

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](https://paypal.me/robbradshaw)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for the *Christian Brethren Research Fellowship Journal* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_cbrfj.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_cbrfj.php)

# THE CHURCH GROWTH POINT OF VIEW AND CHRISTIAN MISSION

Donald McGavran

Christian Mission continues, in the midst of a tremendous world wide revolution which affects almost all segments of mankind and aspects of life. Small wonder that, amidst the multitudinous adjustments called for, no one knows quite what 'mission' is. It is being redefined on the right and on the left.

Louis and Andre Retif, noted Roman Catholic missiologists, in *The Church's Mission in the World*, for example, say that 'mission properly so called consists in bringing a non-Christian to the faith or in marking some non-Christian reality with the stamp of the Gospel'. Thus the mission 'is exercised not only in the geographical and ethnic spheres, but also in those of civilization and sociology'.

D. Y. Niles in *On This Earth*, says that 'a missionary is a Christian as a Christian simply being there'.

To some, the mission is a many sided enterprise in which Christians go out to do good to men in the name of Jesus, healing, teaching, helping younger Churches, evangelizing, administrating, and making nations more friendly to each other. The mysterious dictum that 'The Church is Mission and Unity' further complicates the issue and enables almost everything the Church does outside her four walls to be called mission in some sense or other. The word has become so broad as to be almost without meaning. The vast effort to state a theology of mission (which includes everything the Church now does) results in the KKD formula (kerygma, koinonia, diaconia) whereby worship, service, and proclamation, become that which God is doing in the world through the Church and hence mission.

The Church Growth point of view arises in sharp contradistinction to all this. It grants that God is doing and the Church should be doing many good things in the world; but as long as more than two billion men yield no allegiance to Christ in addition to the uncounted millions of nominal Christians, it insists that 'mission' should properly be limited to proclaiming Jesus Christ by word and deed as divine and only Saviour and persuading men to become His disciples and responsible members of His Church. Given mighty multiplication of churches of Christ throughout the earth—the members of each church living out the Gospel in each person and in the corporate structures which make up society—the 'non-Christian realities' which Retif speaks about will truly have 'the stamp of Christ' put upon them. Until there is mighty multiplication of churches, most realities in most lands will remain firmly non-Christian.

The Church Growth point of view is rooted in theology. God wants church growth. He wants His lost children found. The multiplication

**About the author.** Donald McGavran is the Director of the Institute of Church Growth and the Graduate School of World Mission of Fuller Theological Seminary (California).

of churches is theologically required. Christians, churches, and missionary societies are correctly concerned about communicating Christ. They *should* be propagating the Christian religion. Indeed, growth, as Winburn Thomas pointed out in an article in a recent *International Review of Missions*, is a test of the Church's faithfulness. 'The Gospel', Paul says in Romans 16: 26 (New English Bible) 'is now disclosed and . . . by eternal God's command made known to all nations *to bring them to faith and obedience*'. Christians are ambassadors to reconcile men to God in the Church of Jesus Christ.

While Christians are commanded to preach the Gospel to the whole creation, the New Testament never intends proclamation for proclamation's sake. It intends proclamation that men may believe, be baptized in the Name of Christ, be saved, and manifest the fruits of the Spirit.

Thus the Church Growth point of view sets itself off, on the one hand, from the inclusive obscurantists who furiously label everything 'mission', with the result that the word becomes meaningless; and, on the other, from the neutral witness school which seems to believe that mission is summed up in witness of some sort whether any believe or not. *Theologically* mission is bringing men to faith and obedience, multiplying churches, and leading them to further self propagation. In short, finding the lost and bringing them back to the Father's house is a chief and irreplaceable purpose of Christian missions to Asia, Africa and Latin America where tremendous numbers are living and dying without placing their faith on Jesus Christ. I am writing from America. Were I writing from India, I would equally easily say that Christian missions to Europe and America have as a chief and irreplaceable purpose finding the lost in these lands and bringing them back to the Father's house.

True, men have multitudinous needs of body and mind. Meeting these needs is thoroughly Christian. The Church is properly engaged in relief of suffering, pushing back the barriers of ignorance, and increasing productivity. But such activities must be carried out *in proportion*. They must never be substituted for finding the lost. Christians must never be guilty of turning from the Spirit to the flesh or of mocking men with false securities, as Lesslie Newbigin has said. As long as mission is clearly the planting of churches and yet more churches, it can and should carry on many auxiliary enterprises, some of which contribute directly to world evangelization and some of which do not.

What must not happen, however, is for a vague amorphous enterprise consisting of many parallel thrusts, none of which has an inherent priority, being called Christian mission. Christian mission is not an ecclesiastical peace corps, with some preaching of the Gospel thrown in. It is not helpful to confuse the issue by saying that mission is search for Christian unity or Christianization of the framework of society. Those are good activities. In the interests of clarity, they should be carried on and accounted for not under 'mission' but under other heads.

The primacy of church multiplying is theoretically accepted by most Churches and written into the constitutions of their missionary societies. The promotional addresses of most missionaries stress preaching the

Gospel and winning men and women to Christ. Practically, however, liberals and conservatives, state Churches and gathered Churches constantly under-emphasize and betray church planting. They agree that it is the heart of mission, but examination of their budgets reveals that a relatively small proportion of their total strength is devoted to it.

Missionaries and mission organizations today, faced with many human needs, often defeated by resistant populations, always bound by previous patterns of action, cumbered with institutionalism in advance of the Church, burdened with cultural overhang which leads them to proclaim Christ in Western ways, committed to a non-biblical individualism, not understanding multi-individual accession as a normal way in which men come to Christ, and deceived by their own promotional efforts (whatever missions do is 'wonderful') engage in 'splendid church and mission work'. They are not frequently engaged in specific, purposeful, well planned, and efficient church planting. This is true of both liberals and conservatives. Bitter experience teaches them to entertain small expectations of church growth, and they spend most of their time and missionaries for other things. They claim that these other things contribute to church growth, or are intended to do so: but they almost never evaluate what they are doing or revise their programs in the light of whether churches are in fact planted.

Furthermore, at this very time, the mosaic of peoples which makes up the world is much more responsive than it has ever been. Numerous pieces of the mosaic have become winnable. Segment after segment can be disciplined. For example, in Sierra Leone ten or fifteen major tribes compose the principal population. Each tribe is a large piece of the mosaic. Each tribe in turn is composed of many small pieces—dialects, chiefdoms, political or geographical divisions, and the like. Not all of the mosaic but small pieces of the Mende, Kissi, and Kono tribes have Christward surges operating in them. The small pieces demonstrate winnability. Out of them men and groups of men are being baptized and 'added to the Lord'. In nation after nation, such responsive units of the population can readily be identified.

Many resistant and rebellious sections of the mosaic also exist. Some populations have set their faces like flint against the Gospel. They literally will not hear. Other populations are merely indifferent: they hear and go blithely about their business. It may be that of the scores of thousands of segments of mankind more than half are resistant. No one has counted and classified them.

Nevertheless, it can be stated confidently that thousands of more or less receptive pieces of the mosaic exist. Some are found, and many more would be found if the missionary forces of the world would diligently search for them. Enough receptive populations exist so that the entire missionary force could be poured into them and there would be room for yet more.

However, not all the winnable are being won. Most responsive units are being mishandled. God's servants are coming out of ripening fields with fewer sheaves than is necessary. Partly because mission suffers from

paucity of knowledge about finding lost men and building them into churches, enough 'discipling' is not happening. Each generation of missionaries and national ministers inherits a going work and, without a clear goal in sight, intent on doing good church and mission work, repeats many of the mistakes made by previous incumbents.

A frequent sequence is the following. Mission work in a resistant field is adjusted to meet resistance. Methods suitable for working among the resistant are used. Expectations of church growth are curtailed to fit what the past has shown to be likely. Then the resistant population turns receptive (or, more often, one section of it turns receptive). Changing methods and escalating expectations to fit the new situation is a process which most missions and churches find difficult. Often God has to send in a new missionary society or a new Church, not shut up in the prison-house of past practices, before the potential church growth begins to be realized.

The paucity of available knowledge of how churches multiply—so characteristic of missions—can now be ended. As a matter of fact the Church Universal has a great deal of knowledge of how churches grow. She has grown from nothing to hundreds of millions. But this knowledge is not available: it is shut away in denominational, geographical, and linguistic compartments. Exchange centers dedicated to finding out about church growth do not exist. The information in these thousands of pockets can be pulled out, evaluated, organized, forced to yield the secrets of growth, and shared by all Christian missions. The hard facts of church increase can be ascertained by researches. Where has the Church grown? Where have churches multiplied? How much have they multiplied? What non-Christian reservoirs are left? Above all, why and how have churches reproduced themselves. What is God teaching us through past successes and failures in the propagation of the Gospel?

Christians often show greater intelligence in conducting their worldly business than in conducting missions. They spend hundreds of millions on research in how to make synthetic fabrics, get mail faster to its destination, land men on the moon, paint houses, and do innumerable other tasks; but on research in discovering how men of other cultures can be led past barriers to accept the abundant eternal life available in Jesus Christ perhaps a few thousands now and then are spent. The time has come for all Churches and their missionary societies to invest at least five per cent of their income in planned, continuous, purposeful research dedicated to finding out how the Gospel may more effectively be communicated.

The hard facts of church growth, once discovered, should be published. Hundreds of books on various aspects of Christian mission (by which I mean the communication of the Gospel to unbelievers) should be published and made available to Christians. Missionaries will, of course, read these. They should be read also by thousands of missionary minded Christians in all churches. The mission is the task of the Church. The Church—to borrow that mysterious phrase from the obscurantists—is mission. Innumerable Christians, all who take seriously their Lord's death on the cross for all men, and His commission to disciple the nations, should come

to have an exact knowledge about their mission, which is also the Lord's mission.

The sciences of man—anthropology, sociology, and psychology—have much to tell us about how society is put together, how it 'works', how it initiates changes, and how these ramify throughout the corporate structure. All such knowledge can be used by mission to extend the Church. These sciences are in themselves neutral. They can be used to build up totalitarianisms or advance the Kingdom of God, Harnessed anthropology, by which I mean anthropology which has been applied to the propagation of the Gospel, should become the common property of all missionaries.

Research, devising of more effective methods, publication of church growth books, dissemination of knowledge made available by the sciences of man, and much else is ancillary to the actual planting of churches. It must be judged by the effectiveness with which it does plant churches. Christian missions are already cumbered with too many good plans which ought to work, but don't. Every mode of mission should be submitted to the test of whether it does in fact operate to multiplying churches in receptive populations.

Another way of saying the same thing is that actual church planting should be greatly increased. The means and methods will be multitudinous. Let us have more church planting by laymen, and by missionaries, and by ministers. Let denominations turn their most intelligent efforts to claiming given populations for Christ and making available to them the liberating power of Christ in viable churches. Let church planting by the indigenous church method, mass evangelism, people movements, personal work, literature and radio increase mightily. Where schools and hospitals do, in fact, work to the increase of churches, let us use them greatly for sowing a countryside with hundreds of congregations.

The great urban conurbations which mark our day should be—but are not—among the most responsive areas of human life. The task in them is not to 'do urban work': it is to multiply congregations. If that is done, urban work will look after itself. The task is not to 'extend a witness to new villages', but to establish cells of baptized believers there. The task is not to 'build Christ into the foundations of Brazil' or to 'maintain a Christian presence' in modern industry. These vague phrases are confessions of confusion and defeat. The task is much clearer—to seed Brazil with hundreds of thousands of churches of Christ and bring multitudes who comprise labor and management in the industries of the world to a saving experience of Christ.

Finally, theological education in the seminaries of the world has been largely planned and theologies have been largely framed with other Christians in view. Other Christians, must, of course, be kept in view; but over and above doing that, with two billion and more who have never considered becoming Christian a real option must be held firmly in view as theological education is laid out and theologies are developed. God, the Father Almighty, as revealed in Jesus Christ and the Bible, has set forth a plan of salvation for all mankind. He sent His only Son to die for all men. He is the Author of Mission and remains in charge of it at all

times. Any theology, worthy of the name, must be intensely concerned in every doctrine with liberating the world through a fantastic multiplication of Christian churches.

The Church Growth point of view takes the discipling of the nations seriously. Entirely friendly to all good mission works, to all Christian enterprises, and thoroughly aware of the rushing revelation of the twentieth century, the Church Growth point of view quietly insists that precisely in times such as these we must maintain the biblical priorities. These must regulate our preparations. These priorities must operate in a cool, clear understanding of each segment of mankind. Each of thousands of plans of operations must be defensible when hailed before the Lord and questioned as to whether it is the most effective possible plan for bringing the segment for which it was designed to faith and obedience.

#### **Bibliographical Note**

In addition to the books by McGavran listed in the bibliography to this issue of the *Journal*, special attention is called to the studies by Read, Shearer, and Grimley. 'Receptivity: Missions' Great Challenge' (*The Christian and Christianity Today*, May 6, 1966, p. 12) by McGavran provides the reader with a brief introduction to some of the basic principles of church growth. Studies on church growth in (1) the Andes Mountains, (2) New Guinea, (3) Guatemala, (4) Costa Rica, and (5) Jamaica—in addition to those on church growth in (6) Mexico, (7) Brazil, (8) Korea, and (9) Nigeria, which are listed in the bibliography—are available from the Institute of Church Growth, 135 North Oakland Avenue, Pasadena, California 91101, U.S.A. The writings of Roland Allen are also relevant.