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EMERGING CHURCH GROWTH OXYMORON: MCGAVRAN AND NEWBIGIN IN DIALOG

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abstract

The Emerging church and the Church Growth movement are presented in the article in comparison and contrast, with special attention paid to the fathers of both movements, Lesslie Newbigin and Donald McGavran, respectively. An overview of problematic critiques and unhelpful practices in the treatments of each movement is given. Current trends are noted involving shifts in both movements, leaving open a possibility for more constructive dialog and partnership. A final synergy is suggested to envision a future way forward.

It would be difficult to think of stranger bedfellows in Christianity these days than the Emerging church conversation and the Church Growth movement. Upon first glance, the talking points of church growth and the emergent conversation could not appear more divergent.

Church growth is stolidly conservative in doctrine; the Emerging church is roundly criticized[1] for shaky theology. One appears to decline in the consciousness

[1] Most notably by D. A. Carson in *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House © 2005.)

of Christian movements[2]; the other's ascendancy in Christian thought seems to be inching towards a peak, perhaps even fracturing under the weight of its own popularity.[3] Church growth researchers are deeply entrenched in the social sciences of modernity[4]; the postmodern Emerging church is deeply skeptical and deconstructive of the methods of modernity. Church growth has highlighted the numerical success and vibrancy of non-mainline, conservative evangelical churches; Emerging churches often equip believers for a trip down the Canterbury Trail[5] that looks downright mainline. Church growth celebrates mega-churches while the Emerging church seems to prefer house churches. The "tastes-great . . . less filling" style contrasts are many. The phrase "emerging church growth" must be an oxymoron.

Those closely tied to each movement might raise objections at this point. It is certainly unfair to paint the Church Growth movement (CG) or the Emerging church (EC) with one brush apiece.[6] Tony Jones, onetime Coordinator of Emergent Village and a well-known voice in the EC, has already given such a rebuttal:

> "The problem with all of these critiques is that they fundamentally misunderstand the nature of Emergent Village. We are a group of friends—about 20 in 1997, and now in the thousands —who are committed to doing God's Kingdom work together, regardless of our theological, ideological, and political differences. Are we friends with Jim Wallis? Yes! And are there Bush-loving neocons among us? Yes! Emergent is a loose collection of folks who feel that true, robust conversation about issues that matter has been chilled out of modern Christian institutions (seminaries, mega-churches, denominations, and

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[2] "There is a sense in which interest in, and enthusiasm for, Church Growth theory might be thought to have peaked around the middle of the 1980s and to be passé today." Charles Van Engen "A Centrist Response" to the "Gospel and our Culture" view. *Evaluating the Church Growth Movement: 5 Views* edited by Peter E Engle & Gary L. McIntosh (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan © 2004) 103.

[3] E.g., "The Emerging Church: One Movement—Two Streams" by Mark DeVine in *Evangelicals Engaging Emergent: A Discussion of the Emergent Church Movement*. ed. William Henard & Adam Greenway (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishing Group © 2009) 4–46. Compare to "Understanding the Emerging Church" by Ed Stetzer in *The Baptist Press* downloaded on December 5, 2009 from http://www.sbcbaptistpress.org/bpnews.asp?ID=22406. Also compare to "Five Streams of the Emerging Church" by Scott McKnight downloaded on December 5, 2009 from http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2007/february/11.35.html. (DeVine divides the EC in two: doctrine-friendly and doctrine-averse, Stetzer three ways: relevants, revisionists, and reconstructionists, and McKnight tops them all with a full five streams in the EC.)

[4] See "A Short History of Church Growth Research" by Kenneth W. Inskeep in *Church and Denominational Growth*, ed. by David A. Roozen and C. Kirk Hadaway. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press © 1993) 135–148. The perception identified here over-simplifies two overlapping but somewhat distinct elements of Church Growth research: the "social science" church growth researchers, who might focus on "contextual factors" less than the "institutional factors" which some evangelical church growth researchers (such as McGavran) would take more time to analyze and prioritize.

[5] See Robert Webber, *Evangelicals on the Canterbury Trail: Why Evangelicals Are Attracted to the Liturgical Church*. Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing © 1985

[6] As DeVine notes: since 2005 and the publication of D.A. Carson's indicting treatment of the Emerging Church, "The movement has grown, diversified, and shown itself composed of more dimensions than Carson recognized and capable of transmutations and trajectories Carson does not address." DeVine 2009:7

para-church groups, to name a few). We're trying to make a place to bring conversation back. Within Emergent are Texas Baptists who don't allow women to preach and New England lesbian Episcopal priests. We have Southern California YWAMers and Midwest Lutherans. We have those who hold to biblical inerrancy, and others trying to demythologize the scripture. We have environmental, peacenik lefties, "crunchy cons," and right wing hawks."[7]

Like Jones for Emergent, a CG researcher might likewise take pains to clarify the generalizations (although I suspect with much less provocative examples than Tony Jones tends to use). The researcher would assure us that the movement is more diverse and splintered than we might imagine. These corrections are useful to keep in mind. They will help us not to pigeonhole the CG movement or the EC conversation. I am doubtful, however, that distinctions and caveats made would draw the movements closer together. They would merely clarify the number of tents in the camps that are made far off from one another.

Perhaps those who consider themselves a part of the CG movement and those who are engaging in the EC conversation have some things in common, however. Perhaps those who are emerging could widen their conversation to include those passionate about the growth of the church. And perhaps proponents of CG could include emerging thinking at their table at the same time. If both groups were to engage in such a discussion, a dialog that included CG paradigms and EC ethos, what would it look like?

meet the parents

When a dating relationship progresses to the more "serious," you usually orchestrate a time to meet the parents. You can't get very far in defining the relationship until you know where this person is coming from. Perhaps the place to start in a dialog between the EC and the CG movement is to meet the parents. In the case of this relationship, we should introduce ourselves to both McGavran and Newbigin.

First, let's meet Donald McGavran.[8] It would take great effort to overstate the influence of Donald McGavran on the modern CG movement.[9] He is assuredly the "father" the CG types must introduce to the EC.[10]

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[7] "Is Emergent the New Christian Left? Tony Jones Responds to the Critics" by Tony Jones. May 23, 2006. Downloaded on December 10, 2009 from http://www.outofur.com/archives/2006/05/is_emergent_the.html

[8] (1897–1990)

[9] "The name Donald A. McGavran is inseparable from the concept of church growth" from a chapter entitled "Donald A. McGavran: A Tribute to the Founder" by C. Peter Wagner in *Church Growth State of the Art* by C. Peter Wagner, Win Arn & Elmer L. Towns (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers © 1986.)

[10] We will soon be able to make this introduction more formally, as Gary McIntosh is writing a biography of McGavran tentatively titled *Yearning for Growth: Donald A. McGavran and the Church Growth Movement*.

We should also introduce Lesslie Newbigin, of course.[11] As if they were orphans abandoned to the streets of postmodernity, the EC has been in search of a father for more than a decade. They found the perfect adoptive father-figure in Lesslie Newbigin.[12] It is a messier link than the McGavran bloodline—but the EC doesn't mind a little authentic mess from time to time.

We are surprised to discover that our fathers are well known to each other. Rather than an awkward newcomer introduction, Newbigin and McGavran seem to strike up some conversation they must have left incomplete at some previous date. We come to find out that while the CG and EC types consider themselves so disparate, their fathers have a whole lot in common. It is at this moment when they begin to tell stories about India.

mcgavran and newbigin in india

Both McGavran and Newbigin cut their missiological teeth on the Indian subcontinent. Donald McGavran was born in that country to missionary parents and returned to India from the United States himself in 1923, continuing in ministry there right up to 1954, the same year his first book, *Bridges to God,* was released. The year of that publication might be an apt date for the founding of the modern CG movement. Lesslie Newbigin went to India in 1936 from England and proceeded to engage in a full and varied missionary career there. Newbigin retired from India in 1974, but had published his first work entitled *South India Diary* in 1951.

What McGavran communicated in his books, papers, and lectures was strong enough in force to birth a movement with clarity and purpose whose influence spread into nearly ever corner of the church in the latter half of the twentieth century. All he said could not even be summarized here, but one of his core messages is found in his book *Understanding Church Growth*. In this work, he outlines the difference between what he called "search theology" contrasted with the view he championed: "harvest theology."[13] Search theology, according to McGavran, frames missions and evangelism as acts of proclamation not focused on or accountable for the results the acts produce. "Its duty is complete in

[11] (1909–1998)

[12] See "The Newbigin Gauntlet" by in *The Church between Gospel and Culture: the Emerging Mission in North Amercia* ed. George R. Husberger & Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids: MI: Wm B. Eerdmans © 1996.) which states, "Perhaps more than anyone, Newbigin has grappled theologically with the issues of gospel and culture . . ." Scot McKnight also addresses Newbigin's centrality to the "conversation" when he says "No one points the way forward in this regard more carefully than longtime missionary to India, Lesslie Newbigin, especially in his book *Proper Confidence* . . . Emerging upholds faith seeking understanding, and trust preceding the apprehension or comprehension of gospel truths."

[13] *Understanding Church Growth*, Donald A. McGavran (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company © 1990) rev. & ed. C. Peter Wagner

proclamation," since God "will gather into his church whom he wills." McGavran criticizes this view sharply, saying, "Mere search is not what God wants . . . God wants his lost children found" (26–27). He says this theology developed for four reasons: 1) in "the face of weakness at home and resistance abroad", the church developed the opinion that the results were up to God (24). 2) Relativism buttressed search theology—a "deferential proclamation" developed—essentially allowing the church to approach evangelism in this tone: *you believe what you want, but I believe in Jesus Christ*. (25). 3) The gap in wealth between Christian West and the developing world caused a real need for humanitarian work by the church, and this delayed then perhaps displaced conversion. In one of his more memorable indictments, McGavaran noted that those pursuing this path practically found that they "could not produce many converts; but they could produce many hospital treatments . . ." (25) Finally, this theology developed as 4) a defensive rationale for lack of growth, becoming a "caveat" of sorts for small and non-growing membership in churches and mission stations around the world. To illustrate the phenomenon, McGavran shows how this search theology might work in the parable of Jesus: "The shepherds, going out to search for lost sheep, meet at the gate to announce that they do not intend to notice particularly how many are found . . ." (26).

The solution to the anemic results of search theology, as McGavran suggests, is to embrace a "Harvest Theology." He likewise notes four components to a healthy harvest theology: 1) rather than being uninterested, God is positively *possessive* about the harvest we should be about the task of bringing to Him . . . He is called the "Lord of the Harvest" and the harvest itself is "*His* harvest"[14] (27). 2) The parables themselves emphasize the *finding*, not merely the *search* for the lost (28). 3) The joy over a single sinner's repentance is immense in heaven—how much more would the joy be over *many* repenting (28–29). 4) He concludes with a point about how the early church numerically recorded their church growth and expanded throughout the known world rapidly (29). This final point included a recurring novel theme emphasized in the work of McGavran which is the impetus to take the gospel to those places that might be most responsive.[15] He concludes that a theology of search is not wrong; it is merely "partial" (30).

At this point we should lean over to the other father in the room, Rev. Newbigin, to see what he thinks of McGavran's approach. We might be surprised

[14] "therismon autou" or "θερισμον αυτο"

[15] You could say that this amounted to bias for numerical response but it is a logical extension within this paradigm if "two converts are always better than one." The "unprecedented receptivity" to the gospel found in many countries was outlined in McGavran's original paper to the 1974 Lusanne International Congress on World Evangelization. See "The Dimensions of World Evangelization" by Donald A. McGavran downloaded on December 11, 2009 from http://www.lausanne.org/documents/lau1docs/0094.pdf

to find a good deal of agreement between the two missiologists. Newbigin is likewise frustrated with an anemic church that has little influence on the culture. Having observed similar situations in India, they both have a keen sense of the unethical imperialistic tactics some modern missions had gravitated towards. On the issue of the growth of the church, Newbigin's head is nodding in agreement whilst McGavran explains his theology of harvest. There are differences in tone and emphases, no doubt, but at their core there is agreement.

The best place to put Newbigin more fully into conversation with McGavran is Newbigin's 1978 book *The Open Secret*. In this work Newbigin defines how he sees the *missio Dei:* "Mission is the proclaiming of the kingdom of the Father, and it concerns the rule of God over all that is. We have seen, therefore, that the church has been led by the logic of its own gospel to move beyond preaching into actions of all kinds for the doing of God's justice in the life of the world."[16] Mission, for Newbigin, might have a more nuanced and expanded scope than McGavran's platform. But in *The Open Secret* Newbigin engages McGavran's thought with plenty of "amens" along the way.

Newbigin notes, already here in 1978, the laudable impact the father of CG has had. "Dr. Donald McGavran has forced missionary agencies in the many parts of the world to ask why churches do not grow and to plan deliberately for church growth and expect it as the normal experience of missions" (122). No doubt Newbigin's respect for McGavran was influenced by their shared missionary station in the same country. Newbigin says that "Dr. McGavran's convictions were developed out of his experience in India, where he observed that some churches were multiplying rapidly while others in similar situations stagnated." (122) He summarizes McGavran's analysis of divergent missionary techniques, one being the "mission station" approach where the new Christians are intentionally isolated from their home communities and then fully integrated into the foreign mission and its institutions, required to conform to ethical and cultural standards that belong to the Christianity of the foreign missionary.

McGavran, in the summary of Newbigin and with his support, says the effect is twofold: "on the one hand the convert, having been transplanted into an alien culture, is no longer in a position to influence . . ." those in the culture they are related to or have relationships with. Newbigin continues: ". . . on the other hand the energies of the mission are exhausted in the effort to bring the converts, or . . .

[16] Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company © 1995) p21.Chapter 9 of this book includes an extensive review of Newbigin's perception and analysis of McGavran's paradigm of Church Growth.

their children, into conformity with the standards supposed by the missionaries to be required by the gospel." (122)

McGavran and Newbigin both see the significant limits of this approach. McGavran emphasizes how this paradigm stops the growth of the church compared to mission work that is far more adept at inculturation, for instance. The results, in Newbigin's review, are that "schools, colleges, hospitals, and programs for social action multiply, but the church does not." (122) Both of our "fathers" appropriately grieve this lack of growth. This collegial response by Newbigin might come as a surprise to many in the EC, who sometimes dismiss CG thinking and McGavran's approach out of hand. We should be reminded of the common ground here in the conversation.

In the book *Signs Amid the Rubble*, Newbigin describes his first engagement with McGavran's approach. "When McGavran and I were both serving as missionaries in India, his books came to me as illuminating my situation. I find marks of approval in the margins of my copies of his earliest works. He rightly saw that missionaries measure discipleship by standards not derived not from the Scripture but from their own European and American cultures . . ."[17] (84) He notes that the consequences were disastrous, and the lines between conversation and cultural change were inappropriately blurred. The most poignant example he cites to support McGavran's case is when literacy became a pre-existing requirement for full communicant membership. Newbigin, like McGavran would, calls this an "absurd rule." (85)

So, we might overall take note of the areas of common ground between the fathers of these movements. In an overview comparing and contrasting the CG movement and the Newbigin-inspired Gospel and Our Culture Network[18] for the *Journal of the American Society for Church Growth*, Timothy Peck notes "several core similarities between these movements than can serve as a common ground for ongoing dialog."[19] In his list of commonalities he includes *similar origins*, *similar questions*, and *similar answers* (at least in regards to biblical doctrine).

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[17] *Signs Amid the Rubble: the Purposes of God in Human History* by Lesslie Newbigin (edited and introduced by Geoffrew Wainwright and posthumously published by Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company (©2003) p84–86

[18] Here I should note the difference in scope between Peck's article and this one. While his article narrowed the dialog to the GOCN this one speaks of the larger Emerging church movement or conversation. It is my assessment that the GOCN is a more academic missional renewal movement that is largely influential in Reformed church circles, rather than with the vast majority of those who self identify as being in the Emerging church. Most of them would never have heard of the GOCN.

[19] "The Church Growth Movement and the Gospel and Our Culture Network: An Ongoing Dialog" by Timothy J. Peck in *Journal of the American Society for Church Growth*, Volume 13, Fall 2002, p19–27.

The similarities end quite quickly there, however. The conversation between our fathers begins to turn to the finer points of their missiologial approach, and here their differences loom large. Newbigin's critique of McGavran is founded in the latter's approach to the effect discipling has upon the new believer and the culture the new believer finds themselves in. Newbigin would have that conversion begin to affect the broader culture in transformative ways. (Newbigin 2003, 86). In his view McGavran highlights conversion of the individual in evangelism and misses the broader conversion of culture. This is a missiological shortcoming Newbigin cannot overlook. He insists that "there can be no conversion which has any reality if it does not involve a change in perception and in behavior, in other words, conversion cannot leave culture unchanged" (86). To illustrate, Newbigin highlights their difference in opinion regarding India's culture. McGavran suggested that the caste system need not be adjusted in terms of conversion of the lost in India—but to instead evangelize people within it. Newbigin considered the caste system a social evil that should be changed by converted Christians. Where McGavran might also consider it a social evil, he would put its change secondary to reaching the lost. Newbigin, however, holds the conversion of culture in near equal status to the saving of souls.[20]

Unfortunately, we do not have a robust response to Newbigin's critique from McGavran. The CG movement's founding father merely continued on his successful path of calling the church to renew itself and reach the lost in ever more effective ways. Proponents of the Church Growth movement have not rolled over, however, and the book *Evaluating the Church Growth Movement: 5 Views* is our best place to turn for a response. Charles Van Engen considers "Newbigin's critique to be accurate and appropriate." (104) He shares the Newbigin-inspired concern that "much CG theory has fueled a functional view of the church, to the extent that churches (and congregations) are only significant as they are useful tools to achieve some other goal" (104). However, Van Engen points out a core problem CG proponents have with the Newbigin schools of thought (which I think

[20] Newbigin's speech to the Grubb Institute Colloquium in 1998 contains perhaps his most scathing critique of McGavran and Church Growth thinking. He explains, in contrast to more extreme church growth thinking, that the church cannot exist only to gain converts that gain converts and over and over again—an "infinite regress." He compares this cycle to cell growth, saying "the multiplication of cells unrelated to the purpose of the body is what we call cancer." But he couches this comment with a heavy caveat saying that McGavran and the Church Growth movement cannot be entirely attributed to this minimalistic ecclesiology—but rather, this would only describe those that hold to the notion of individualistic evangelism as mission in total. "On Being the Church for the World" reprinted in G. Eccleston (ed.) *The Parish Church? Exploration in the Relationship of the Church and the World*. Oxford: Mowbray, 25–42.

can be applied to many in the EC.) The problem has to do with thinking of western culture in the singular. How can we view "the west" with such monolithic vision? Van Engen says, "In North America, we can no longer use the word in the singular . . . [it] is a complex mosaic of many cultures." (106) This is a grand irony, of course, because we in the EC (and the GOCN) wear as a badge our cultural sensitivity—it is close to a core value. Perhaps it is not showing in our missiological communication.

A deeper concern coming from Van Engen and others concerns the lack of emphasis on conversion itself. They consider the critics of the CG movement and still stand squarely in the camp of conversion of individual first, then culture second. "I do not believe ethical living and the social impact of the gospel . . ." Van Engen says "is possible without . . . spiritual conversion" (106). Newbigin is less firm on this point than others, but he does include caveats along these lines. In a review of the concept, particularly as advanced by some German missiologists, that we are to convert "the nations" and thus the individual conversion must take a back seat to cultural conversion, Newbigin resists. He clarifies the intent of the Great Commission, and then notes: "There is no way in which . . . nations . . . can be discipled except as the people who compose them are converted, baptized, and enabled to live in the power of the Spirit." (Newbigin 2003, 89) Newbigin's views of the near equal treatment of individual and cultural conversion in emphasis, or in some cases, an unequal elevation of the cultural transformation, can make CG proponents quite nervous. But he does not appear to have his cultural cart before the individual conversion horse when he spells things out in detail. Craig Van Gelder gives a parallel caveat in his overview of the gospel and our culture response to the CG movement, noting that Scripture does indicate that there is a "clear expectation that the church will grow."[21]

dismissive treatment

Perhaps most concerning to me overall is the dismissive way both McGavran and Newbigin, as well as their missiological offspring, are treated. McGavran, on the one hand, is oft dismissed as a missiological lightweight. David Bosch's wonderfully respected and otherwise fair and insightful book *Transforming*

[21] Craig Van Gelder "Gospel and our Culture" view in *Evaluating the Church Growth Movement: 5 Views* edited by Peter E Engle & Gary L. McIntosh (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan © 2004) p76.

Mission seems to only cite McGavran as a straw-man foil along the way.[22] In every single citation of McGavran, his view is derisive, attributing to McGavran church forms that are a "veiled form of escapism" and a view of salvation that is "dangerously narrow." Bosch goes so far as to describe McGavran's harvest theology as "distorting evangelism." I wonder if this dismissive tilt betrays a lack of true engagement with what McGavran got right. What is interesting to me is not that Bosch made these statements in this way—but that he is expected to do so. I wonder if those in the EC itself can see our own limitations. Members of the CG movement do not seem to be invited into the EC conversation—a dialog that, supposedly, is to open to anyone. Perhaps we meant to say anyone that is not overly influenced by the enlightenment.

However, these same kinds of accusations could be levied against the CG movement. The EC is the target of many scathing rebukes and diatribes, from blogs to books. Perhaps as a result of the more diverse theological and political views of the participants in the conversation—emergents are easily attacked. If Brian McLaren or Rob Bell make this or that controversial statement it is then applied to anyone who would dare use the term "emerging" in an evangelical context. The conflict is real. In my own district, one youth pastor was summarily fired after preaching a few sermons (when the senior pastor was on vacation) that contained more than their acceptable limit of EC thoughts that were gleaned from a book written by EC author Donald Miller.

Now, these kinds of affects cannot be laid at the door of CG proponents alone—they are broader evangelical responses. However, a common retort of CG movement types to EC concerns is that they are "liberal." This kind of labeling is unfair and while perhaps could be applied to many in the EC we find it to be unhelpful to apply to them all, just as it is unhelpful to dismiss the entire CG movement in the ways cited above.

shifts in both movements

How is the dialog Timothy Peck called for going? What progress has been made? What's more, how have EC leaders adjusted their thinking to include some CG paradigms—or has the baby been mistaken for bathwater? And how has the CG

[22] David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books © 1991 see pages 381–2, 398, 404, 406, 410f, 415, 420, 505, 532 for each citation of McGavran in this work. I do not mean to disqualify Bosch's work entire, but only to note that his treatment of McGavran illustrates a general dismissive and negative treatment of the man and his work.

movement adjusted its approach to consider the serious critiques offered by Newbigin and his emergent progeny?

I have seen some encouraging signs. The first came at the 2006 Leadership Summit at Willow Creek Community Church. Willow's conferences could be seen as the jewel in the crown of the CG movement. Only the best large church practitioners and communicators make it to the stage of the Leadership Summit, where their speeches are broadcast to hundreds of satellite sites worldwide. However, in 2006, a perceptible shift could be seen in the content of the conference. Many of the speakers signaled a change in their own ministries toward the transformation of the culture around them and a compassion for the needs of the world. Bill Hybels and Rick Warren both outlined the need for social change in world relief, racism and AIDS care and prevention, particularly in Africa. Wes Stafford of Compassion International was one of the guest speakers that echoed these sentiments, and then all this was capped off by an interview of rock band U2's Bono by Bill Hybels. This may not seem like that big of a deal, but it does seem like every single EC leader I meet is a big Bono fan. If we were forced to elect an Emerging church pope, he might get the most votes. Emergents took notice as the largest conference of Evangelical Church Growth developed an agenda that sounded downright emerging in content.

At the same time, many emerging practitioners are fleshing out their own missiology in real time. We must remember that most emergent thinking is in its infancy (for instance, Brian McLaren's book *A New Kind of Christian* came out in just 2001). One of the best skills of EC thinkers is deconstruction. They are able to turn their incisive and semantic knives onto any topic and dissect it into its disassembled parts. Early EC leaders used this skill to great effect on evangelical epistemology, church growth approaches, and the entire enlightenment-influenced Modern Age itself. Enough time has passed, however, that EC leaders are becoming self-critical, and this is what seems to have caused the current fracturing of the EC world into many parts. We are now self-deconstructing.

I do not see this as a negative trend, but only a more mature and thoughtful approach to the same EC questions. Of course, those questions result in a variety of answers. None of us in the EC has ever expected anything close to a unanimous voice to emerge. This is why I recently heard an inner-city "missional" church planter tell me, "I don't really use the buzzword 'missional' anymore—everyone uses it, so what does that even mean now? I just say, 'Effective.'" Not so long ago it was common for EC leaders to practically celebrate the smallness of their churches. Now many around the circle where such claims are made are suspicious that lack of growth somehow proves authenticity. An emergent would have to

admit that a large church or a small church can be likewise inauthentic to the *missio Dei*, or in CG terminology, authentic to reaching the lost.

the aim of growth

So perhaps a season is dawning in which the seemingly passé CG movement and the fracturing EC conversation can develop some common approaches to a compelling, world-changing missiology. A return to the thinking of McGavran and Newbigin, and more importantly a return to Scripture and the patterns of the earliest churches, helps us see that the conversion of individuals and the transformation of culture are both in our short list of aims. In the local ministry settings, these ideas find their application and take on greater relevance.

Through diligent study and critically constructive conversation, we can hone in on the finer points of missiology and thus become more and more precise in the way we describe the ecclesial purpose of the body of Christ. However, if none of this translates into individuals whose lives are changed in Christ, if we don't see churches that have more and more transformed people in them, if we fail to make a difference in our communities and defeat social evils that are pervasive in our cultures, then all is for naught. We will simply be two choirs preaching to each other about how great our last song sounded to us.

EC leaders and CG leaders both want our churches to *grow*. We want this because we are looking for more people's lives to change, so that our cultures might be transformed, and so that it would truly be on earth as it is in heaven. We all join in the celebration of heaven for each lost sheep that is found. Perhaps *emerging church growth* need not be the oxymoron I assumed it to be.

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