

1-1-1997

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### Recommended Citation

Vaughan, J. N. (1997). The Church Growth Movement: Offense to the Cross?. *Journal of the American Society for Church Growth*, 8(1), 3-9. Retrieved from <https://digitalarchives.apu.edu/jascg/vol8/iss1/2>

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**The Church Growth Movement: Offense to the Cross?**

**Dr. John N. Vaughan**

**Presidential Address to The American Society  
for Church Growth Annual Meeting  
November 1993**

Almost two years ago Os Guinness was speaking to a group of more than two hundred pastors and church leaders in a hotel near Dallas. The topic was about modernity and generic references were repeatedly made about leaders within the Church Growth Movement. Accusations were made that members had contributed to the contemporary drift of today's churches toward an accelerated entrenchment into perilous modernity. The accusations were repeated and pointed.

I was one of the two officers of the American Society for Church Growth present at the event. When the speaker was finished and offered time for questions and answers, I stood to identify myself as founding editor and second-vice president of the Society. After asking him to provide the audience with the names of specific offenders and to match them with specific accusations, he confessed that perhaps he had been too harsh in his blame. My preference, however, was that he redeem the names of those he had generically accused of a serious offense against God's churches and His kingdom.

Critics of the Church Growth Movement, in their most recent books, and in newspaper articles by journalists that quote them, suggest that the movement has become an offense to the cross. Sometimes one could wish that they would just go away. We within the Church Growth Movement, however, should remem-

ber that the writer of Proverbs assures us that an undeserved curse has no power. Conversely, the last thing we can afford is the justified curse of judgment from God due to our own inability to hear the voice of God through the words of our critics.

Included among the more prominent examples in the popular literature are *Ultimate Church: An Irreverent Look at Church Growth, Megachurches, and Ecclesiastical 'Show-Biz'* by Tom Raabe (Zondervan, 1991); *No God But God* by Os Guinness and John Seel, Editors (Moody Press, 1992); *The Evangelical Forfeit: Can We Recover?*, by John Seel (Baker Book House, 1993); *Selling Jesus*, by Douglas Webster (IVP: 1992); *Power Religion: The Selling Out of the Evangelical Church?*, by Charles Colson, J. I. Packer, R. C. Sproul, Alister McGrath and others (Moody Press, 1992); *Dining with the Devil: The Megachurch Movement Flirts with Modernity*, by Os Guinness (Baker Books, 1993) and *Ashamed of the Gospel: When the Church Becomes Like the World*, by John F. MacArthur, Jr. (Crossway Books, 1993).

Their specific accusations include:

1. Abandonment of foundational principles laid by Dr. Donald McGavran by today's Church Growth Movement leaders. (Guinness: 1993, pp. 20-21).
2. Excessive application of pragmatism by McGavran and an enlarged expansion of that misapplication by his disciples to the exclusion of Scripture. The natural result of pragmatism is a philosophy of ministry that views the end as being justified by the means and a "it works so it must be right" attitude. (Guinness: 1993, pp. 51-52).
3. Vulgar compromise of Scriptural truths by redefining "contextualization" of the gospel into contemporary themes like "user friendly" churches designed to tell people what they want to hear rather than what the Scripture mandates that we tell. (Colson, et al: 1992, p. 145).
4. Attempting to solicit "felt needs:" of people through surveys and then customizing our message to affirm their best sense of self-esteem as a reachable "target group." The "customer is sovereign" even at the expense of God's Word and His own Sovereignty. (Colson, et al: 1992, p. 144; MacArthur: 1993, p. 65).
5. Systematic neglect within the Church Growth Movement

to examine its presupposition, principles, and “laws” through the use of modern, objective, research technique. (Hadaway: 1991, p. 13).

6. Systematic displacement of scriptural principles and teaching about the sovereignty of God in the growing of His churches. The Bible basis for church growth is increasingly being replaced with audience ratings, population polls, preoccupation with corporate image, statistical growth, financial profit, opinion surveys, demographic charts, census summaries, celebrity status, and top-ten listing of churches. (MacArthur: 1993, p. 80; Guinness: 1993, p. 81).
7. Leading churches to focus on merely “churching” the already converted “unchurched” rather than reaching the unconverted for commitment to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. (MacArthur: 1993, p. 81).
8. Failure to distinguish numerical growth of biblically orthodox churches and those teaching false doctrine. The movement studies all growing churches—even those with false doctrine at the core of their teaching. (MacArthur: 1993, p. 78).
9. Preoccupation with the size of a church as the measure of success. By this standard, most church leaders are failures. (Colson, et al. 1992, p. 145).

God knows your heart, motives, commitment to the integrity of His Word and sound doctrine. He also knows mine. Perhaps the confrontation between Peter and Jesus in Matthew 16:21-27 can provide some guidelines in helping us in this room, and those we represent, to rightly allow God to lead us in judging ourselves and the validity of our critics’ claims against us. Make no mistake, the accusations demand our prayerful consideration and perhaps even our collective and individual response. Where exactly can we agree with our critics and where do we have serious disagreement?

Six questions I suggest that we might ask of ourselves after examining this text are:

1. Do we share the urgency of Jesus? v.21;
2. Is Jesus being rebuked, and if so by whom? v. 22;
3. Is Jesus our leader or have we run ahead of Him? v.23;
4. Is the name and the cause of Jesus Christ being offended

- because of our words or actions? v.23;
5. Do we as members of the North American Society for Church Growth "savourest not the things of God, but those that be of men"? v. 33;
  6. Have we in fact led in the seduction of God's churches by flirting with modernity to the extent that the church is losing her very life because of the "exchange" she is declared to have made in exchange for her very soul? v. 25-26.

The answers to these six questions are vital in light of verse 27, "For the Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father with his angels; and then He shall reward every man according to his works."

It is my belief that we DO share the urgency of Jesus. As a society we are open to receiving rebuke when justified, while also assuming our call as a prophetic voice for God's rebuke of ignorance and sometimes stubbornness of God's churches to obediently, and boldly claim the harvest of souls without hope in the villages and megacities of the world.

The declared purpose of the Church Growth Movement is to serve as encourager, equipper, and prophet to the churches in our shared commitment in the Great Commission mandate. Fulfillment of the Great Commission in this generation is the goal. The challenge of modernity and contextualization of the Gospel is not new. Neither is its curse. Spurgeon, Tozer and even the Apostle Paul are frequently acknowledged by our critics as having faced the same challenges.

#### *A Word from the Critics*

Os Guinness in *Dining With The Devil*, identifies the heart of concern: "Put simply, modernity can be understood as the character and system of the world produced by the forces of development and modernization, especially capitalism, industrialized technology, and communications (p. 16)...Modernity simultaneously makes EVANGELISM easier...yet somehow makes DISCIPLESHIP harder" (p.18). He observes that a major and subtle reversal has occurred in American religious life.

"LIBERALS...have generally tended to SURRENDER to modernity without criticizing it;

"CONSERVATIVES...have tended to DEFY modernity without UNDERSTANDING it" (p. 18). This tendency has been re-

versed in the LAST generation.

The causes for this drift are identified by various critics of the Church Growth Movement and tend to focus on:

1. The preoccupation of Donald McGavran with pragmatism, whatever his best intentions may have been during his early days as missionary and later as missiologist;
2. The questioning of what C. Peter Wagner means by the "multiplication of churches on New Ground." (*Your Church Can Grow*, p. 13);
3. The metamorphosis of the movement into its current "third" stage as a fully developed infectious carrier of the modernity virus;
4. The rise of U.S. megachurches and their widespread adoption of modern electronic communications technology that has created a church subculture unlike that of previous eras and of the larger culture of small churches;
5. The shift in focus of the church as Bible-centered spiritual worship and training center for born again believers to a time and place devoted to non-believers and reclaimed "unchurched" or recycled saints;
6. A shift in the content of the public worship experience from traditional Bible-centered teaching to entertainment, concerts, and drama as an attraction to reach the "unchurched" and unconverted;
7. A shift from building a congregation of committed born-again believers to merely gathering a crowd; and
8. A shift from Scripture driven evangelism and discipleship to marketing/selling driven strategies grounded in secular psychology, sociology, and management philosophy and methodology.

John MacArthur notes, "When Charles Spurgeon warned about those who 'would like to unite churches and stage, cards and prayer, dancing and sacraments' he was belittled as an alarmist. But Spurgeon's prophecy has been fulfilled before our eyes. Modern church buildings are constructed like theaters ('play-houses,' Spurgeon called them). Instead of a pulpit, the focus is a stage. Churches are hiring full-time media specialists, programming consultants, drama coaches, special-effects experts, and choreographers...This is all the natural extension of a market-driven philosophy" (*Ashamed of the Gospel*. Crossway Books, 1993).

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*Observations For Our Critics*

The movement can benefit from those who would call us back to biblical priorities and our collective translation of how these basics apply to leaders representative of, or in agreement with, the church growth movement.

1. There is an obvious misreading, hopefully out of ignorance and perhaps misinformation, of basic church growth movement literature by some critics. For example, Os Guinness totally misreads the reference by C. Peter Wagner about "the multiplication of churches on New Ground." He seems to presuppose that "new ground" is a church growth movement code name for some master agenda for nation-wide seduction of God's churches via modernity (1993: 13, 14, 21).

2. According to Guinness' definition of "church growth" (1993: 13), his preoccupation with the term "renewal" appears to indicate the preoccupation with existing believers to the exclusion of sharing the gospel with the myriads of unconverted populations. Both Guinness and MacArthur place strong focus on the efforts of churches impacted by modernity, especially megachurches, to "grow churches" through secular resources and without the help of God.

3. Guinness seems to be unaware that the Garden Grove Community Church changed its name to Crystal Cathedral Congregation several years ago and, to my knowledge, has never been listed on a "top ten list." (1993:13)

4. Critics can be guilty of assuming that anyone writing anything about growing churches or "church growth" must be part of the Church Growth Movement. For this reason, Donald McGavran and the early leaders within the movement created a special designation to distinguish the "movement" meaning by spelling the words Church Growth with upper-case letters. Few critics even when quoting McGavran, seem to be aware of this designation and its associated implications in use of the words. The official definition of "Church Growth" adopted by the American Society for Church Growth since its founding is: "Church Growth is that discipline which investigates the nature, expansion, planting, multiplication, function and health of Christian churches as they relate to the effective implementation of God's commission to 'make disciples of all peoples' (Matt. 28:19-20). Students of Church Growth strive to integrate the eternal theological principles of God's Word concerning the expansion

of the Church with the best insights of contemporary social and behavioral sciences, employing as the initial frame of reference, the foundational work done by Donald McGavran."

5. Just as James Kennedy and Bill Bright cannot possibly be responsible for the misapplication by others of Evangelism Explosion or the Four Spiritual Laws, neither can those within the Church Growth Movement be assumed to endorse or be in agreement with those who may misunderstand or misapply principles or methods when used by freelance church growth "experts".

Critics should be aware that there are leaders within the Church Growth Movement who understand but refuse to use the term "market-driven" or "user-friendly." "Church marketing" is a method of distribution of church information and materials in churches, and between churches, but it is not the major focus of the movement or of the Church Growth societies in America or on other continents.

6. Many sources quoted by critics of the Church Growth Movement are religious and secular newspapers and magazines. These sources can aid the distribution of information about church and religious life in the nation, but remember that many of these writers are not sympathetic with Christian causes. Surely our critics know that some writers, even of national and international publications, search the globe for illustrations that are hardly representative of larger church life in the nation.

7. Finally, it is a gross misapplication of information to identify megachurches as the heart of what the Church Growth Movement is all about. The movement's statement, as quoted above, is clear and is endorsed by church growth leaders in the larger Christian community both in the United States and other nations.

#### Writer

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