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Book Review: Biblical Church Growth: How You Can Work with God to Build a Faithful Church

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Book Reviews

**Biblical Church Growth:
How You Can Work with God to Build a Faithful Church**

Reviewed by Darryl Thompson

McIntosh, Gary L. Biblical Church Growth: How You Can Work with God to Build a Faithful Church. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003. 191 pp. \$14.99.

The book is a response to common misunderstandings which have developed concerning church growth. The author seeks to show that church growth teaching is not just a 'numbers game' or a 'marketing methodology' to get people into church. Rather he explains how it is a purposeful process based on biblical principles aimed at winning people to Christ, assimilating them into local churches, and equipping them for ministry.

The book is dedicated to Donald McGavran, the father of the church growth movement. His ideas have largely shaped the principles presented in the book. Quotes and a prayer by McGavran are included in each chapter and give insight into McGavran's views and passions.

McIntosh is highly qualified to write this book. He is a nationally known author, speaker, consultant, and professor of Christian Ministry and Leadership at Talbot School of Theology who has been actively involved in the church growth movement from its early years. He is president of the McIntosh Church Growth Network, a consulting firm he founded in 1989. He has served more than 500 churches in 55 denominations throughout the United States and Canada.

The book begins with a personal story of a time when McIntosh was a young pastor of a struggling church. His search for answers to the church's challenges eventually led him to an understanding of the church growth principles which he shares in the book. He believes that these principles are biblically based and provide the answers on how to grow a faithful church.

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In chapter two he explains why he believes a church should grow. His foundational reason is the nature of God. God, by His very nature, is life-giving. This is displayed in God's creative acts and in His promise of a redeemer after Adam and Eve sinned. It is further evidenced by the life-giving ministry and message of Jesus and by the church which Jesus said He would build. The local church is to be a channel of Christ's life experienced in both spiritual births and spiritual growth.

The first principle which he presents is the starting point for all of the principles. It is having the right premise which he identifies as the Word of God. "Simply stated, life-giving churches have a strong commitment to the authority of God's Word" (37). God is the source of all authority and the Bible is the complete expression of His revelation to mankind. "Churches that have a high commitment to the authority of God's Word and passionately communicate their beliefs to those outside the faith have great potential for biblical church growth ... (47).

His second principle is titled the 'right priority'. He offers the ultimate goal that a church should have as "bringing glory to the life-giving God" (51). He demonstrates that giving glory to God is a main theme throughout the Bible with passages such as Isaiah 48:10-11, I Chronicles 16:28-29, Revelation 4:11 along with Jesus' words in John 12:27-28, 13:31, and 17:1 & 4-5. A primary way to bring God glory is for Jesus' disciples to bear fruit. He makes a good case that the fruit which Jesus refers to in John 15 is new converts or disciples.

The third principle is the right process which he identifies as discipleship. Churches do this by finding the lost, folding them into the body, and building them up in the faith (68). He sees Matthew 28:16-20 as the most complete account of Christ's commission to make disciples.

He advocates that church growth should come primarily through evangelizing the lost. He displays great insight in discussing how an overemphasis on spiritual renewal in a church can actually make it sick instead of healthy. This happens as a church becomes self-centered and loses its sense of mission.

The fourth principle is the right power which he presents as the Holy Spirit. Churches which follow Biblical principles will rely on the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit for the growth of the church and not human effort. He does not advocate that churches ignore proper techniques, methods, and strategies but that they carry out all of their activities in total dependence upon the work of the Holy Spirit. This is seen in how churches place prayer at the forefront of their ministry.

The fifth principle is the right pastor. McIntosh says that

“life-giving churches are led by pastors who faithfully serve as God’s fellow workers in fulfilling the Great Commission” (96). David is presented as an example of a servant-leader who shepherded with character and competence. The right pastor is a faithful shepherd who is concerned about biblical church growth.

The sixth principle is the right people. The right people are growing spiritually and willing to invest their lives in life-giving ministry. McIntosh states that “numerical growth in a church will not last unless the people reached also grow spiritually” (109). He identifies three categories of people (consumers, internal volunteers, and external volunteers) in a church. The ratio that a church has of these will greatly affect its growth potential.

The seventh principle is the right philosophy which is identified as cultural relevance. The principle is stated as “life giving churches relate to their communities in culturally relevant ways” (123). Paul is presented as an example of what it means to adjust one’s style to the culture in which he is ministering in order to reach people. Although he was a Jew he willingly did what was necessary to gain a hearing from Gentiles. His methods could change but his unchanging message was Christ.

The eighth principle is the right plan which he states as “life-giving churches focus their ministries on clearly defined groups of responsive people” (137). He presents five questions which a church needs to ask and answer to help it identify its target group and experience biblical church growth. A local church must seek to learn the culture of the people it is trying to reach just as a missionary would.

The ninth principle is the right procedure which is a simple structure. He advocates that “life-giving churches employ simple organizational systems” (153). He notes that very few specifics are given for church structure in the New Testament. Four principles for church structure are identified: 1) as a church grows, certain persons need to be placed in charge of specific ministries, 2) every believer is responsible for and capable of relating directly to God, 3) each believer is gifted to serve the entire body, and 4) order is vital to the continued health of a church (153-154). Two conclusions from the Bible and church history are presented concerning church structure. First, the life-giving Spirit is more concerned about function than form (154). Second, the life-giving Spirit is earnestly concerned with reaching every tribe, nation, people, and family (155). This chapter also includes some very helpful church life-cycle insights.

The book closes with a chapter titled, “Mix It Right.” Like a great tasting pie, biblical church growth results when the right

ingredients are properly blended to create a dynamic synergy (165). Here he summarizes the nine principles which have been presented and closes with a challenge to the reader to cooperate with God to build a faithful church. For biblical church growth is the heart and passion of the life-giving God.

The field of church growth has had its share of criticism, misunderstanding, and misrepresentation. McIntosh makes a gracious, biblical response in this book. He leaves no room for confusion. Church growth as understood and advocated by Donald McGavran and the author is all about fulfilling Christ's commission to His followers. It is based solidly upon biblical principles. It does utilize the wisdom gained from studying what works and what does not work. But it is not simply aimed at increasing church numbers.

Many will struggle with the contents of this book. Not because it is not biblical but because it will measure success in ministry by reaching prechristians with the gospel message and bringing them into responsible involvements in the local church. Few churches are doing this well. It is difficult and challenging. Yet to do anything else is to play at church and fail to be about the great task Christ entrusted to His church.

I would recommend this book to pastors wanting to understand how to grow a church by reaching unchurched people, to church leaders wanting to understand why some churches grow and others don't, and to anyone wanting to better understand biblical church growth. This book is essential to properly understand the ideas and motivations of the church growth field founders.

Reviewer

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