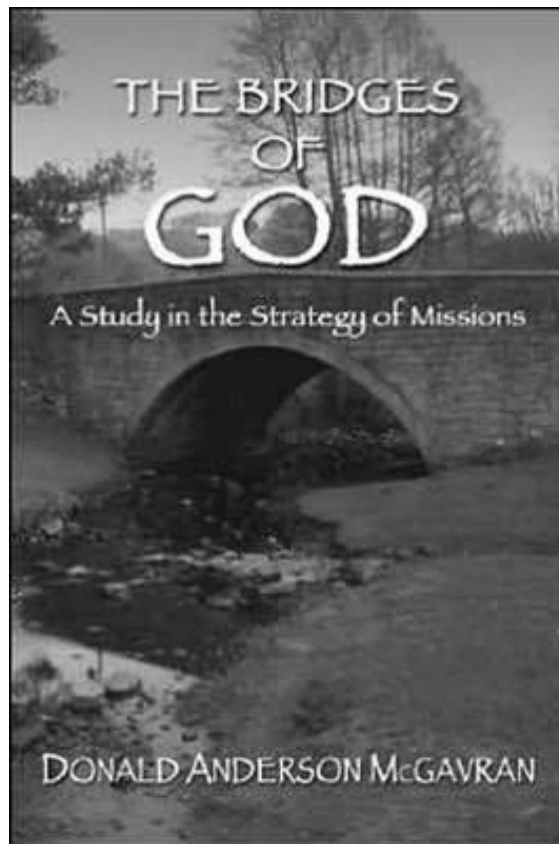




## CHURCH GROWTH ISN'T WHAT YOU THINK IT IS



*By K. Douglas Brown*

One of the greatest pitfalls to the church in the last century has been the effect the Church Growth Movement has had on the western, and perhaps the worldwide church. Let me be clear from the outset; not everything about the Church Growth Movement is bad or unbiblical. In this article you will discover an analysis of the effects of the Church Growth Movement over the last 50 years.

Let's begin by looking at what the Church Growth Movement is. The Church Growth Movement began under the presupposition that God desires for all to come to a knowledge of Christ. The beginning of the Church Growth Movement is marked by the publication of a book by a missiologist named Donald McGavran titled, *The Bridges of God*. A former missionary, McGavran desired to shine a light on the process by which people became Christians. One of the elements in this work was to look at the things that were roadblocks to people coming to Christ.

My assertion is that what started as a passion for the Great Commission, and seeing people come to the knowledge of Christ, has morphed into something quite different. The Church Growth Movement looks very different today. Yes, there has always been an emphasis by many churches and Christian leaders who prioritize the Great Commission as the mode by which the church should grow. Generally, however, the evangelical culture in the west has taken on a different flavor. So, what are the unbiblical elements of the church growth movement that have crept into our thinking. The following are the characteristics of the Church Growth Movement that are founded on unbiblical ways of thinking.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CHURCH GROWTH MOVEMENT

First is what I call, the **“If-Then” proposition**. There are those who have traded the gospel for this unbiblical way of looking at growing a church. A fly in the ointment, this line of thinking supposes that if a church undertakes certain activities, they can produce growth.

We have wrongly begun to treat the church like a complicated mathematical equation. If you can just get all the right x’s and y’s in the correct order, then church growth will commence, or so the thinking goes. This mindset believes that if you build it, they will come, whether that refers to an actual building, a church program or a certain model of ministry. One of the problems with this is that what seems to draw people in one locality and culture will not work in another. Ultimately people experience their need for Christ and are drawn into a relationship with Him in varying ways. To expect that a rural church in a small community will grow in the same way that an urban church does is not rational. Further, this supposes that with enough effort, and just the

right amount of determination, that anyone can be wrangled into the kingdom. Sadly, this leaves out the work of the Holy Spirit.

Another incorrect approach is a **man-centered focus**. This one has been particularly frustrating for me over the years especially when applying for pastoral openings. I recall an experience I had years ago during an interview process with a church. Seeing a youth pastoral opening on a job board site, I applied and began making my way through a series of interviews with the search committee. I sensed that things were progressing very well, and after each stage of the interview the chairman of the search team, who was also the chairman of the elder board, would call me and express how well he thought things were moving along. Each time he would review the process that involved a series of interviews and inform me that the last step would be a 45-minute phone call with the senior pastor.

At each step I grew to love the people more and began to see myself serving at this church. The day finally came for that phone call with the senior pastor, and I quickly realized that this would not be the church for me. The pastor began by expressing his desire to see an Acts 2 revival among the youth in his community and wanted to know if I saw myself making that happen. I affirmed that any revival in his community like the one in Acts chapter 2 would be extraordinary, but that it was my understanding what happened in Acts 2 was initiated by the Holy Spirit. Obviously, not connecting with my response, he responded by asking if I thought I could create this kind of revival in his community. Well, that 45-minute phone call turned into a 5-minute phone call as I informed the pastor that I was no longer interested in this ministry opening. The next day the chairman contacted me to find out what went wrong, and I informed him about the call.

He apologized, stating that he would get to the bottom of it and get back to me. I never heard from him again, but just a couple months later, I did happen to see an opening for a senior pastor at that church posted on the same job board.

We must ask ourselves, have we lost our dependence on God in the church? Interestingly, many of the descriptors included in job descriptions for ministry position openings are not scriptural at all. One ad reads, "Looking for a high performing, exceptional, and dynamic leader, a driven, multi-tasking, charismatic, motivational influencer, who thrives in a fast-paced environment." Where are the ministry ads which say, "Looking for a humble, caring servant of God who is able to instill trust in others, and is a person of prayer?" Too much of our focus has become about the abilities of man and reveals a lack of trust in God. I've always said that if you go after what man can do, the best you're going to get is what man can do.

Many are confused thinking growth is initiated by the determination of people. One pastor would constantly talk about the "wins." He would try to create activities and events that would be considered a win for the church and, more importantly, for his reputation as a leader. Be assured that God doesn't need our wins. He desires to build His church with His methods.

Scripture gives us so many examples of this. Think of God showing Gideon that He only needed a small army to defeat the Midianites. And then there's Esther, who though she was a person of low stature and influence, was used by God to save the Israelites from annihilation.

David was another leader who understood clearly that God is the one who brings victory. Just before his encounter with Goliath, David

said to Saul, "The LORD who rescued me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will rescue me from the hand of this Philistine" (I Samuel 17:37). Then later, as he faced down the giant, he boldly proclaimed, "You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the LORD Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied" (I Samuel 17:45). David knew that God was His deliverer and protector.



One of the things Scripture tells us about God's character is that He is a jealous God. Not jealous in a sinful way but jealous in the sense that He wants us to know He's the one who is accomplishing His will. In the Old Testament God always wanted it known that He was the one who was Israel's defender. God would regularly remind Israel what He had done for them because He wanted them to recognize Him as their protector and provider. This is ultimately behind the first commandment that God gave to the Israelites that they should have no other Gods before Him.

Another wrong idea is a **growth focus**. Focusing on growth itself as the ultimate goal is not something that God has called us to do. Further, Christ told Peter, “You are the rock and upon this rock I will build my church” (Matthew 16:18). We must ask ourselves who does the growing. Is it us or is it Christ? I would argue that we do not have the power to convince or cajole souls into the kingdom; that is God’s work.

Rather, we should strive prayerfully and dependently as we share Christ with others. Further, Scripture never commands us to grow a big church. We are, however, taught to be seed sowers.

Not long before Jesus left this earth He appeared to His disciples in Galilee. It was on this occasion that He gave them the Great Commission. This is really the main assignment that was left for us to fulfill. We are to, “go into all the world and preach the gospel” (Mark 16:15). It’s interesting that nowhere do the Scriptures tell us to make the church grow. We are, however, told to make disciples, and of course if we are faithful to fulfill this work of the Lord, and if He chooses to bless this, we will see the church grow. Church growth is not to be the focus, but rather the result of fulfilling the Great Commission.

Fourth is the idea of a **better mouse trap**. Too many have gotten caught up in a cycle of trying to be the next big thing. To be better than all the other churches around. I recall a billboard advertising a new church, and in the center of the sign, in large bold print, were the words, “Not your momma’s church!” I remember thinking what was so wrong with my momma’s church? My momma’s church was where I came to know Jesus as my Savior and where I learned what it meant to serve God and others.

While well-intended, this kind of thinking has promoted a consumerism in the Christian culture around us. There have been people who have visited the church where I pastor, and you quickly get the sense that they’ve been conditioned by the church culture around us that the church exists as a provider of services. Many are attracted to churches for their kid’s sports programs, health facilities, online offerings, or their wonderful coffee and donut service. These are all wonderful things but none of them are mentioned in Scripture as priorities for the church. I’ve often wondered in the churches where I’ve served what would happen if the coffee and donuts went away. How many members might drift off to other churches?

Further, it seems that much of the church growth emphasis is focused on what will draw people, not from the world, but from other churches. Of course, we’d never say that, but if you analyze much of the efforts of churches to grow, they are only focused on what would ultimately take people away from other churches, not draw souls into God’s kingdom.

When I was a college student our church began a college ministry that was growing and brought in several young people. The church never had much of an emphasis on this demographic and it was exciting to see a number of 20-somethings joining in. Soon a few of the leaders began to attend the college ministry of a large church known as the flagship of the Church Growth Movement. Over the subsequent months most of the remaining group of college students left to attend there as well and our college ministry was dissolved. Though several of these young people were key leaders in our church’s college ministry, at the new church they were simply observers. The few remaining participants were discouraged over what had become of our

group. I later learned that during these years the same dynamic was in play in churches all over the city. Too much “church growth” is nothing more than a parasitic feeding off the life of other churches. Be sure that we are not in competition with other churches. Rather, we are to be in cooperation with other churches and pray for their success to the extent that they are pursuing gospel priorities.

Interestingly, the reformers used to speak of two churches: the visible church and the invisible. The visible church is what is observable to the naked eye. The invisible church, on the other hand, is represented by the souls that have been miraculously born again, and by all the things God is doing in the building of His kingdom. Though it began out of a passion to reach people, much of what the Church Growth Movement has produced, only pertains to the visible church. We cannot see what God is doing in the building of the church; it is described in the Bible as a mystery. In Ephesians 5:32 Paul proclaimed. “This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church.” The invisible church is a mystery; it is the unseen work of God, not the creation of man or a result of our keen intellect or scheming.

Sadly, there will, one day, be a separating of the wheat from the chaff (Luke 3:17), and some will be greatly disappointed. The things that cause a church to grow in number are not always what ultimately adds souls to the kingdom. Church health is better measured by things like unity, love, the sharing of the gospel, and even laughter.

Though the Church Growth Movement began with a motivation to reach those who need Christ, much of it has strayed from that purpose and has become something very different. The key to the downfall can actually be found in one

of the founding core values of the movement. One of the original goals was to understand how to spread Christianity in a culturally relevant way. In itself, this goal is admirable. The tension, however, lies in the fact that the gospel message, by nature, is countercultural. Jesus said, “If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also” (John 15:20). The system of the world will always be contrary to our heritage in Christ. We read in John 17:14, “I have given them Your word; and the world has hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world.” Wise Christians will strive to share the gospel in a culturally relevant way without compromising the purity of the message.

## THE BIBLICAL PRIORITIES OF THE CHURCH



This would be a great opportunity to remind ourselves about the biblical priorities of the church. First and foremost, the main priority of the church is the Great Commission as expressed in Matthew 28:19-20, “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” The church exists primarily to spread the message of the gospel, sharing God’s love and Christ’s forgiveness with the world.



The church is also to devote itself to the teaching of the Word, to prayer, and to fellowship. Acts 2:42 states, "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer."

Church leader, my challenge to you is to not let the church become a laundromat for junk church leadership philosophy. Too much worldly and unbiblical thinking has crept into the church. Don't waste your time trying to spit-shine worldly philosophies that are not found in Scripture. We cannot take unbiblical ideas like the ones we've mentioned here and somehow think we are doing the work of God.

Also, we should not think that simply because we observe a church growing in number that its activities comprise the work of God. We are called to be discerning. 1 John 4:1 states, "Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world."

Just because an idea is emanating from a church does not make it legitimate or biblical. Every heresy and false teaching through history has ultimately originated in the church. We have ample warnings in the Bible that we are to be on guard against unbiblical thinking. 1 Timothy 4:1-2 declares, "The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron."

We tend to think that the church's fiercest enemies come from outside the church. In reality, the worst dangers the church will ever face will be those illegitimate ideas that creep inside. The fox always does the most damage when he's *inside* the henhouse, and the evil one always inflicts the most damage by sneaking his way into the church. We, however, tend to think, not my church. My church is a good church, my church is a strong Bible teaching church, we are a gospel centered church. If this is true, and I pray that it is, your church is *exactly* the kind of church that Satan would like to take apart.

Though the Church Growth Movement was begun with the Great Commission in mind it has largely become something rather unbiblical and dangerous. Our priorities in the church are to share the gospel with an unbelieving world. We are building something we ultimately cannot see or observe. Let us not be distracted by the shiny objects of the church growth emphasis that have infiltrated the church and polluted its core priorities.



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