>45</sup> Enns, *Moody Handbook of Theology*, 478.

<sup>46</sup> Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, 75–91, 98.

<sup>47</sup> Arthur F. Glasser, “Church Growth and Theology,” in Tippet, *God, Man, and Church Growth*, 52.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>49</sup> McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 30.

<sup>50</sup> Tippet, *Church Growth and the Word of God*, 74–80.

claimed that the doctrines of election and God's sovereignty form the very basis for evangelism. He explained:

The sovereignty of God in grace gives us our only hope of success in evangelism. . . . So far from making evangelism pointless, the sovereignty of God in grace is the one thing that prevents evangelism from being pointless. For it creates the possibility—indeed, the certainty—that evangelism will be fruitful. Apart from it, there is not even a possibility of evangelism being fruitful.<sup>51</sup>

God's sovereign grace is the grounds for evangelism in this view. Hoekema concurred, stating, "What the Canons [of Dort] stress about this process of reconciliation is that it is the work of God—from its beginning in God's pre-temporal decree to its consummation in eternity."<sup>52</sup> God's will in eternity past makes the success of the Gospel certain.<sup>53</sup>

### **receptivity and the harvest principle**

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The receptivity principle of Church Growth theory is a fundamental tenet. It is discussed here along with the Harvest Principle because receptivity level is what identifies the harvest in Church Growth thinking. Wagner declared, "Resistance-receptivity theory postulates that at a given point in time certain people groups, families, and individuals will be more receptive to the message of the Gospel than others."<sup>54</sup> He articulated how this is connected to the Harvest Principle:

The value of resistance-receptivity theory for planning evangelistic strategy is self-evident. Since resources are limited, decisions have to be made as to where they can best be used. This necessarily involves setting priorities. Although God can and does intervene and indicate otherwise, it only makes good sense to direct the bulk of the available resources to the areas where the greatest numbers are likely to become disciples of Jesus Christ. The resistant are not to be neglected or bypassed, but they are to be held lightly. This makes good sense to those who take the approach of consecrated pragmatism.<sup>55</sup>

The strategy of spending the majority of missionary resources on responsive people groups is one of the defining missiological principles of the Church Growth Movement.

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<sup>51</sup> Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, 106.

<sup>52</sup> Hoekema, "The Missionary Focus of the Canons of Dort," 210.

<sup>53</sup> For Calvinistic optimism toward the success of the Gospel as reflected in the eschatological position called "Postmillennialism," see Benjamin Breckenridge Warfield, *Biblical and Theological Studies*, ed. Samuel G. Craig (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1968), 270–350; William G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, vol. 2, Classic Reprint Edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971).

<sup>54</sup> Wagner, *Church Growth and the Word of God*, 77.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 77–8. For a fuller explanation of the Harvest Principle, see Wagner, *Strategies for Church Growth*, 57–72.

That some hearers of the Gospel receive it and others reject it is obvious. Greenway noted the role of God in this reality. He wrote, “The harvest is His and He has made it ripe.”<sup>56</sup> McGavran described the activity of God in causing people to be receptive to the Gospel as preparatory grace.<sup>57</sup> This was consistent with his view of election, which included God’s selectivity, man’s receptivity, and the evangelistic harvest of souls. Melancon observed that for McGavran, “Receptivity displayed God’s election and demanded that the church be obedient in harvesting.”<sup>58</sup>

McGavran claimed that the doctrines of receptivity and the Harvest Principle are consistent with Dortian Calvinism. He argued:

Neither Dort nor the New Testament . . . deals with today’s issue, namely: as between gospel acceptors and gospel rejecters; to whom should the Church go first? The church growth view point maintains that, by going to gospel receptors first, Dort Doctrines are maintained and New Testament commands are obeyed. As regards Dort, God in sovereign freedom ripens certain homogeneous units (sub-cultures, segments of humanity) so that groups by multi-individual decision accept Christ. These groups of believing individuals are then baptized and added to the Lord. Mission should—in obedience to God—go to these ripe and receptive populations first.<sup>59</sup>

McGavran’s successor as the Dean of the Fuller Theological Seminary School of World Mission, Glasser affirmed the consistency of receptivity theory and the Harvest Principle with Calvinistic soteriology:

Actually, the Church Growth Movement has taken this profound truth of God’s sovereignty and translated it into a dynamic missionary axiom: “Concentrate on the responsive elements of society.” . . . If God is selective in His grace, if Jesus Christ in the days of His flesh deliberately bypassed some to reach others, should not His missionary servants expect His Spirit to lead them to concentrate on winning the winnable? Indeed, one cannot read carefully the Gospels without being impressed with the very deliberate way in which He ministered to the responsive (Matt. 9:13).<sup>60</sup>

At this particular point, the theological emphases of Calvinistic theology and the pragmatic drive for results of the Church Growth Movement seem to be more than merely compatible. There seems to be something approaching a cause-effect

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<sup>56</sup> Roger S. Greenway, “Winnable People,” in Conn, *Theological Perspectives*, 57.

<sup>57</sup> Donald A. McGavran, *Momentous Decisions in Missions Today* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 47–51.

<sup>58</sup> Melancon, “Theological Topics,” 124.

<sup>59</sup> Donald A. McGavran, ed., *Church Growth Bulletin Volumes I-V* (South Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1969), 190.

<sup>60</sup> Glasser, “Church Growth and Theology,” in Tippett, *God, Man, and Church Growth*, 57–8.

relationship. Clearly then, regarding the theory of receptivity and the Harvest Principle, though there may be exceptions in each of the camps, there is compatibility between the Church Growth Movement and a Calvinistic soteriology.

## **conclusion**

While the existence of Church Growth thinkers who hold a Calvinistic soteriology is ample in itself to manifest the fact that the two schools of thought are not mutually exclusive, the survey of additional evidences of compatibility establishes the relationship between Church Growth and Calvinistic soteriology. Interaction between mission-driven Church Growth Movement and theology-based Calvinism may encourage Church Growth advocates to be more conscious of the need for theological consistency. Further, this interaction may spur Calvinists to apply their theology in obedience to the mission mandate of Scripture.

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The impact of showing the compatibility of the Church Growth Movement with Calvinistic soteriology may serve a broader purpose. The relationship of missions with Calvinist theology may be generally improved by consideration of such compatibility. Both sound, biblical theology and strategic, purposeful missions are needed.

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