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Reformation & REVIVAL

My Journey Through the Church Growth Movement

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A lady from our congregation recently traveled out of state for a wedding. During her involvement in the wedding festivities, she was seated at a table with a pastor who was in between churches. An interesting dialogue began to ensue.

This "in-between" pastor was a member of a noted Southern Baptist church whose pastor is considered to be one of the Convention's finest preachers. His conversation went something like this: "We have the most wonderful pastor! He really preaches the Word. He preaches against sin and even calls sin 'sin.' We have a fast-growing church, with over 10,000 members."

"That's interesting," my friend replied, then asked, "Does he preach on doctrine?"

The pastor looked a bit puzzled at her inquiry and quickly stated, "Oh no! He would never preach against other churches."

"Oh, that's not what I mean!" this inquisitive lady responded. "By doctrine I am referring to regeneration, justification, redemption, sanctification and so forth. Does he preach on these subjects?"

With a stunned look, this preacher said of his well-known pastor, "No, he doesn't preach on *those* kinds of things."

If growth strategists could take a tour around my denomination and point out the finest, growing churches,

this one would be among the top of their list. Their pastor has preached at numerous denominational conferences, conventions, and rallies. His picture and name frequently appear in denominational publications, yet the sad assessment is that "No, he doesn't preach on *those* kinds of things."

How can we reconcile a *growing church* with *doctrine-less preaching* and still call it a New Testament church? This is precisely where I found myself several years ago.

While in my third pastorate, I grew despondent over the lack of sizable growth in my congregations. I had attended conferences and seminars that promoted *growth, growth, growth* as being the end-all for pastors. I had listened to the well-respected men in my denomination and often wished that my church could have the kind of growth they had experienced. Finally, my despondency led to action! After making radical changes in my own church organization, I started seeing our numbers rise. I was gratified and motivated to go after more growth. I'm not much for doing things half-way, so I thought that the best move I could make would be to study church growth at the "fountainhead," Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California.

My first two-week seminar in Fuller's Doctor of Ministry program was under the leading spokesman for church growth, Dr. C. Peter Wagner. Wagner is a former missionary in South America who returned to his alma mater to teach with the late Dr. Donald McGavran. While McGavran, a former missionary to India, is known as the "father of the church growth movement," Wagner certainly carries the title for the best-known proponent. I had already read several of Wagner's books in preparation for this seminar, along with books by many others in the movement. I found Wagner to be an interesting and personable teacher, one who has the capacity of producing lively classroom

discussions. Armed with overhead transparencies and a battery of notes, Wagner began to unfold to my class the basics of church growth.

I found myself hanging on to every word spoken in class, though at times I was uneasy with various assertions. Wagner never flinched when rebuffed in class over disagreements, though such disagreements seldom happened. He stated that he welcomed criticism and corrections for the teachings on church growth since that became one of the best tools for refining the movement.

I continued my studies at Fuller with a major emphasis on church growth and church planting. Twenty-four units out of my forty units of class time were devoted to studying church growth. While Peter Wagner taught most of the material related to church growth, there were other professors involved. Among them was John Wimber, founder of the Vineyard churches, who taught the controversial subject of "signs and wonders" and their relationship to church growth as part of the advanced level of church growth studies. I noticed in my first twelve-unit course on church growth that Wagner found great delight in quoting John Wimber, as well as telling interesting vignettes about the booming Vineyard Church. It was obvious that the Vineyard Church was considered a viable model of true church growth. I was interested in my second two-week course to hear what Wimber himself had to say about growth and the need for "signs and wonders" as foundational to such growth. By the time of my graduation, I was thoroughly steeped in "church growth thinking" and the broad range of the movement's influence upon evangelicalism.

Much of what is taught in the church growth movement can be labeled under the heading of "common sense." Perhaps there's too much neglect of common sense in our day, so church growth proponents have reminded

church leaders of a few basics that can help their churches. Details regarding church parking, building the right staff, location, maximizing use of facilities, training lay leadership, utilizing spiritual gifts, and diagnosing weaknesses can be readily found in church growth materials. Much of this common sense teaching will be extremely helpful to any church staff. Churches will be wise to avail themselves of it.

The church growth movement also provides a good analysis of the weakness of crusade evangelism and the greater effectiveness of one-on-one evangelism. Stress is laid on pursuing the "fields that are white unto harvest" in efforts to reach the lost and grow churches. A strong emphasis on "disciple making" over against merely "evangelizing" helps to correct the attitude of bloating church rolls with unconverted members. Statistics provided by church growth leaders can give a church staff a better grasp of the spiritual needs in our nation.

While I found some helpful ideas in studying church growth, I also found myself wrapped up in a "mentality" that proved costly. Building a church on "church growth principles" meant an adherence to *pragmatism* rather than biblical Christianity. Pragmatism can provide increased numbers, but it cannot regenerate unbelieving men. As a pragmatist, I was interested in discovering what methods and devices worked to *produce* growth and to fully employ them in my church. Though I have always held to the need for expository preaching, I found myself going light on exposition and heavy on appealing to the *felt needs* of the community. All of this was justified, or so I thought, because I was going to be growing a large church.

I recall visiting one night in a home of a theological student who had visited my church. He asked me what my theology was and I responded, "I have a pragmatic theology. I want a theology that *works*." I was incensed later when

a friend told me that he had spoken with this student who told him after my visit, "Phil doesn't have a theology." Unfortunately, he was right and it was showing up in the way I was *doing ministry*. Little by little I began to see these flaws in my own ministry and in the church growth movement as a whole.

At the heart of Wagner's teaching and the church growth movement are *principles* related to evangelism. Wagner has admirably promoted the work of evangelism as being of utmost importance in the local church. Understanding what he means by evangelism, however, reveals some question marks concerning biblical evangelism. He categorizes evangelism as *1-P* or *Presence Evangelism, 2-P* or *Proclamation Evangelism,* and *3-P* or *Persuasion Evangelism.* Perhaps a brief explanation will be helpful.[1]

1) *Presence Evangelism.* A definition of evangelism for which the goal is perceived as getting next to people and helping them; doing good in the world; designated 1-P evangelism.

2) *Proclamation Evangelism.* A definition of evangelism for which the goal is perceived as presenting the gospel; the death and resurrection of Christ is communicated; people hear and can respond; designated 2-P evangelism.

3) *Persuasion Evangelism.* A definition of evangelism for which the goal is perceived as making disciples; stresses the importance of not separating evangelism and follow-up. The goal is incorporating people into the body of Christ. Designated 3-P evangelism.

Wagner points out that all three types of evangelism have their places, but the goal must be to carry out *3-P evangelism.* Few would disagree with the fact that *1-P evangelism* cannot adequately communicate the gospel to an unbeliever. But few would also deny that without the *visible presence* of those who have been animated by the gospel of Christ, all other evangelism would be stifled.

Perhaps the biggest problem comes in Wagner's understanding of *2-P evangelism*. According to his definition it appears to be little more than preaching or a verbal witness of the facts of the gospel. Then the unbeliever can make up his mind on whether the facts presented appear to be worthy of his deciding to embrace the gospel.

3-P evangelism becomes the focal point for church growth proponents. It does involve both *presence* and *proclamation*, but that is not enough. The evangelist must use every means at his disposal to *persuade* an unbeliever to turn from his sin and believe in Christ so that he becomes a disciple. In class lectures, Wagner capitalizes upon the Greek word *peitho* and its use in the book of Acts. He cites Acts 13:43; 17:4; 18:4; 26:28; and 28:23-24, where *peitho* is used as a reference to an evangelistic appeal. Wagner consistently portrays the word as meaning "to persuade." Therefore, proper evangelism will be *persuasion evangelism*.

There are several problems with Wagner's deduction from these passages in the book of Acts. First, it is generally unwise to build a theology upon a historical section of Scripture unless there are no didactic or instructional passages dealing with the subject. The New Testament abounds with passages referring to the work of evangelism. Most notable is Paul's clear explanation of his method for evangelizing: "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, 'But the righteous man shall live by faith'" (Rom. 1:16-17). Paul declared that the gospel is adequate enough through the work of the Holy Spirit to bring a man to a saving knowledge of Christ. He continues in 1 Corinthians 2:4-5 to point out that he sought to proclaim the gospel in the power of the Holy Spirit rather than using all of the common mind-control techniques of the Greeks: "And my mes-

sage and my preaching were not in persuasive [Greek, *peitho*] words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God." The apostle also contends that Christians should so live out the reality of the gospel that they will "appear as lights in the world," which is 1-P evangelism according to Wagner's definition. On the heels of such a statement he then shows the appropriate method of evangelizing, "Holding forth the word of life," which puts the believer in the position of presenting (i.e., "proclaiming") the life-giving truth of God's Word to unbelieving men (Phil. 1:15-16).

Second, Wagner's use of *peitho* as the basis for *persuasion evangelism* is extremely weak. To limit the translation of such a word to one use shows a lack of understanding the breadth of the Greek language. While *peitho* can be translated "persuade" in numerous places, it also can best be translated by "urged," "convinced," "seduced," "entreat," and even "bribe" in other cases. The context determines the best translation of the word. Did Luke, the biblical writer in Acts, use *peitho* to refer to a certain type of persuasive methodology employed by Paul and other early disciples? Obviously, Luke would never want to use manipulation, trickery, or deceit in the work of evangelism (see the use of *peitho* in Acts 12:20; 14:19; and 19:26 where the ideas of "seduce" and "bribe" are conveyed in the Greek text of these verses). To do so would deny the need for the Holy Spirit's work, which must be at the heart of any true evangelistic work (Rom. 8:9, 12-17; 1 Thess. 1:4-5). The New American Standard Bible rightly translates *peitho* in Acts 13:43 as "urging," showing that Paul and Barnabas used the best reasoning powers and their passion for truth in exhorting the listeners to "continue in the grace of God." In Acts 17:4, "persuaded" implies that the Thessalonians were "convinced" of the things which Paul and Silas had pro-

claimed. Luke had already noted that they had "reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead" (17:2-3). These descriptive words show a great intellectual interchange taking place, as the messengers utilized the proofs of Scripture, a series of questions and answers ("reasoned," Greek *dialegomai)* and all of their reasoning powers to "convince" these people of the truth. They passionately presented the Word of God to these unbelieving people by appealing to their minds with the truth (see also Acts 18:4 and 28:23 where the use of *peitho* is most naturally translated as "to convince").

Third, the idea of *3-P evangelism* suggests that the *2-P evangelism* of proclamation lacks persuasive power. The early disciples never stoically proclaimed the gospel! They were passionate about the truth that had transformed their lives. Their presentations of the gospel contained solid logic and reasoning. They appealed to the *mind* of unbelievers rather than trying to manipulate a "decision for Christ" by appealing first to the *will* or to the *emotions.* The Acts 17 passage demonstrates this conclusively, as does the whole narrative of the book of Acts. In the nineteenth century, Charles Haddon Spurgeon was noted as the supreme example of a true evangelist. The scope of his ministry spread broader than any other man of his day. Spurgeon would have been repulsed by manipulation or man-centered emotional methods in evangelism. Yet no one would ever accuse him of proclaiming the gospel without persuasion or passion. The gospel itself, rightly proclaimed, is *persuasive!* And such a gospel, when savingly believed due to the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, produces true disciples.

Last, while I agree with Wagner that we must be persuasive in presenting the gospel, his emphasis puts undue confidence in the evangelist's abilities to bring about conversions. Such confidence is foreign to the teaching of

Scripture (see 1 Cor. 2:1-16).[2] The apostle Paul was so overcome with a consciousness of divine judgment, that he stated, "Therefore knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade men." The natural sense of translation is that because Paul understood that sinners would stand before a just and holy God, he sought "to win men to Christ." He looked for the lost, proclaimed passionately the gospel to them, but depended upon the power of the Holy Spirit to save. Those whom the Spirit of God saved would inevitably become a part of the visible body of Christ (see Acts 2:47). True evangelism seeks to proclaim clearly and passionately the *whole* gospel of Christ in dependence upon the Holy Spirit to save. Such evangelism will result in the work of incorporating new believers into the church. The disparity comes when the evangelist sees himself and his methods as the keys to the man's salvation rather than the regenerating work of the Spirit.

Wagner bases his categories of evangelism on "The Engel Scale," which is a "spiritual decision process model" developed by James Engel. The scale has a series of negative and positive numbers which chart the process of evangelism.

-8 Awareness of Supreme Being but no effective knowledge of the gospel
-7 Initial awareness of gospel
-6 Awareness of fundamentals of gospel
-5 Grasp of implications of gospel
-4 Positive attitude toward gospel
-3 Personal problem recognition
-2 Decision to act
-1 Repentance and faith in Christ
REGENERATION—A "NEW CREATURE"
+1 Post-decision evaluation
+2 Incorporation into body
+3 Conceptual and behavioral growth begins

The basic problem with the Engle Scale can be seen in the reversal of the biblical order of *repentance and faith in Christ* and *regeneration—a "New Creature."* Following the logic of this chart one would assume that a sinner merely has to begin to grasp the fundamental implications of the gospel, recognize his "personal problem" (which is a kind way of implying "sin"), then make a decision to be saved. What Wagner assumes concerning regeneration implies that a sinner must not be totally depraved or dead in his trespasses and sins. Otherwise, regeneration would of necessity precede repentance and faith as is clearly taught in the numerous passages dealing with regeneration (note the following examples which refer to the act of regeneration: Titus 3:5, where the Greek *paliggenesia* means "a birth again," "new birth"; Eph. 2:5 and Col. 2:13, where the Greek *sunezoopoisen* means "to make alive together with"; John 3:3, 5, where the Greek *gennao* means "to be born," "to be begotten"; James 1:18, where the Greek *apekuasen* means "to give birth," "to bear"). The whole premise is that the sinner is persuaded to make a decision to repent and believe; *then* he will be regenerated. It is the act of the sinner that thus *causes* his regeneration. The sinner has the capability to make a willful and appropriate choice concerning the gospel if he is under good *3-P* or *Persuasion evangelism*. How does that sinner's nature *improve* enough for him to repent and believe? If the sinner's spiritual problem is the result of not only his sinful behavior but his depraved nature, then until his nature is changed he *will not* repent and believe; it would be against his nature to do so. Besides, how can a "dead man" make himself alive, which is what takes place in regeneration? This is especially clear in Ephesians 2:1-5 where Paul asserts twice that an unregenerate person is "dead."

C.R. Vaughan helpfully explains the inability on man's part to rise above his sinful nature and pursue holiness, repentance, and faith.

No stream can of itself ascend higher than its source; no nature can transcend itself in the manifestation of its energies, and if man is really dead in trespasses and sins, he can put forth no energy containing in it the element of real holiness, or true spiritual life.[3]

Yet in Wagner's paradigm, the evangelist attempts to persuade a sinner to do something which he has no desire to do. His nature demands that he rebel against the gospel, rather than respond to it. Only by a regenerating act of the Holy Spirit does that sinner have a change of nature which causes him to see his separation from God due to his sin, then to grasp the work of Christ propitiating for him, so that gladly, he repents and believes in Christ. Just as in Ezekiel's valley of dry bones, the sinner is dead to the things of God until animated by the life-giving Spirit in the new birth (compare John 3:1-7 with Ezek. 37 where "the Spirit" and "the breath" convey the same divine person and work).

In a discussion on the well-known Parable of the Sower (or Soils), Wagner does not follow the clear interpretation that the first three soils represent the Word sown upon unregenerate people who *will not* repent and believe unless regenerated by the Holy Spirit. Instead, he mentions the seed sown among the thorns and refers to this as a problem with the type of evangelism used. He stated in a lecture that the appropriate questions the *evangelist* must ask are, "Am I in the wrong place at the wrong time?" and "Am I in the right place but using the wrong methods?" The work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration gets pushed aside in favor of methods and timing.

Wagner points out that "responsible church membership," or incorporation into the body of Christ, is the basic fruit that must be looked for to determine whether or not regeneration has occurred. Granted, if a person fails to

show kinship with the body, the likelihood of his salvation being real is questionable. But "responsible church membership" can be carried out by pagans who have no love for personal holiness and truth! How can this statement be reconciled with the defining qualities of true conversion expressed in Romans 8:12-17, or those precious evidences of genuine salvation found in 1 John?

The church growth movement's priority of *3-P evangelism* shows that it believes that *2-P evangelism* cannot get the job done. *Proclamation evangelism* merely opens a window to let the light of the gospel come in, so that an unbeliever may hear well but stops short of becoming a disciple. The evangelist must use the right kinds of methods, techniques, and approaches to truly make a disciple. He must appeal to the sinner's *felt needs* so that he will be *interested* in the gospel. This is where the church growth movement brings out a broad array of *principles* and *axioms* which, if rightly applied, can almost guarantee results.

On the basis of this extremely Arminian view of evangelism, the church growth movement has thrived! Seminars, conferences, workshops, books, and modules with this type of approach have flooded the ranks of evangelical Christianity. Evangelicals of every stripe are using church growth principles to build greater numbers and larger churches. The *proclamation* of God's Word no longer has central place in such churches. The teaching of sound doctrine is considered an unnecessary thing of the past. Instead, methods and grand productions become the *draw* for people to attend a church and decide to become members. While talk of the work of the Holy Spirit takes place, dependence upon the regenerating work of the Spirit is neglected.

Recently our local newspaper carried an Associated Press story about a church in Missouri that has "no pews, no ministerial vestments, no organ, no hymns, no Scripture readings and no chance this would be mistaken for a

traditional Sunday service." The church has a country-western band, sing-along lyrics, entertaining skits, and a market-driven approach to their ministry. This is characteristic of the *felt-need, consumer-oriented* pragmatism of the church growth movement. This is illustrated by a comment I heard that an unbeliever made after visiting a large Baptist church that has all of the high-tech accoutrements, "Hey, this is the best show in town!"

As I studied and preached expositionally through Ephesians, I found my whole concept of church growth shattered by the truth of God's Word. As I dug into the first fourteen verses of the first chapter of Ephesians over a two-month period, I had to come to grips with some doctrine which I had carefully avoided for years.

How can a pastor implement such principles if he believes in the doctrines of grace? I faced this question after coming to terms with the biblical theology of our founding Southern Baptist fathers. As I studied and preached expositionally through Ephesians, I found my whole concept of church growth shattered by the truth of God's Word. As I dug into the first fourteen verses of the first chapter of Ephesians over a two-month period, I had to come to grips

with some doctrine which I had carefully avoided for years. I had given much thought to the sovereignty of God and the depravity of man, believing these truths as much as I could understand them. But what I had failed to see was that if I did truly believe in the biblical teaching of God's sovereignty and man's total depravity, then the only logical conclusion to which I could come would be to embrace the balance of "the doctrines of grace" which Edwards, Whitefield, Spurgeon, Boyce, and others taught. Anything less than this conclusion pictured God as not-quite-sovereign and man as not-quite-depraved. So I faced the question: If conversion is wholly a work of God's grace, then who am I to think that my techniques and methods can convert even one soul? I realized that the issue of my theology must dictate my practice in ministry or else I would be a hypocrite to both. I began to back off from most of what I had been taught in my years of church growth studies (the exception being primarily the "common sense" principles or those principles clearly spelled out in Scripture). I tried to concentrate on proclaiming God's Word with clarity, purity, and passion, dealing with the doctrines encountered in each week's text.

This radical "theological conversion" took place in the fall of 1990. I had two seminary degrees to my name to go along with my bachelor's degree, but I would gladly have traded them, if need be, for the richness of spending fifteen months studying Ephesians. It was an education that somehow I had missed along the way. Every week of exegeting the Greek text, reading Martyn Lloyd-Jones, John MacArthur, Leon Morris, John Stott, and others brought me to a clearer understanding of the whole glorious message of redemption. I approached my preaching task with a renewed consciousness of preaching "the whole counsel of God." I knew that everyone would not receive freely what I was preaching, but still I had the responsibility to patiently and clearly

proclaim the Word and let the Holy Spirit do the needed work.

Did such a move meet with hearty approval with everyone in my congregation? Absolutely not! I did discover an openness in many who hungered for the truth of God to be proclaimed without apology or fear of man. Some have gone on into a wonderful liberty of walking in the truth of God. Others have battled against the Word, hanging on tenaciously to beliefs that have been prejudiced by experience and traditions.

I have found that moving away from church growth practices to exercise a ministry in the tradition of our Baptist fathers may not bring in the masses. In many cases it meets with opposition from those who have practiced *responsible church membership.* Yet, the passion which grips my mind and heart is that one day I must answer to the Sovereign Lord for *how* I carried out my calling. My observation is that too often pastors have their ministry dictated to them by the *expectations* of other ministers. The pressure placed upon ministers to grow large churches, bring in great numbers, and produce a multitude of conversions spurs many to imbibe virtually everything from the wells of the church growth movement. When this happens the minister will inevitably compromise his responsibility of preaching the Word and depending upon the work of the Holy Spirit. He will scurry from one technique to another, grappling for every new idea that comes from the proponents of church growth. What is the minister's motive for all that he does? Is it truly for the glory of God and for the sake of God's kingdom?

You may wonder, "Do you believe in church growth?" Sure I do! As long as that growth has been engendered by the work of the Holy Spirit and the faithful proclamation of the Word of God. If the Word and the Spirit cannot produce it, then I do not want it! Indeed, one day, I trust, our

Lord will find pleasure in moving upon our congregation and community with mighty, awakening power. Then men will know that the salvation of sinners comes not through our shrewd techniques, nor by the implementation of *church growth principles*, but by the sovereign grace of an all-glorious Lord.

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Notes

1. C. Peter Wagner, editor, with Win Arn and Elmer Towns, *Church Growth: State of the Art* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1988), 296-97.

2. Cf. Iain Murray's excellent treatment of the subject in *Revival and Revivalism* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1994), 161ff.

3. C. R. Vaughan, *The Gifts of the Holy Spirit* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1984), 175.