

CHAPTER 1

A THEOLOGY OF CHURCH GROWTH

A. God Wants His Church to Grow

The axiom of what has come to be known as the church growth position is that God wants His church to grow, His lost children to be found. "The more found, the better pleased is God," asserts Donald McGavran, career missionary and founder of the modern church growth movement.¹ What reasons may be advanced for holding this basic position?

The first is the nature of God Himself. Throughout scripture He is revealed as a seeking God extending Himself to His rebellious creation that He might be known and loved in faith and obedience. Scripture's very existence points to God's desire to be revealed to people who turn against Him. God sought out those who did not know Him, or did not know Him rightly: Abraham, Moses, Jeremiah, Hosea, and Paul are a few examples. These, and many others, God sent in mission on His behalf to win those yet untouched by his grace. God is never passive, unmoved by the needs of humankind, even of those members who do not deserve his mercy, but is

continually active: seeking, reconciling, making covenant, extending Himself, reaching out to save those in need of His power and forgiveness.

We see also in Jesus Christ, who is the word and heart of the Father made flesh, this continual urgent sense of mission. From his baptism Jesus knew why he had come:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has
 anointed me to preach good news to the poor.
 He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the
 prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to
 release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor
 (Luke 4:18-19).

When those who had experienced the reality of the words Jesus spoke sought to keep him from leaving, Jesus responded: "I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent" (Luke 4:43).

Jesus also made clear to his disciples that their lives were to be consumed by the same calling to which his life was given: "Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men" (Matthew 4:19).

After a life, death and resurrection demonstrating the love of God and training his disciples to implement the rescue mission given him by his Father, Jesus said to his followers: "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you" (John 20:21).

Various expressions of that same calling to the church to win the lost may be found in every gospel: Matthew 28:18-

20, Mark 16:16-18, Luke 24:45-49, John 20:21-23, and the Acts of the early church: Acts 1:4-8. While textual issues of both critical and literary natures continue to be debated,² little doubt remains of Jesus' understanding of his calling to seek and save the lost or of his mission mandate to his followers.

The entire New Testament is a document advocating a strategy for mission. Paul who, after Luke, is responsible for writing the largest portion of the New Testament, had no question about the missionary nature of the church. He never tired of telling of his call to follow Christ and God's seeking love for lost humankind (Acts 9:1-22, 22:1-21, 26:9-23).

Some will maintain that while perhaps God wants His church to grow, He will accomplish that growth with sovereignty: at His own rate and in His own way. "We sow the seed; God in His good time gives the increase," is a common expression of this position. Frequently, Paul's call from God to share in the work of proclaiming the gospel without claiming any of the resulting glory (I Corinthians 3:1-15) is cited to support this 'seed-sowing' theology.

God does want His church to sow seeds diligently in every corner of our nation, telling of the desire of Christ to seek and to save the lost. God does deeply desire His church, widely and urgently, to seek and call back to Himself, throughout this land, the lost who have wandered unknowingly from the fold.

But He wants more.

God wants His church to actually harvest the seed sown and then gather the harvest into His granary. Moreover His church is actively to seek and bring into His sheepfold those who have been lost. Every parable Jesus tells underscores the fundamental desire of the Father's heart. The lost sheep must be found (Luke 15:4), the harvest gathered (Matthew 13:23).

It is God's unchanging desire and purpose that His church grow, winning more and more of the lost, to the very end of the age (Matthew 13:31-33; 24:14).

B. The Kingdom and the Church

Jesus proclaimed that the Kingdom of God was the primary burden and focus of his ministry, preaching: "The time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news" (Mark 1:15).

Of the continual burning centrality of the kingdom of God in the heart, mind, and ministry of Jesus Christ few scholars have serious doubt. John Bright, in his landmark volume The Kingdom of God, observes: "Everywhere the Kingdom of God is on his lips, and it is always of desperate importance."³

But was Jesus equally committed to the church? And what, if any, is the relationship between the Kingdom of God and the church?

The Kingdom of God involves the total message of the

Scripture⁴ and is variously termed: 'salvation', 'the kingdom of heaven', 'eternal life', 'the age to come', and 'the kingdom of heaven'.⁵ Each of these terms refers to the same ultimate reality.

The differences between the church as such, and the Kingdom of God by any of the above terms, are considerable. The church, for example, as a collection of people or as an institution, is within history, and is both historically and culturally conditioned. The kingdom of God, by contrast, transcends history and culture and is sovereignly breaking into each from the outside.

The church, in at least one of its dimensions, is a sociological entity, made up of countable people. The progress of the church can, in that sense at least, be analyzed, and studied in considerable detail. The kingdom of God, by contrast, is transcendent, beyond human measurements and forms of study.

The church began in time, the instant of its inception being placed by scholars variously as in the Garden of Eden, with Abraham's departure from Haran (Genesis 12:1), the exodus of Israel from Egypt, or the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the early disciples at Pentecost. The kingdom of God, on the other hand, stands outside time, and as such transcends the creation and the birth of the church.

What then is the relationship between the kingdom of God and the church? First, the kingdom of God is a much broader concept than the church. The church exists within

the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God existed before the church. The proclamation of the kingdom of God, in fact, calls the church into being.

Thus the kingdom of God is the context within which God elects, calls into existence, gives birth to, and increases, the church. The church exists for the kingdom of God and not vice versa.

The kingdom of God is larger than the church, and the church grows within it as it responds to the kingdom. The church says of the kingdom of God what John the Baptist said of Jesus: "He who is coming surpasses me because he was before me" (John 1:30, paraphrased).

A second dimension of the relationship of the church to the kingdom of God is the church serving the purposes of the kingdom of God in the world. The kingdom of God, not the church or the world, sets the agenda for the church's program and mission. The church then is the servant and instrument of the kingdom of God, in all things submitting to the King of the kingdom for the sake of the world he has come to save.

Jesus Christ supremely, and Israel and the church secondarily, acts each one as a 'suffering servant' for the world (cf. the Isaiah 42:1-9; 49:1-13; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12; 61:1-4 'servant psalms'). The kingdom of God works in and for the world through the church.

Thirdly, the church represents the rule, presence and message of the King to the world. It represents the King and

his rule in its lifestyle and its relationships. It represents the reign of God also in its ministry of mercy, healing and reconciliation. The church is therefore, in its words and actions, the herald which goes before the King into the world, proclaiming His coming. It introduces the King of the kingdom as the only savior of the world, inviting it to repent and believe the good news, submit willingly to the King, and obey his gracious reign.

Fourthly, as the church proclaims and demonstrates the kingdom of God in the world, it is God's instrument for advancing His kingdom. The church cannot, of course, create, build, and advance the kingdom of God by its own will or in its own strength. The kingdom of God is sovereign while the church is not. Humans can but preach and proclaim the kingdom, while others can receive it or reject it.⁶ Yet, as the church proclaims, obeys, and demonstrates the kingdom, inviting others to repent and follow the King, the kingdom of God moves forward.

The kingdom of God is represented in and to the world by the church alone. And the kingdom of God is advanced in the world by no one other than His church, through the power and grace of God.

The kingdom of God will come inexorably. As it does, the church is the kingdom's primary, perhaps only, represent-ative, preparing the world for that coming. Jesus, speaking of disciples who were to remain faithful to him, said: "And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in

the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come" (Matthew 24:14).

Jesus expected the kingdom of God to grow. The parables of the Messiah, gathered in Matthew 13, make his expectations abundantly clear. The kingdom of God will grow and multiply as a seed in the good soil of receptive hearts (Matthew 13:1-23). The kingdom of heaven will grow to the very end of the age (Matthew 13:24-30) despite the simultaneous growth of evil. God's reign will grow from a humble beginning to become the greatest of all realities on earth, and to permeate all (Matthew 13:31-33).

As the kingdom of God grows, the church which represents, proclaims, serves, and manifests the kingdom, will necessarily and inevitably grow also. Not even the gates of Hades will stop this inevitable growth ordered by him who said: "I will build my church" (Matthew 16:18).

To suggest that Christians are to expect the kingdom of God to grow without a correlative expectation that the church will grow, is to miss the point of the relationship between the church, and the kingdom of God it proclaims. The church is the training ground for those who would work out the principles of the kingdom in the world. God starts, therefore, to fulfill his desire for the growth of his kingdom with the growth of his church which he blessed in order that it be a blessing to the world. The church is not to be identified directly with the kingdom, but is rather the community of those who personally know and subject

themselves to the rule of the King.⁵ As the kingdom grows, those who know and demonstrate the rule of the King, i.e. the church, will grow also. Both church and kingdom will grow together until the end of the age.

C. The Priority of God

Some Canadian theologians grant both that an essential aspect of the nature of the kingdom of God is its continuing growth on earth, and that the kingdom and the church are so related that we may expect the church to grow along with the kingdom. Yet they question whether it is God's *first* priority that his servant church grow.

Such persons ask, is not God's first priority rather for His people to demonstrate righteousness in advocacy for the downtrodden? Is His first priority not for His church to take up the cause of the poor, the hungry and the disadvantaged, thereby demonstrating the kingdom and love of God for the people He sent His Son to earth to save? Is it not God's first priority to develop the full quality of life He intends in the church, rather than simply add more equally weak and inadequate people, similar to some who are already in the church? How can a weak and inadequate church rightly represent the kingdom of God in the world?

These are important questions to which we must respond. As we do, we must nevertheless assert that God is primarily concerned with winning the lost and finding and reconciling to Himself those who have turned against Him and His

righteous rule. We hold with Donald McGavran that spiritual reconciliation is "a chief and irreplaceable work of the church."⁸ It is this chief and irreplaceable work of the church because only the gospel can respond both to the needs of life on earth and to life in the age to come. This gospel of the kingdom is in this regard unique, in the most fundamental sense of the word. The gospel alone can minister to the needs of life in the age to come. Therefore, God makes this often overlooked but critical need of humanity His main concern. Dr. McGavran writes:

The cross is the measure of God's desire for the eternal salvation of myriads yet uncounted by man, whose very hairs are numbered and known to a loving God; and of the priority of salvation over the comforts or even the necessities of temporal life. ⁹

While we do believe that God primarily wishes to make His church and kingdom grow by inviting those who are alienated from Him to accept His eternal reconciliation, God is also concerned about the pressing temporal needs of humanity.

God desires more than numerical growth for His church and kingdom. Dr. Peter Wagner suggests that a consideration of Acts 2:42-47 indicates that the multi-faceted pattern of growth manifested by the grace of God in the early church, is commended by the scriptures to the church of all ages. This pattern includes:

- a) growing up into spiritual maturity and coming to know God the Father. This maturity is developed through prayer,

and through teaching believers obedience to the implications of the gospel in everyday life and service. This aspect of growth is reflected in Acts 2:42: "they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching...."

- b) growing together in maturity of relationships into a community marked by committed love and practical sharing, including the sharing of material goods. This aspect of growth is reflected in Acts 2:44: "all believers were together and had everything in common," and in Acts 2:46: "they broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts...."
- c) growing out in service to the larger community. The church must grow in compassionate and costly service to the needs of the world. The result of this aspect of the growth of the church is reflected in the attitude of the community towards the church as expressed in Acts 2:47a: "(they) enjoyed the favor of all the people."
- d) growing larger in number as more people respond to the reality of the coming of the kingdom of God. This aspect of growth is reflected in Acts 2:47b: "and the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."¹⁰

Church growth, according to the scriptures, requires both service to the community in which the local church represents the kingdom of God, and service to the larger world community.

The church growth movement further affirms that

biblical growth 'up', into the spiritual maturity of knowing the Father, growth 'together', into committed and sharing community, and growth 'out', in compassionate service to the world, naturally produces growth 'larger' in order to effectively repeat the cycle of growth.

Moreover Dr. George Peters argues, even more Christians, in and of themselves, do not minister effectively to the structures and needs of a society. The most effective social service needs not only more Christians, but for existing Christians to be gathered into larger churches:

History seems to substantiate the fact that larger churches make a greater contribution to in-depth evangelism or the Christianization of culture and structures of society than do numerous smaller groups.¹¹

If Dr. Peters' observation is accurate, this troubling question must then be answered: is church growth then but a conveniently pragmatic means to the more urgent and higher calling of service to the world, or can any priority be assigned to these four aspects of growth identified in Acts 2?

Theologically we must assert that church growth is not merely a means to any human end: God is gathering a redeemed people to be His guests and friends in the kingdom of God for eternity. This glorious purpose supercedes all benefits the church or the world it compassionately serves has previously received.

We may further assert, that should any church grow

continually and proportionately in all four aspects of the balanced growth desired by God and depicted in Acts 2, all concerns of disproportionate emphases on numerical growth would be alleviated. If every church devoted a quarter of its energy to understanding the implications of the gospel for obedience in the kind of society in which we find ourselves, a quarter of its energy to the developing of healthy, sharing, personal relationships in community, a quarter of its energy to serving the needs of the community, and the remainder to personal evangelism, the debate would be ended.

D. God and the Poor

Some will ask at this point, "but do those who claim that evangelism and numerical growth through new believers are the priority of God, not in fact pursue this end to the neglect of the poor and hungry they claim also to be the concern of the heart of God?"

No: those concerned for evangelism and numerical growth historically have not, and currently do not, neglect social concern and reform. Timothy Smith has argued from a study of history:

Far from disdaining earthly affairs, the evangelists played a key role in the widespread attack upon slavery, poverty, and greed. They thus helped prepare the way both in theory and in practice for what later became known as the social gospel.¹²

The effective linking of concern for body and soul is also argued by C. Peter Wagner in his book Church Growth and

the Whole Gospel.¹³ Christians who believe the soul to have eternal value also act compassionately towards the human needs of the body. As Jim Montgomery and Donald McGavran affirm, through His redeemed God causes "justice to roll down in families, neighbourhoods, cities and states."¹⁴

Contemporary studies point in this very same direction. In 1979 the Gallup Poll asked evangelical and non-evangelical Christians this question: "Do you happen to be involved in any charity or social service activities, such as helping the poor, the sick or the elderly?" Forty-two percent of evangelicals responded positively to this question, as compared to twenty-six percent of non-evangelicals.¹⁵ A Christianity Today poll in the following year found those who emphasize evangelism are almost twice as concerned about social issues as the general public.¹⁶

God's concern for the growth of His church does not neglect, nor should the church neglect, the needs of humanity, but this concern rather inspires and produces active service to the eternal benefit of all the world.

Endnotes:

- 1 Donald McGavran. Understanding Church Growth (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), 1980, p. 24.
- 2 Wilbert R. Schenk, ed. Exploring Church Growth (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), 1983, pp. 218-248.
- 3 John Bright. The Kingdom of God (New York: Abingdon Press), 1953, p. 17.

- 4 Ibid. p. 7.
- 5 George Eldon Ladd. The Gospel of the Kingdom (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.), 1959, p. 33.
- 6 Ibid. p. 117.
- 7 Dr. Eddie Gibbs. Fuller Seminary lecture, August 1988.
- 8 Donald McGavran. Understanding Church Growth (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.), 1980. p. 90.
- 9 Ibid. p. 36.
- 10 Dr. C. Peter Wagner. Lecture on "Church Growth Eyes" in Church Growth I, June 1987.
- 11 George, W. Peters. A Theology of Church Growth (Grand Rapids: Zondervan), 1981, p. 193f.
- 12 Timothy L. Smith. Revivalism and Social Concern in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America (New York: Abingdon), 1957, p. 8.
- 13 Dr. C. Peter Wagner. Church Growth and the Whole Gospel (San Francisco: Harper & Row), 1981, ch. 6.
- 14 James Montgomery and Donald McGavran, Global Church Growth Bulletin. Santa Clara, CA, 1980, p. 22.
- 15 Emerging Trends (Princeton Religious Center) 1, no. 1 (January 1979), pp. 1-2.
- 16 Wilson, Kenneth L. 'Concern for Society,' Christianity Today 24, no. 17 (October 10, 1980), p. 41.