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A Response to Dr. Litfin

Charles Van Engen

I believe I echo the sentiments of my colleagues in the American Society for Church Growth when I express my deep appreciation to Dr. Litfin for taking the time to honor us with his presence—and especially to challenge us with his critical assessment of one of the central core issues concerning Church Growth theory. We need to listen carefully to our critics, for our response to critique will influence to a large extent the maturity, authenticity and development of the movement. In this response I would like to do three things: summarize how I have understood Dr. Litfin's critique, reflect on the significance of the critique for the Church Growth Movement, and, thirdly, to clarify and nuance an evaluation of the critique.

Summary Of The Critique

Dr. Litfin's critique centers around one of the most fundamental presuppositions of the Church Growth Movement: "pragmatism." Dr. Litfin has focused on the matter of a pragmatic approach to the relationship between the motivations, means, goals and results of mission in the construction of Church Growth theory. "*Your critics,*" Litfin says, "*intuitively perceive the Church Growth Movement to have lost sight of the contrast which so alarmed the Apostle Paul. They perceive you often to be operating out of the very Persuader's Stance Paul disavowed.*" (9)

If one looks...to the constant and distinctive emphases of the Church Growth Movement, Litfin affirms, "what one finds is a characteristically pragmatic, methodologically-

neutral stress upon audience-driven, results-oriented strategies that 'work'...an approach which does seem to show the telltale signs of the Persuader's Stance. (92)

Dr Litfin is generous and gracious in offering a couple of caveats to the critique. First, he states that he has perceived that "the Church Growth Movement has not shown itself oblivious to the dangers of the Persuader's Stance." (92) Secondly, he nuances the contrast between what he calls the "herald" stance and the "persuader's stance" by referring to Paul's well-known affirmation in I Cor 9:22, "I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some." Dr Litfin admits that Paul "is speaking here of adapting to one's audience for the sake of *communication* (as against *persuasion*), and much of what the Church Growth Movement promulgates legitimately falls into this innocent, indeed necessary, category." (92)

Nevertheless, Litfin is strong in his criticism of the Church Growth Movement for having adopted the "Persuader's Stance" which he feels is not Pauline and is not biblical.

I have tried to understand Dr. Litfin's objection. As I see it, Dr. Litfin offers us a rather sharp dichotomy between two approaches to evangelism. On the one hand, Litfin describes a rhetorical approach he has called the "Persuader's Stance." The description is adapted from Greco-Roman rhetoric which at its worst was crass verbal manipulation of an audience to achieve a desired positive response. The Persuader is audience-driven, results-driven, and will do anything it takes to move the audience to the desired response. The audience's response, therefore, is entirely dependent on the human dynamics of the persuader.

The Persuader approach is set over against what Litfin considers to be Paul's approach which he calls the "Herald's Stance." The Herald's stance, Litfin says, recognizes that the audience is *Given*, as also in the case of the earlier approach. However, in stark contrast with the earlier methodology, Paul, according to Litfin, was aware of the spiritual dynamics of the cross. He was not audience-driven, nor was he results-driven. Rather, according to Litfin, "Paul's own efforts were a never-changing *Constant*." (Apparently Litfin means that Paul always used the same methods, everywhere.) "And the results?" asks Litfin. "They turn out," he says, "to be Paul's *dependent variable*. To his heralding of the gospel Paul discovers a variety of responses: to the Jew his message is a scandal; to the Greek his

message is ridiculous; but to 'those who are being saved,' that is 'the called ones,' whether Jew or Greek, that same message turns out to be the wisdom and power of God. What determined the difference? Something outside the equation altogether – the work of the Holy Spirit. And this, of course, is just as Paul would have it. Paul was determined to depend upon the spiritual dynamic of the cross rather than the human dynamic of the persuader.." (90)

Paul is thus portrayed by Litfin as being a model of the "Herald Stance." Litfin affirms that, "In the literally dozens of places in Paul's writings where he refers to his own preaching, the Apostle scrupulously uses the language of the herald (*kerusso, parakaleo, martureo, euangelizesthai*), language which plays no part in the rhetorical literature because it describes non-rhetorical behavior." Thus Litfin feels that Paul's "efforts are neither results-driven nor audience-driven, they are obedience-driven, and Paul is willing to let the results fall where they may." (90)¹

Significance Of The Critique For Church Growth Theory

Dr. Litfin's criticism is not new to Church Growth theory – but is, as he says, one of the heart issues. This issue was at the center of the debate between C. Peter Wagner and J.I. Packer in the early 1970's in their evaluation of the 1918 Church of England definition of evangelism. The 1918 definition presented the goal of evangelism as, "So to present Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit, that men SHALL come to put their trust in God through Him, to accept Him as their Savior, and serve Him as their King in the fellowship of His Church."

In 1961, in *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, J.I. Packer had suggested that the "SHALL" should be changed to "MAY."² In 1976, Packer reaffirmed this, stressing that this change was important, "so that evangelism as an activity is unambiguously defined in terms of purpose rather than consequence."³

Wagner registered strong disagreement with Packer's viewpoint.

With this statement," said Wagner, "Packer has touched the heart of the problem. Is evangelism merely preaching the gospel so that many hear, or does it go further and insist on bringing the hearers into a personal relationship with Christ? . . . Proclamation evangelism measures suc-

cess against the yardstick of how many people hear and understand the gospel message...Persuasion evangelism evaluates success only in terms of how many new disciples are made, how many persons previously without Christ and without hope in the world commit their lives to Him and become members of the household of God.⁴

Donald McGavran's terms for these two perspectives were, "Search Theology" which he rejected, and "Harvest Theology," which he advocated. And Wagner, following McGavran, rejected a definition of evangelism that entailed, in Wagner's words, "a neutral position on results."⁵

So we are dealing here with a central, foundational issue of the missiological method of Church Growth theory. And the issue is still very much alive today. In what we know as "post-1980 Church Growth," with its emphasis on a variety of spiritual issues in Church Growth, one can find the same "constant and distinctive emphasis," using Dr. Litfin's words. Post-1980 Church Growth is just as results-oriented as the earlier theory was. Thus Dr. Litfin's critique is accurate, pointed, on-target, and crucial in any evaluation of Church Growth theory. Permit me, then, to respond and evaluate the criticism from a Church Growth point of view.

Evaluation of the Critique

In the first place, let me state that I am very sympathetic with Dr. Litfin's concerns. In my 1981 dissertation entitled, *The Growth of the True Church*⁶, I strongly criticized McGavran's "Harvest Theology" and Church Growth's too-heavy stress on numerical results. I do not believe it is legitimate to use actual numerical results as the over-arching criterion of faithfulness, appropriateness, and effectiveness. There are too many institutional, contextual and spiritual factors involved in the multi-faceted integral growth of the Church of Jesus Christ, the mysterious creation of God.

In 1981 I wrote,

Taken alone, on its own merits, it is clear that "Harvest Theology" tends to obscure just that power of the Holy Spirit which is often emphasized by the Church Growth Movement. "Harvest Theology" emphasizes that the Church is responsible for the RESULTS. Thus if the

“Harvest” is not there, it is because the Church either has been slothful, or has been using “Wrong Strategies.” This over-emphasis on RESULTS tends to humiliate, frustrate and crucify the Christian and the Church in a rather unnecessary way...(This emphasis on results) is a well-intentioned desire to make the Church recognize (its) responsibility in the proclamation of the Gospel. We may agree with the intention, but we disagree with the manner in which the intention is worked out in theory...In the final analysis it is NOT the Church who brings the ethne to Christ, but the Spirit. It is NOT the Church who convicts of sin, but the Holy Spirit. It is NOT the Church which applies the word of truth to the heart of the unconverted, but the Spirit. It is NOT the Church which receives the converted sinner, but Jesus Christ the King and Lord. It is NOT the Church who opens the book of life, but the Lamb.

Dr Litfin’s critique has served to remind me that pragmatism is unacceptable. Of course, this hinges on what one means by “pragmatism.” We must avoid “pragmatism,” if by “pragmatism” we mean

- a) That we believe that our human methods alone, the efficacy of our strategies by themselves, bring about the growth of the church, or
- b) That the resulting growth JUSTIFIES unacceptable means, or proves the validity of the means, or validates the theory that has been used to support the means; or
- c) That because our intentions are right in that we desire to grow the Church, therefore it is OK to use manipulative, de-humanizing, self-aggrandizing proselytism as a way of, by any means, bringing people into our churches; or
- d) That any church that is growing numerically is ipso facto healthy, correct, or legitimate.

Any of these four caricatures of Church Growth (or temptations in Church Growth) are biblically and theologically unacceptable. Further, they are naive and erroneous. They are misleading and tend to obscure the real issues.

I was born and raised in Mexico. Our history of rapid “church growth” during the Spanish conquest warns us that

numerical growth as such cannot be used as a justification of the messenger, the message or the means. We know too many movements in church history, including the German church under the Third Reich, where the size of the following was in fact a sign of the decadence, deformation, error and unfaithfulness of the Church, rather than its obedience.

We tend too easily to equate rapid growth with authenticity and faithfulness. We tend too easily to assume that "bigger is better." We fall too easily into a marketing mode where the quantity of product sold is the be-all and end-all, the "bottom-line" of our organizations. We need to repent of such attitudes.

In its enthusiasm for growth, in its commitment to effective communication of the Gospel, in its deep desire for appropriate contextualization of the Gospel, the Church Growth Movement needs to constantly hear warnings like this one—that the results do not in themselves justify, prove, support, or validate the agents of mission or their means. The Bible gives us many other criteria on which to evaluate the Church's authenticity, other than its numerical growth. So Dr. Litfin reminds us of a very significant matter.

Dr. Litfin's critique has pointed out the matter of authenticity. The opposite of William James' type of "pragmatism" is a stress on the ontological and spiritual nature of the agent of mission. C. Peter Wagner has emphasized this in his "Four Axioms," "Seven Vital Signs," and "Eight Pathologies" in *Church Growth*. Wagner is deeply concerned about the spiritual health of congregations and churches, apart from whether they are growing or not. This is increasingly significant. Congregations, denominations, Christian institutions and mission agencies need to embody in their own corporate culture the values of the message they are proclaiming, and the Lordship of the One whom they proclaim. I believe this is the crux of Paul's emphasis in the divisive context of Corinth. Christian organizations are to be permeated with the fruits of the Spirit in their being, in their essence, quite apart from the results of their evangelistic efforts. The ends, in this sense are quite secondary: obedience, faith, a permeation of the Church by the Holy Spirit, these are primary. In Paul's words, this is knowing "only Christ crucified." In Jesus words, "by this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you LOVE one another." (Jn 13:35)

Pragmatism is rejected when one recognizes that the nature

of the Church, the lordship of Jesus in the Church, and the way of life of the Church in the power of the Spirit are biblically far more important than the numerical results of the Church's proclamation. Numerical growth is a RESULT, it FOLLOWS, it is not the starting point of our missiological reflection.

However, I believe the Church Growth Movement's rather unfortunate use of the word "pragmatism" has been an attempt to mean something other than the issues just mentioned. I believe we need to be more precise and careful in our meaning here. Briefly let me mention three areas of clarification: the agents of mission, the audience, and the results.

First, I believe Dr. Litfin builds a dichotomy that is too strong between human agency and God's agency in mission. Litfin says, "Paul's difficulty (with the principles of persuasion) was not that these principles were inherently immoral but that they *depended upon an essentially human dynamic*. They inserted the human agent into the process in an inappropriate way, displacing the work of the Holy Spirit and generating false, merely human results." (98, emphasis is Litfin's).

I find such a strong dichotomy unacceptable, and I expect that Dr. Litfin himself would not want to go too far in this direction. All through Scripture God uses human instruments. Of course, especially in terms of the Corinthian context, Paul emphasizes that God uses the "foolish" and the "weak" (I Cor 1:27)—with good reason, considering the problems of the Corinthian church—but God is still using human instruments. I believe Dr. Litfin would agree that the use *IN ITSELF* of human instruments does not mean God is not there. The growth of the Church, as Luke tells it in Acts, is the story of God using particular, unique individuals in their specific strengths and potentials to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul, in his image of the Church as the Body of Christ (e.g. Rom. 12, I Cor 12, Eph. 4), stresses precisely that it is in the unique giftedness of each member that God uses each member for God's glory. So I would not draw such a strong distinction here between human agency and divine initiative. God's use of human instruments calls for us to offer the best, brightest, most efficient and most effective stewardship of our gifts in the growth of the Church.

Secondly, being "pragmatic" may be a good thing, if by "pragmatic" we mean being receptor-oriented, good listeners in our communication; and if we mean being committed to seeing

people come to faith in Jesus Christ as a fruit of God's using us in Gospel proclamation. I believe that this is what Peter Wagner originally meant, although I think the use of the word "pragmatic" caused more misunderstanding than was necessary. In a 1972 article in *Christianity Today*, Wagner defined what he meant—and the concept had to do with missional goals and evaluation. In that article Wagner mentioned the need for a well-honed set of objectives, ruthless progress evaluation, mobility in changing circumstances, a functional methodology, and a Church-centered mission.⁷ This is a far cry from the negative meaning of "pragmatic" (a la William James) we saw earlier.

I am not convinced that Paul was not audience- and results-oriented in terms of means and goal of mission. When I read Luke's account in Acts, and when I see Paul's marvelously contextualized writing that differs from letter to letter, I believe Paul was very audience-oriented. Luke records five of Paul's sermons. None of them are alike. The audience was NOT a *Given*, for Paul. Rather, he was very much aware of the nature of his audiences, changing the language he spoke, the thought-forms and styles he used, and emphases he gave to his communication whenever necessary. He carefully crafted his sermons in ways that were effective for his hearers. This was not a manipulative matter, it was a matter of being receptor-oriented. This was not underhanded or sneaky to produce certain results; it was simply "being all things to all people so that he might by some means win some." I do believe that I Cor 9:22 is a self-description by Paul of his missionary strategy, and that he is echoing this strategy in II Cor 4-5.

Of course, the reason I believe that, is because I think Paul was also results-oriented. I do not mean this in the same way that Dr. Litfin seems to signify. Rather, I believe Paul was firmly committed to what McGavran defined as New Testament mission: "proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ and persuading men and women to become his disciples and responsible members of his Church."⁸ Paul sounds rather results-oriented to me when he says that he would have wished "that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers..." (Rom. 9:3). He sounds quite results-oriented when he speaks about "being all things to all people so that by all means he might win some " Paul suffered stonings, imprisonments, cold, hardships, shipwrecks (enumerated in II Cor 6) with a goal in

mind. He very much wanted people to come to faith in Jesus Christ. I believe Dr. Litfin firmly desires this as well.

Using Dr. Litfin's structure, I would suggest that for Paul the audience is the INDEPENDENT VARIABLE, the Speaker's Efforts are for Paul the DEPENDENT VARIABLE, and the desired results are a CONSTANT: In every case he wants women and men to come to faith in Jesus Christ and become responsible members of Christ's Church. Does that make Paul a "Persuader," in Litfin's sense? NO. Does it make Paul a "pragmatist" in the negative sense I rejected earlier?" NO. Rather we have here a recognition that Paul was committed to listening well, communicating effectively, and desiring ardently and deeply that women and men come to faith in Jesus Christ.

In my 1981 dissertation I called this YEARNING for growth. Paul was not neutral as to results. He considered himself "under obligation" to those who have not yet come to faith in Jesus Christ (Rom. 1: 14). He saw his apostleship as integrally incorporating a desire that the Gentiles might become disciples of Jesus Christ, and thus the new family of God (Eph. 2-3). This yearning that others would come to faith in Jesus was integral to Paul's apostleship. Results mattered to him.

The Apostolic Church, fulfilling its apostolic function in the world, exhibits a "YEARNING" for numerical growth. As the *Sammlung* and *Sendung* simultaneously, it knows that it has been assembled to serve, and it assembles others to serve as well. The disciples were sent into the world to seek out other disciples who will in turn disciple others. Clearly this apostolate involves many things and many ministries. It includes at least the Church's three-fold witness (of *Koinonia*, *Kerygma* and *Marturia*.) However, it is not possible to divorce from this apostolic mission the strong desire on the part of the apostle to see that others also become disciples. They will then take on certain tasks together. They will join their forces in the service of the King...Clearly the disciple is not greater than her or his Lord; and the Lord comes to serve, to heal, to free, and to give his life a ransom for many. But no less does he come hoping, praying, desiring, "YEARNING" that those who are 'not-my-people' will come to experience the joy of becoming the People of God. (I Peter 2) The "Yearning" is the motiva-

tion and the drive behind the apostolate.

If this desire is taken away, if there is no "Yearning," we are faced with either of two unacceptable options. Either the disciples consider themselves or their church to be the exclusive possessors of the truth which they will share with no one, and thus they do not WANT anyone else to become disciples like them...Or...the disciples consider that it really does not matter, it is unimportant that anyone else be a disciple either. In this second case, the apostolic motivation of discipleship to Jesus Christ is lost, and the apostolate loses its Christocentric content. The only way to avoid either of these options is to realize that disciples and Church are sent PRECISELY because 'all power is given to (Jesus) in heaven and on earth.' Precisely because they confessed their obedience to the Master and the Master then sends them, the disciples and the Church go to the world. And PRECISELY because they are disciples who love their Lord and have thus obeyed him in the apostolate, they will also "YEARN" that many others will experience that same joy by also coming to the point of being Christ's disciples.⁹

The results, therefore, are not the determining factor in the entire diagnosis, but they are a thermometer that needs to be consulted, along with other symptoms, to analyze the healthy, integral growth of the congregation. This is borne out by the inclusion to references to numerical growth in Luke's description of the early church in Acts 2:42-47 and in Paul's description of the young church in Thessalonica in I Thessalonians 1:4-10¹⁰

Is this "pragmatic" in the "ends-justify-the-means," "Persuader's Stance," negative sense? I don't believe so. Is it neutral as to results? No, it is not that either. Rather, this view allows for a profound commitment to the goal of world evangelization; it builds urgency in evaluating the effectiveness of the methods and agency being applied, but also recognizes that the Church is the mysterious creation of God, created by the Holy Spirit's work through human agents.

I believe Dr. Litfin is correct when he says, “if you do not approve of the Persuader’s Stance as a basis for your ministry, then you will have to be much more careful in how you talk about some of the methodological issues.” And I wholeheartedly affirm his encouraging word to us, “By all means make plans and focus on goals...state your goals in terms of what God has called you to be and to do, and then state your plans in terms of how you intend to be that and do that.” Amen!

My only addition would be, let’s take a good look at the results and allow them to stimulate a careful evaluation as to . . .

whether we, as churches and missions agencies, need reformation and renewal to be more useful instruments in the Spirit’s hands,

whether our goals are appropriate both to the nature of the Gospel and the make-up of the context, and

whether we have listened carefully enough to our receptors so that what they hear is in fact the Gospel of the love of God in Jesus Christ.

Lets try as much as possible to “be all things to all people so that by all means we might save some” (I Cor 9:22)—knowing full well that it is by grace, through faith, through the mysterious, loving work of the Holy Spirit that anyone comes to faith in Jesus Christ and becomes responsible members of Christ’s church.

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Notes

1. (We would, of course, consider these references to fall into the same category where Litfin has placed I Cor 9:22—to Paul’s concept of communication (as against persuasion) and are not intended to describe

Paul's missional goals or methods.)

2. London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1961, 37. This is quoted by J.I. Packer in H.Conn, edit, *Theological Perspectives on Church Growth*. Nutley, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1976, 98.

3. J.I. Packer, "What is Evangelism?" in: Harvie Conn, edit. *Theological Perspectives*, 98.

4. C. Peter Wagner. *Frontiers in Mission Strategy*. Chicago: Moody, 1971, 128 and 132-133. I dealt with this issue at length in Charles Van Engen. *The Growth of the True Church*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1981, 462-467. (Available from University Microfilms Inc., 300 N. Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor MI 48106: C1995 by Charles Van Engen.)

5. C. Peter Wagner. *Frontiers*, 130.

6. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1981, 460-486.

7. C. Peter Wagner, "Fierce Pragmatism in Missions -- Carnal or Consecrated?" CTXVII:5 (Dec. 8, 1972) 13, 14, 17, 18 (reprinted as, "Pragmatic Strategy for Tomorrow's Mission," in A.R. Tippett, edit. *God, Man and Church Growth*. G.R:Eerdmans, 1973, 148-157).

8. Donald McGavran. *Understanding Church Growth*. 3rd edition. G.R.: Eerdmans, 1990, 24.

9. C. Van Engen, *The Growth of the True Church*, 499-500; See also C. Van Engen *God's Missionary People*. G.R.:Baker, 1991, 81-84.

10. Ibid, 178-191; C. Van Engen