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FAULTY PREMISES OF THE CHURCH GROWTH MOVEMENT

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"They are from the world; therefore they speak as from the world, and the world listens to them. We are from God; he who knows God listens to us; he who is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error." (1John 4:5, 6)

"It is my deep conviction that anybody can be won to Christ if you discover the key to his or her heart. . . . It may take some time to identify it. But the most likely place to start is with the person's felt needs."¹ (Rick Warren)

If we compare what the Apostle John said with what a famous Church Growth² advocate says, we encounter a problem. John says that the world will not listen to a true, unsullied Christian message. Rick Warren says that anybody can be won to Christ if we discover a message that will interest them through promising to meet their felt needs. These concepts are contradictory. The Biblical idea is that we must speak God's unchanging message of the gospel whether the world hates us or not: *"If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you"* (John 15:19). The Church Growth idea is that we must study man (using the latest sociological, psychological, and anthropological insights) to determine how to create a church that will grow and a message that will be popular through appealing to a target audience. Someone is wrong here and I do not think it is the inspired Apostle John.

THE MODERN CHURCH GROWTH MOVEMENT

Since the advent of the modern church growth movement which dates from

the 1950's, pastors and local churches have been under massive pressure to do something to facilitate church growth. The movement was founded primarily by two people, independently. Those people are Donald McGavran and Robert Schuller. Donald McGavran wrote *The Bridges of God* in 1955. C. Peter Wagner claims that this book, "launched the Church Growth Movement."³ Rick Warren cites McGavran's book as being influential early in his ministry.⁴ About that same time Robert Schuller started his ministry in California which became the Crystal Cathedral. Later, in 1970, Schuller founded the Robert Schuller Institute for Successful Church Leadership, where he has trained many key leaders in the Church Growth Movement including Bill Hybels and Rick Warren.⁵ It is accurate to say the McGavran is the intellectual founder of the movement and Schuller the most visible popularizer of the movement.

The movement has spawned some highly visible "successes" such as Willow Creek Church and Saddleback Church. Nevertheless, in spite of fifty years of training thousands of pastors, weekly church attendance in America has not risen in terms of the percentage of the population.⁶ Church growth advo-

cates often cite the figure that 80% of churches are declining or are in a state of plateau. Seminaries use that figure to support the need to learn church growth principles. Since the movement has yet to reverse the trends, another way of interpreting these figures is to know that if you accept the definitions of the Church Growth Movement, 80% of all those going into the ministry are failing. Teaching Church Growth in seminaries has yet to reverse the trend.

Whatever else the Church Growth Movement has done, it has convinced the majority of church leaders that if their local organization is not growing, this is a sure sign they are "unhealthy" and failing. Rick Warren says, "Forget church growth, Church health is the key to church growth. All living things grow if they're healthy. You don't have to make them grow—it's just natural for living organisms."⁷ So, according to this thinking, failure to grow is a sign of disease or sickness. Having convinced pastors and other church leaders that they are failing, Warren and others leave them desperate for a solution. The following email I received from a CIC reader reflects this:

We are going through a restructure where questions have been raised about what the "vision" is, whose "vision" is it, and must we all rally behind that "vision" or do we each get a piece of that "vision" by being allowed to input into that "vision." The answers provided at my church are ambiguous. . . . The problem is our church is small, really small - no more than 20 regular members in attendance at any time. It is barely able to support itself (e.g. pay the pastor). The obvious answer is church growth. . . . The prevailing belief in this community is that a church will grow if programs are provided which people deem necessary, because that is what

seems to bring them in around here. Once they come in, we can show them love and then begin to share the gospel with them. If this is not right, then what is the biblically correct way for a church to grow? Please answer in practical terms because our church has been preaching the gospel and remaining small (even less than 20) for almost 10 years.

Many churches feel the type of pressure that is reflected in this email. There are local reasons why gospel preaching does not always make a given church grow. The problem is that church leaders end up feeling like SOMETHING has to change.

To meet this challenge leaders usually create a plan of their own or buy someone else's plan that promises to give the congregation appeal in the community. The plan, whatever it is, becomes the "vision" for the church. Leaders present a mission statement that reflects this vision; then all the remaining resources of the congregation, financial and human, are poured into the vision. Either the plan works, the church is seriously damaged, or folds. Whatever happens, the new vision will not focus on the preaching of the gospel. Gospel preaching often has already been determined to have failed and it's offensive to the unregenerate mind anyway (1Corinthians 1:22-24).

The Church Growth Movement offers a modern, scientific, solution to the problem. Consistently on the cutting edge of Church Growth theory, research, and development is The Fuller School of World Mission and Institute of Church Growth founded by Donald McGavran and further developed by C. Peter Wagner.⁸ Ideas that have come from this movement include the concept of "people movements" that suggests a more group oriented version of becoming Christian than individual repentance and faith, the importance of "homogeneous units"⁹ that claims that people will more likely be attracted to a church that is made up only of people like themselves racially and culturally, and the idea of a strong, figurehead

'pastor is master' version of church government.¹⁰ Why? Peter Wagner writes, "The ethical issue is one of pragmatism."¹¹ Long before "outcome based" became a buzz word, McGavran, Wagner, and others determined to base their movement on what is proven to work. That is why ideas like "homogenous units" became part of their movement. Scientific studies showed that they work.

To clarify the problems of the Church Growth Movement, I am going to examine some of its key premises and compare them to the Bible. We will see that several of the most basic assumptions that underlie this movement are false.

False Premise # 1: That God's Will for Every Local Congregation is Numerical Growth

Church Growth leaders believe it to be axiomatic that Christ wants His church to grow. Here I cite several passages many Church Growth leaders use to show this:

"There will be no end to the increase of His government or of peace, On the throne of David and over his kingdom, To establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness From then on and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will accomplish this" (Isaiah 9:7).

"He presented another parable to them, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field; and this is smaller than all other seeds; but when it is full grown, it is larger than the garden plants, and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches'" (Matthew 13:31, 32)

"And I have other sheep, which are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they shall hear My voice; and they shall become one flock with one shepherd" (John 10:16).

Donald McGavran continually emphasized the need to find the "lost sheep."¹² He writes, "Jesus Christ, our Lord, came to seek and save the lost. The lost

are always persons. They always have countable bodies."¹³ His conclusion is that searching or preaching should be judged by numerical results, not in faithfulness in the act of searching and preaching. McGavran wrote, "To God, as he has thus revealed himself, proclamation is not the main thing. The proclamation of the gospel is a means. It must not be confused with the end, which is that men and woman—multitudes of them—be reconciled to God in Christ."¹⁴ McGavran judged mission efforts by their outcome in terms of numbers, results. He did not accept various excuses, e.g. people being hardened. C. Peter Wagner wrote in the 1990 forward to *Understanding Church Growth*, "McGavran demanded more accountability in Christian stewardship. He wanted efforts evaluated by their results."¹⁵ Here are McGavran's words:

In view of all this and much more evidence, must we not consider mission in intention *a vast and purposeful finding*? Is it possible biblically to maintain that only "search" is the thing, motives are what matter, and the finding of multitudes of persons is something rather shabbily mechanical and "success ridden"? Can we believe it theologically tenable to be uninterested in the numbers of the redeemed?¹⁶

Results in terms of numbers were the bottom line for McGavran. He wanted mission efforts to be judged accordingly.

I agree that Jesus Christ wants His gospel preached to all peoples. I also agree that His kingdom shall increase throughout the church age. I further agree that people being rescued from their lost condition and disciplined according to the terms of **Matthew 28:19, 20** is the mission of the church. I would even tentatively agree that if certain people continually reject the gospel after hearing it preached, that the preacher is fully justified in going to other people like Jesus told his disciples to do (**Mark 6:11**) and like Paul did (**Acts 18:6**).

But there is an underling category error here. The continual increase of people entering the kingdom of God and thus the increase in the numbers in the church militant as well as the church universal and triumphant is also true. These numbers increase every time a sinner repents and believes the gospel. But the Church Growth movement is not discussing these matters. Rather it focuses on the relative size of given local congregations or the relative success of various missionary endeavors judged in terms of numbers (either in terms of individual converts or numbers of congregations started). The statistics they cite to justify the need for their principles and practices have to do with local congregations and church attendance. The proof texts have to do with the whole of Christ's church, not the size of local fellowships. The church is growing world wide continually, as soul by soul, God saves them through the gospel. The cited passages prove that Jesus is building His church. The size of various congregations and whether they are growing or shrinking is a different matter all together. Likewise, missionaries who have only a few converts have added to the growth the church as described in the passages cited, even if people like McGavran have judged those missionaries failures and unworthiness of support.¹⁷

Let us suppose, for example, that a small church exists in a small community. The local congregation is made up of people who have believed the gospel and are serious about growing in the grace and knowledge of the Lord. They are also faithful in gospel proclamation and their Christian witness. Are they failing God if few or no others in that community believe the gospel? Are they failing God if more believers from their town move elsewhere because of job changes than move into the city? Are they failing God if the rest of the residents continue to reject the gospel? Do these circumstances prove they are sick, dying, or need a new vision? If we accept standards like that, then congregations that are not in a location with a continual influx of new people would likely not be

able to get anyone to care for them for fear of "failing."

Ralph Elliot describes just that phenomenon:

The church growth theology is also dangerous in dooming the city to hopelessness. The strong emphasis on choosing target populations according to the criterion of success leads the church growth people to neglect the city with its economic mobility, its changing neighborhoods and racial mixture. The preference is for the suburbs and for each succeeding suburban ring which mobility and economics establish. One suburb gets old, so emphasis shifts to the next one because that's where the best possibilities are.¹⁸

I agree with Elliot. The outcome-based approach that judges results by numbers assures that churches will go where there are homogeneous units (i.e. people like us), where there are many of those people of this unit moving (i.e. growing suburbs), and in short, where they are not likely to "fail" by the criteria of the Church Growth experts.

When Paul preached in Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:14-51), it says, "And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord; and as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed" (Acts 13:48). Should not those who were thus "appointed" be cared for in a local congregation? Since the rest have rejected the gospel, how exactly is this new church to grow? The advocates of church growth set up standards that require pastors to get people into their churches even if they have rejected the gospel. This causes them to search for some new message and new method that appeals to people's unregenerate minds.

Is an organization with this new message and new method the "church" as described in the Bible? Again, Elliot astutely sees this problem:

The dangers inherent in the church growth movement are many, and the crucial issue in assessing those dangers is whether we are talking

about becoming Christians or about building institutional membership. The greatest danger in the movement may be that it obviously succeeds. If one tailors the church to identify with its culture and engages in the pseudo-gospel of "possibility thinking," promising to assuage guilt with the minimum of pain and connecting that promise with marketing techniques, there will be success. The question is whether the result will bear any similarity to the church.¹⁹

The church consists of the "called out ones," not those who enjoy having a religious experience with people who are just like themselves.

When God brings people to Himself through the gospel, He adds numbers to the church. In whatever local situation people exist, those who are added to the church gather for fellowship. True fellowship is not the gathering of religious consumers with similar "felt needs," but it is fellowship around the person and work of Christ. Consider what John wrote:

What we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, that you also may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ. If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth; but if we walk in the light as He Himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin.
(1John 1:3, 6, 7)

Without the blood atonement, there is no fellowship with God or with one another. The "church" that consists of people from a community who have similar needs and desires, who feel comfortable with each other for social reasons, and who have certain religious aspirations, is not a fellowship as described in 1John 1. It is something else.

I claim that faithful preaching of God's Word is mandated even if it is

rejected. I furthermore claim that when God has established a congregation that meets the Biblical definition of a local church, such a congregation should be cared for by godly leadership even if for some reason it is not growing. Why throw God's people to the wolves because the prospects for gaining ministerial prestige are greater elsewhere because of demographic considerations?

By Church Growth standards the greatest failures of all time were Noah and Jeremiah. Noah preached (see **2Peter 2:5**) for a hundred years and no one believed him. Jeremiah's message was totally rejected. Events of history proved him right during his lifetime, but even then those left in Jerusalem still would not listen to him and carried him away to Egypt (**Jeremiah 43:1-6**). Conversely, Jonah, if judged by Church Growth standards, was a fantastic success. The Bible does not see it that way.

Further proof of the falsity of Church Growth premise that numerical growth of any given local congregation is always God's will is found in a study of the churches in Revelation. I have written more extensively on this matter recently.²⁰ The two churches that were commended with no rebuke were Smyrna and Philadelphia. Both were small, poor, and lacked influence, but they were faithful in their confession. There is no indication that these churches were growing. Since they had existed for some time, and yet were small, they could not have been Church Growth success cases. But another church that was very successful was Laodicea—it was rebuked. Jesus' understanding of what is important and modern Church Growth technocrats' understanding is very different. Who do you think is correct?

**False Premise # 2:
That the Needs and Sensibilities of
the Unconverted Should Determine
the Strategy of the Church**

Let us return to Rick Warren's statement cited at the beginning of this article: "It is my deep conviction that

anybody can be won to Christ if you discover the key to his or her heart. . . . It may take some time to identify it. But the most likely place to start is with the person's felt needs."²¹ This principle of "felt needs" is bedrock to Church Growth principles. It is related to the idea of "relevance" and "satisfy the customer" is one of marketing's oldest principles. If a person feels a need and is convinced that your product meets that need, they will be satisfied if they buy the product and it performs as expected. Often, however, marketing is more difficult. The potential customer does not feel the need for your product and you have to convince them they have a need.

What Church Growth thinking does is take the easier approach. Rather than convince people they have a need, they start with needs that people already feel. Having determined what those are, they design a church that meets those needs. If the church succeeds in adequately meeting the needs, it has satisfied customers. Satisfied customers are the best advertising for future potential customers. If the customers come from a "homogeneous unit" they are likely to enjoy the process corporately. Ideally this leads to a "people movement" (another of McGavran's concepts²²).

Let us analyze this Biblically. The greatest need that all people have, because they are children of Adam (the homogeneous unit that matters most) and are under God's wrath against sin, is for the blood atonement that only Christ provides. The unconverted do not feel this as a need unless they have already come under the conviction of the Holy Spirit (**John 16:8**) which happens through the preaching of the Law and the Gospel. The unregenerate in any neighborhood are not going to say they feel a need for the blood of Jesus to wash away their sins. This is a need they must be convinced they have, and will not be convinced unless the Holy Spirit does a work of grace in their hearts.

Furthermore, if one follows the felt needs agenda, the church will inevitably have to take resources and attention

away from gospel preaching and Bible teaching in order to create programs to meet these needs. When people are asked if they are "good people" and whether they think they will go to heaven when they die, the answer is nearly always "yes." They feel no need for conversion. So hearing gospel preaching will not be one of their felt needs. Therefore the felt needs of the unregenerate will determine that the church puts the proclamation of the gospel on the back burner, if indeed their self-perceived needs are the starting point for the church's growth strategy. Thus those needs devour the church's time and money and push aside what in reality is far more important.

"Yes, they need the gospel" say the Church Growth experts, "but you have to get them into the church and comfortable with the church before they will listen to you about the need for salvation." This is not true. Peter preached to the unconverted; those who repented and believed the gospel were "added to the church" (see **Acts 2:38-42**). Those people saw no need for a crucified Messiah before Peter preached; they were the ones who had rejected Him and had Him crucified. Peter indicted them of this: "Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ—this Jesus whom you crucified" (**Acts 2:36**). If people are willing to come because you are offering satisfaction to those needs sinners tend to be aware of, there is no reason to expect they will suddenly see the need for the blood atonement. If they were going to reject the gospel if it were preached to them forthrightly, why would they accept it if it is coyly brought in the back door after they came for other reasons all together?

Warren's claim that anybody can be won to Christ if we figure out some key is false. There is no Biblical warrant whatsoever to this claim; and there are many passages that refute it. The passage in Matthew 7 about the narrow gate refutes it. The concept of the saved remnant found in Romans 9 and elsewhere refutes it. The fact that even Jesus, who as God knows the heart, lost Judas the "son of perdition" disproves it.

The Biblical doctrine of election taught in dozens of passages (such as **Romans 8:28-33**) disproves it.

The very idea that it is possible to win anybody to Christ by learning information about their heart is foolish and dangerous. If we really believed that, we would spend our time studying man to find out what is in his heart rather than faithfully proclaiming the terms of the gospel to all people and trusting God who alone knows the heart to convert those who will be saved. As a matter of fact, that is exactly what the Church Growth movement is doing. They have invented a course of study called "missiology." The nuts and bolts of missiology have to do with the study of man. This is from a website that promotes missiology: "As missiologists reflect on the global march of the Church, they use tools from the social sciences to understand various dynamics. Insights are drawn from cultural anthropology, ethnology, sociology, geography, and political science."²³ Missiology links the mission of the church to the scientific study of man in hopes of thereby more adequately fulfilling the Great Commission.

The bad theology that underlies Church Growth thinking is man-centered. It does not take serious the depravity of the fallen human race. It apparently assumes that people have the power and inclination to become Christian without a prior supernatural work of grace.²⁴ This being the case, its practices try to entice people with programs to meet needs, cajole them with human wisdom, or attract them with supernatural signs and wonders. What is offered must appeal to the natural man. But Paul rejects this type of reasoning all together:

Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things freely given to us by God, which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words. But a natural man does not accept the things of

the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised (1Corinthians 2:12-14).

The Corinthian world of traveling sophists had a very high regard for human wisdom. Paul's message of a crucified Jewish Messiah was foolishness to them. Nevertheless, Paul refused to give them what they wanted (human wisdom). On the contrary, here is ONLY what Paul would give them: "*For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified*" (1Corinthians 2:2). He refused to let their appetite for human wisdom change his message of Christ crucified.

Since Paul approached his ministry in this way, he was dependant on the work of the Holy Spirit, not the wisdom of man. The work of the Holy Spirit was to change hostile sinners into loving worshippers through the gospel:

For indeed Jews ask for signs, and Greeks search for wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block, and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. (1Corinthians 1:22-24)

Ironically, in the Church Growth Movement C. Peter Wagner offers signs and Rick Warren offers wisdom, but who is going to publicly proclaim the gospel? The Holy Spirit works powerfully through the Word that He inspired, not through questionable signs and human wisdom.

In my opinion, 1Corinthians chapters 1 and 2 in themselves should be all any Bible believing Christian should need to see the fallacy of the "felt needs" premise of the Church Growth Movement. But for some reason, this movement is bigger and more influential than it has ever been, especially given Rick Warren's sensational impact. The answer to why this is the case is likely complex. However, one simple answer that is readily apparent is that

we have allowed the Church Growth technocrats to define both our mission, and the terms of success and failure. Having erroneously granted these, now we find ourselves having to buy their services in order to avoid failure. They have ingeniously created a "felt need" in evangelical pastors and now the growth experts are experiencing record sales of their products that promise to meet this felt need.

Faulty Premise # 3 That the Lack of Adequate Church Growth World Wide Proves the Need for a New Reformation

In 1982 Robert Schuller issued a call for a new reformation in his book *Self-Esteem, the New Reformation*.²⁵ Since 1982, at least three other calls for new reformations have been proposed. The next one, chronologically, came in 1993 at a "Re-imagining" conference in Minneapolis, Minnesota. This conference called for re-imagining God according to feminist ideals. Then in 1999, in his book *Churchquake*, C. Peter Wagner announced a New Apostolic Reformation. Now Rick Warren is calling for yet another new reformation, this one based on his PEACE plan to wipe out the biggest world problems. In May of 2005, Warren conscripted thousands of pastors from 49 countries and 200 denominations to join his PEACE plan.²⁶ An article posted on his website says, "At the conference, Warren unveiled a new catalytic model of ministry for PD designed to engage churches in the upcoming reformation. He then asked churches to commit to adopting the paradigm, become more purpose driven, help other congregations use the paradigm, and deploy small groups through the P.E.A.C.E. Plan."²⁷

It seems confusing that we have four separate "reformations" on the table. One is going to give people more self-esteem, another make Christianity more feminine, another is going to give us later day apostles and prophets, and yet another is going to wipe out world hunger and other problems using a Purpose Driven paradigm. I will briefly

examine each of these to see if they have anything in common.

Schuller wrote, "Where the sixteenth-century Reformation returned our focus to sacred Scriptures as the only infallible rule for faith and practice, the new reformation will return our focus to the sacred right of every person to self-esteem! The fact is, the church will never succeed until it satisfies the human being's hunger for self-value."²⁸ Notice that the motivation is for the church to "succeed." He goes on and says, "The prospects will be a message that promises success to the church. And that's good news, for the alternative is failure."²⁹ His reasoning is that since all humans hunger for self-value (remember the felt needs concept), the church must feed their appetite for this if it is going to succeed. What will this success look like? Schuller explains:

Why must we spare nothing to share the good news of each person's worth? Again we must because we want the entire human family to become a brotherhood and so live that we are proud of ourselves. Then, and only then will the Father be glorified.³⁰

Schuller wants to make the Christian message one that will create a world wide, religious, brotherhood of people who feel good about themselves.

The proposed feminist reformation is rather radical, but shares a similar purpose. I have a newspaper article from 1993 when they held the conference here in Minneapolis calling for a reformation. The article says, "Many of the women who are working to change Christianity are gathered this week in Minneapolis to celebrate what they call 'the second Reformation.'³¹ The article describes the work and ideas of those who propose this new reformation: "They are exploring the sensual and sexual side of the divine, rooting around in contemplative and introspective interplay with God, and talking about women's daily experiences of the divine in every culture as central to theology today."³² Here is what one of the key persons at that conference had to say: "Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, one

of the nation's best known evangelical feminist theologians, said 'This second Reformation we are working on is much more basic and important to the health of humankind. . . . The first Reformation was about authority. This one is too, but this one says authority is right relationship with creation and all people.'³³ Mollenkott is an unashamed lesbian and is actively involved in supporting Christian gay and lesbian groups.³⁴

The New Apostolic Reformation is based on the idea that apostles and prophets as the foundation of the church were never meant to be only the Biblical ones, but that living persons should occupy these offices until the church is perfected.³⁵ Wagner argues that the church has made remarkable progress for centuries without apostles and prophets, but that so much more will happen with them. He uses the analogy of driving a car in reverse. He says that it is possible to make a trip that way, but how much better it is to drive in forward. Wagner writes, "As we begin this twenty-first century, I believe it would be better to shift the Church into forward gear and even into overdrive! Just think. If God, through a Church that had things backward could evangelize practically the whole world, imagine what is in store for us now that we are getting things in order!"³⁶ Wagner makes a faulty distinction between the Greek words *logos* and *rhema*, claiming that the former is contained in the canon of Scripture and the later consists of present day revelations.³⁷ Those who are privy to later day new revelations are apostles: "Apostles who receive the word of the Lord translate it into a concrete vision and announce to their followers that it is what the Spirit is saying to the churches for this time and place, thus opening the way for powerful ministry."³⁸

Wagner himself claims to be the recipient of this type of apostolic revelation. He claims to have been given marching orders for the church to concentrate on the 40/70 window (mis-siologists use that term for the part of the world with the greatest numbers of non-Christians). He claims further that he knows that a principality of dark-

ness named "The Queen of Heaven" is responsible for "neutralizing the power of Christianity in that area."³⁹ The long and the short of it is that the release of apostolic power through later day apostles and prophets with new revelations for the church will bring about the success and triumph of Christianity in the world.

Rick Warren's reformation is also about changing the world through Christian action. He claims that he will mobilize churches and Christians to wipe out the "5 giants." Here is his statement at his church's 25th anniversary celebration: "Our goal will be to enlist 'one billion foot soldiers for the Kingdom of God,' who will permanently change the face of international missions to take on these five 'global giants' for which the church can become the ultimate distribution and change agent to overcome Spiritual Emptiness, Self-serving Leadership, Poverty, Disease and Ignorance (or illiteracy),"⁴⁰

All of these proposed reformations hope to create a new Christianity that is more popular and accepted world-wide. They all change the message of the church in very significant ways. Self-esteem is not the message of the gospel. A feminist theology that is connected to the creation and eschews Biblical morality is not the message of the gospel. New revelations from later day apostles about the identity of principalities and powers that supposedly hinder the Christianizing of the world are not the message of the gospel. Mobilizing churches and church leaders to adopt the Purpose Driven paradigm and energize a billion Christians to wipe out poverty and disease is not the message of the gospel. The one thing these diverse reformations have in common is ideas that can be marketed to the world. The gospel offends the world, not the wisdom of would-be reformation starters.

The real Reformation was not started as a marketing plan in Martin Luther's mind. He did not announce a "reformation," he preached justification by faith, the authority of Scripture, and the priesthood of every believer. The problems that prompted the

Reformation had nothing to do with church growth or making the church more popular in the world. The Roman Catholic Church was doing just fine in the world. The real Reformation was about the gospel itself and its integrity.

Rick Warren claims that the Reformation was about what the church taught as opposed to his reformation of what the church does. This is a faulty description of the Reformation. Luther's 95 theses were against the sale of indulgences (what the church does). The authority of Scripture impacted what the church did in dozens of highly significant ways, including delivering people from abusive church authorities. C. Peter Wagner, by giving us human authorities with authoritative revelations from God is refuting a key principle of the real Reformation. Schuller, by devaluing the idea of God's wrath against sin, makes the concept of justification that was so important to Luther superfluous. Mollonkott and the feminist reformation show an alarming disregard for the authority of Scripture by departing from the Biblical definition of God and departing from Biblical moral standards. The confusing array of reformations being pushed upon us should be rejected and those promoting them not given credibility. We are much better off with the "solus" of the real Reformation.

The lack of popularity of Christianity does not prove the need for some new reformation. It proves that Jesus was absolutely right when He said that His way was narrow and that few walked on it. The Church Growth Movement has shown a willingness to lay aside the clear teachings of Scripture in order to find success in this world. The "reformations" of this movement are all "deformations" and should be fully rejected.

CONCLUSION

Once one starts with a faulty premise, however logical his steps from that point may be, he will always end up in error. The three faulty premises discussed in this article are from one basic falsehood: that the church and

her teachings must be popular with the world in order to succeed. Jesus told His disciples that the world would hate them. The book of Revelation portrays the hostile world and her powers persecuting and martyring believers. The churches in Revelation that were commended were small and persecuted. The idea of a massive world-wide church that is so attractive and successful that the world willingly embraces her is a description of the Laodicean church at best and the church of Antichrist and the false prophet at worst, not the church described by Jesus and His apostles.

I urge pastors and church leaders to reject the false premises of the Church Growth movement and commit to unsullied gospel preaching and Bible teaching. May the Lord give us the courage and grace to stay faithful to the end even if the world and worldly minded critics within the church call us "failures." The Lord is the only One we need to please.

ADDENDUM

I want to make it clear that I am not claiming that the Church Growth movement has nothing useful to say. Paul wrote, "Give no offense either to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God" (1Corinthians 10:32). We cannot change the fact that the gospel is offensive, but we should always avoid needless offenses. Understanding the culture of the people we are trying to reach is helpful in that regard. It is important that we do not allow our personal preferences to become as God's law. When I became a Christian, the church I first attended had many self-created laws. For example they had a law that one could not attend any movie in a theater, not even to see The Ten Commandments. This and other oddities (none of which were required by the Bible) made them appear to be very eccentric to the people in town. This had the affect of limiting their opportunity to share the gospel.

The moral law of God revealed in the Bible protects the integrity of the gospel and the spiritual well being of

those who believe it. Man-made laws that many think make them appear more pious protect only the cultural identity of those who make them. These laws give needless offense and should be avoided. If those of us who resist the seeker movement throw up needless obstacles like the KJV only position, we are unwittingly pushing people into the seeker churches. Human law givers are as much of a threat to the gospel as compromisers.

Another issue that arises in this discussion is the varying degrees of talent that people have. Having a lack of talent is not a sin. Failing to use the talents one has is. The Church Growth movement tends to discourage people who do not have the talent to create programs that would attract large crowds. Even in necessary things like preaching God's Word, people come with different talents. A gifted orator may attract a bigger audience or be hired by a church in a bigger city. Someone less gifted nevertheless has the words of life and is honoring God by using his gifts in smaller arena. The Church Growth movement tends to discourage the less gifted ones to the point where they may even quit the ministry. Or they may buy a packaged program from one of the highly talented Church Growth leaders and run that program rather than preaching from God's Word. Both of these outcomes are unacceptable. Ministry should be judged in terms of faithfulness, not in terms of numbers.

END NOTES

1. Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995) 219.
2. However Rick Warren now says that he does not like the term 'Church Growth': <http://www.christianitytoday.com/bcl/areas/leadership/articles/062905.html> He claims he quit using the term in 1986, but the term "Growth" is on the cover of his book and "church growth" is found often in *The Purpose Driven Church*, see for example pages 48 and 49. Many of the endorsements included in the

- book tout it is a “Church Growth” book.
3. Donald McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*; (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970, 3rd edition, 1990) Revised and edited by C. Peter Wagner, ix.
 4. Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, 29.
 5. <http://www.crystalcathedral.org/rhsi/rhsi.about.html> Schuller says on this website: “Think about it - in 1970, where could a pastor go to learn successful principles for personal, spiritual nourishment and church growth? There was not a single source except the sometimes cumbersome route through ‘the denomination.’ Our Institute has set a new and respected precedent. Alumni include Bill Hybels, John Maxwell, Bishop Charles Blake, Rick Warren, Walt Kallestad, Kirbyjon Caldwell, and many, many others who found the fundamental principles of success at our sessions and the rest is church history!”
 6. <http://www.theamericanchurch.org/> According to David T. Olson, the percentage of people who attended an orthodox (as opposed to a false cult) church dropped from 1990 to 2000, with only 18.7 % attending church on a given weekend. <http://www.theamericanchurch.org/facts/5.htm>
 7. http://www.purposedriven.com/en-US/AboutUs/WhatIsPD/PD_Articles/Church_Health.htm There is an obvious problem with Warren’s analogy. Living organisms only grow until they reach maturity. Humans and other living beings can live healthy lives after they quit growing.
 8. McGavran, *Understanding*, C. Peter Wagner’s introduction, xi.
 9. McGavran, *Understanding*, 165.
 10. Ralph Elliot, *Dangers of the Church Growth Movement*, <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=1723>
 11. McGavran, *Understanding*, C. Peter Wagner’s introduction, xi
 12. McGavran, *Understanding*, 27, 28.
 13. Ibid. 28.
 14. Ibid. 29.
 15. Ibid. ix, x.
 16. Ibid. 29.
 17. See Donald A. McGavran and Winfield C. Arn, *Ten Steps for Church Growth* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1977) 2. McGavran decries “defensive thinking, rationalizations and excuses” for lack of church growth.
 18. Elliot, *Dangers*
 19. Ibid.
 20. see ISSUE 86 - “Church Health Award” From Rick Warren or Jesus Christ? A Study of the Seven Churches in Revelation ; Critical Issues Commentary; January/February 2005 <http://www.twincityfellowship.com/cic/articles/issue86.htm>
 21. Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, 219.
 22. McGavran, *Understanding*, 221-249.
 23. <http://home.snu.edu/~hculbert/missiolo.htm> This is from Southern Nazarene University.
 24. Some would deny this theologically, but nevertheless proceed as if it were true. If they really believed in a need for a prior work of grace, then they would provide the means for that work of grace. Studying people’s felt needs in order to create a church service that promises to meet those needs is appealing to human wants and desires, not showing them their hopelessly lost condition and need for a work of grace.
 25. Robert Schuller, *Self-Esteem the New Reformation*, (Waco: Word, 1982).
 26. http://www.purposedriven.com/en-US/AboutUs/PDintheNews/Pastors_commit_to_new_Reformation.htm
 27. Ibid.
 28. Robert Schuller, *Self-Esteem*, 38.
 29. Ibid. 39.
 30. Ibid. 141.
 31. Martha Sawyer Allen, *The Divine Redefined – From female theologians come the stirrings of a new Reformation*; in Minneapolis Star Tribune, November 3, 1993.
 32. Ibid.
 33. Ibid.
 34. <http://www.geocities.com/vrmollenkott/> this is from her own website.
 35. C. Peter Wagner, *Apostles and Prophets and The Foundation of the Church*, (Regal: Ventura, 2000) 6-8.
 36. Ibid. 9.
 37. Ibid. 34.
 38. Ibid.
 39. Ibid. 36.
 40. <http://www.assistnews.net/stories/s05040087.htm>

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