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**abstract**

From its inception, the Church Growth Movement, as espoused by its "father," Donald A. McGavran, was focused on "effective evangelism." The purpose of this article is to identify McGavran's theology of evangelism as revealed in his published writings. While he may never have delineated a precise theology of evangelism, one can find in McGavran's writings an orthodox, if sometimes incomplete, system regarding the working of God in the salvation of men and women. The article investigates McGavran's views on Scripture, the content and proclamation of the gospel, and on key soteriological issues.

For two thousand years, pastors, theologians, and laypeople alike have sought how best to answer the question, "What must I do to be saved?" The content of that response is the heart of the gospel. Perhaps missionaries, in response to different cultures and beliefs, have sought most fervently to understand the message of Great Commission proclamation. One such man was Donald Anderson McGavran, missionary to India, the "father of church growth," and "founder of the Church Growth Movement."<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Mulholland argues that "probably no

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<sup>1</sup> Thom S. Rainer, *The Book of Church Growth: History, Theology, and Principles* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1993), 24–25.

one person has influenced evangelical missions in [the twentieth] century as much as McGavran.”<sup>2</sup>

The purpose of this article is to identify Donald McGavran’s theology of evangelism, primarily through a selection of his published writings.<sup>3</sup> Two primary reasons stand out for such a study. First, the Church Growth Movement is often considered atheological. While it may be true that McGavran did not delineate a precise theology of evangelism, one can discern in his writings an orthodox, if sometimes incomplete, system of belief regarding the work of God in the salvation of men. Second, McGavran considered evangelism to be the primary focus of his work and of global mission. To understand his definition of evangelism will make clearer his teaching on effective evangelism, or church growth. The body of his writing is large: a dozen books and hundreds of articles on missions, evangelism, and church growth.

No individual system of thought or theology rises in a vacuum. Donald McGavran’s theology and that of the Church Growth Movement was heavily influenced by his missionary upbringing, his denominational heritage, his education, and his missiological studies.<sup>4</sup> From his missionary parents and grandparents, he gained his heart for the nations. From his Disciples of Christ background, McGavran learned an appreciation for the Scriptures and for Christian unity.<sup>5</sup> McGavran’s education challenged his theology but also prepared him for his work in India. Later, his studies in missiology exposed him to the social sciences, which would have a tremendous impact on church growth missiology.<sup>6</sup>

McGavran recognized that some critics of church growth thought accused him of being “inadequately theological.”<sup>7</sup> Darrell Guder has noted that “the Church Growth Movement addresses evangelism more methodologically than theologically.”<sup>8</sup> Gailyn Van Rheenen contends that “the focus of the movement has been primarily methodological, and its theology developed in the heat of

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<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Mulholland, “Donald McGavran’s Legacy to Evangelical Missions,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* (Jan 1991) [on-line]; available at [https://bgc.gospelcom.net/emqonline/emq\\_article\\_read\\_pv.php?ArticleID=2950](https://bgc.gospelcom.net/emqonline/emq_article_read_pv.php?ArticleID=2950); Internet.

<sup>3</sup> For a summary bibliography of McGavran’s work, see Alan R. Tippett, ed., *God, Man and Church Growth: A Festschrift in Honor of Donald Anderson McGavran* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1973), 43–46.

<sup>4</sup> See Vernon James Middleton, “The Development of a Missiologist: The Life and Thought of Donald Anderson McGavran, 1897–1965” (Ph.D. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1989).

<sup>5</sup> Sakari Pinola, *Church Growth: Principles and Praxis of Donald A. McGavran’s Missiology* (Abo, Finland: Abo Akademi Printing Press, 1995), 21–33; A. T. DeGroot, *Disciple Thought: A History* (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University, 1965), 42.

<sup>6</sup> Donald McGavran, “My Pilgrimage in Mission,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 20, no. 2 (April 1986), 53; Middleton, “Development of a Missiologist,” 12. McGavran gave the most complete explanation of the influences on his thought in *Effective Evangelism: A Theological Mandate* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1988).

<sup>7</sup> Donald McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990), 8.

<sup>8</sup> Darrell L. Guder, “Evangelism and the Debate over Church Growth,” *Interpretation* 48, no. 2 (April 1994), 147.

controversy when its methodological postulates were disputed.”<sup>9</sup> While there is certainly some truth to the notion that McGavran started with methodological rather than theological questions, it is not accurate to say that McGavran was light on theology. In his most important summary of church growth, McGavran responds, saying that “church growth is basically a theological stance,” and that “from the beginning the Church Growth Movement has been rooted in biblical, evangelical, conversionist theology.”<sup>10</sup>

In his published writings spanning half a century, Donald McGavran touched on many of the issues of soteriology, including the need for salvation, the source of salvation, the means of salvation, and the results of salvation. These compose his doctrine of evangelism. McGavran’s writing is more strategic and practical in nature, but his concern to support his positions biblically reveals his theology.

### **the source of theology**

For Donald McGavran, the only adequate source for theology was the Scriptures. In church growth thought, he obtained information from many different places: statistics, cultural analysis, interviews, and the like. For doctrine, however, he turned to the Bible. In spite of his early history with theological liberalism, McGavran held firmly to the authority and reliability of the Bible. In an article on the central tenets of an evangelical theology of mission, McGavran listed first, “The Absolute Inspiration and Authority of the Bible.”<sup>11</sup> He continued, “All the books of the Old and New Testaments, given by inspiration, are the written Word of God, the only infallible rule of faith and practice for all peoples in all ages.”<sup>12</sup> McGavran believed strongly in the inspiration, infallibility, and necessary influence of the Scriptures.<sup>13</sup> In addition, the Scriptures, translated into every language, are the only source of an “accurate knowledge of the truth.”<sup>14</sup>

Not only are the Scriptures the only source for theology of mission and evangelism, they are the true source of inspiration to evangelize. “Wherever Christians have come to hold a low opinion of the Bible,” he argued, “eternal

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<sup>9</sup> Gailyn Van Rheenen, “Reformist View,” in Gary L. McIntosh, ed., *Evaluating the Church Growth Movement: Five Views* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 180.

<sup>10</sup> McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 8.

<sup>11</sup> Donald McGavran, “Contemporary Evangelical Theology of Mission,” in Arthur F. Glasser and Donald A. McGavran, eds., *Contemporary Theologies of Mission* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1983), 101.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>13</sup> Donald McGavran, ed., *Crucial Issues in Missions Tomorrow* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972), 25; Donald McGavran, “Why Neglect the Gospel-Ready Masses?” *Christianity Today* 10, no. 15 (April 29, 1966), 18; Donald McGavran, “A Missionary Confession of Faith,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 7, no. 2 (November 1972), 135; Donald McGavran, “Church Growth Strategy, Continued,” in Donald McGavran, ed., *Eye of the Storm: The Great Debate in Mission* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1972), 179–82.

<sup>14</sup> McGavran, “Contemporary Evangelical Theology,” 102.

God's command to proclaim the gospel to *panta ta ethne*, leading them to obedience in faith, is greatly damaged, if not destroyed."<sup>15</sup> Following his awakening to the ramifications of liberal theology (described above), McGavran determined that no true evangelism could take place apart from belief in the authority of God's Word. The only source of truth, theology, and strategy is the Bible.<sup>16</sup>

### **defining evangelism**

In response to his reading of the authoritative Scriptures, McGavran developed a definition of evangelism that encompassed much of his church growth thinking. Evangelism, for McGavran, was "proclaiming Christ and persuading men to become His disciples and responsible members of His Church."<sup>17</sup> This two-fold definition, encompassing both conversion and church membership, is key to understanding McGavran's theology of evangelism. Perhaps stemming from his high view of the church and Disciples background, McGavran believed that evangelism is incomplete if new believers do not become active participants in church life.

53

The dual nature of evangelism took shape in McGavran's most influential book, *The Bridges of God*. Following Christ's command to "make disciples of all nations" and "teaching them to observe all that I have commanded" (Matthew 28:19–20 ESV), McGavran argued that the first step in evangelism requires that a people be "discipled," which he defined as "the removal of distracting divisive sinful gods and spirits and ideas from the corporate life of the people and putting Christ at the centre on the Throne."<sup>18</sup> The second stage of Christianization is "perfecting," which is the "bringing about of an ethical change in the discipled group, an increasing achievement of a thoroughly Christian way of life for the community as a whole."<sup>19</sup> In *The Bridges of God*, McGavran explained these two elements in the context of people movements, or mass conversions to Christ, in cultures where community and group decisions trump individualism. Nevertheless, this two-fold understanding of evangelism played an important role in all of his later church growth thought.

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<sup>15</sup> McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 31.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 57. See also 37, 54–56.

<sup>17</sup> Donald McGavran, "Conclusion," in Donald Anderson McGavran, ed., Robert Calvin Guy, Melvin L. Hodges, and Eugene A. Nida, *Church Growth and Christian Mission* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 231; Donald McGavran, "Essential Evangelism," in McGavran, *Eye of the Storm*, 57; Donald A. McGavran, "Loose the Churches. Let them Go!" *Missiology* 1, no. 2 (April 1973), 81.

<sup>18</sup> Donald McGavran, *The Bridges of God: A Study in the Strategy of Missions* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2005), 14.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

Another important image of evangelism for McGavran was that of “finding the lost.” In *Understanding Church Growth*, the author spoke of evangelism and missions in terms of reconciliation. The goal of evangelism is to bring lost men, women, and children back into relationship with God. “God,” wrote McGavran, “beyond question wills that lost persons be found—that is, be reconciled to himself.”<sup>20</sup> The biblical image of lost sheep and a seeking shepherd fits well with this understanding of evangelism (Matt 18:12–14). McGavran continued, “The finding God wants them found—that is, brought into a redemptive relationship to Jesus Christ where, baptized in his name, they become part of his household.”<sup>21</sup> God seeks, McGavran argued, but He seeks and finds through believers. That is evangelism.

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Over his career, McGavran grew increasingly concerned with the emphasis on social ministry and justice over evangelism. More specifically, he reacted strongly against efforts to call social ministry evangelism and to elevate Christian presence over proclamation of the gospel. In the late 1960s, some missionaries and leaders advocated living peacefully with other religions in order to win them with loving care rather than offensive proclamation. McGavran argued that Christian presence without the proclamation of the gospel was incomplete, although he recognized certain instances (such as areas of intense persecution) where presence evangelism might be necessary. “Please note,” he wrote, “that I endorse presence when the goal is that Jesus Christ according to the Scriptures be believed, loved, obeyed, and followed into the waters of baptism.”<sup>22</sup> Proclamation of the gospel is a necessary component of evangelism. Other activities such as worship, feeding the hungry, and caring for those in need are necessary in Christian ministry, but they are not evangelism.<sup>23</sup>

One final element of McGavran’s understanding of the definition of evangelism is his concept of “harvest theology,” elaborated most fully in *Understanding Church Growth*. Harvest theology is the belief that God is a seeking and finding God and that the mission of believers is to be about finding the lost and persuading them to follow Christ and become responsible church members. This is McGavran’s position as outlined above. “Search theology,” on the other hand, is the belief that “in evangelism the essential thing is not the finding, but going everywhere and preaching the gospel.”<sup>24</sup> Proponents of both viewpoints consider proclamation to be vital, but harvest theology adds the importance of

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<sup>20</sup> McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 21.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Donald McGavran, “Presence and Proclamation in Christian Mission,” in McGavran, *Eye of the Storm*, 209.

<sup>23</sup> McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 103; McGavran, “Missionary Confession of Faith,” 138.

<sup>24</sup> McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 24.

persuasion. McGavran acknowledged that there is biblical support for search theology. Search theology is not false, he argued, but it is only partial; search theology is not complete evangelism. “It is false,” wrote McGavran, “only insofar as it claims to be the sole theology of evangelism and applicable to all.”<sup>25</sup>

For Donald McGavran, the definition of evangelism comprises three central ideas. First, it is searching and finding. It is not enough that the gospel be told; men and women must be persuaded to turn from their sin and idols and place their faith in Jesus Christ. God wants his lost children found. Second, evangelism must include new believers becoming responsible church members. Evangelism is incomplete if converts do not become integrated into an indigenous church. Finally, evangelism requires the proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ. It is to the content of this proclamation that we now turn.

### **the evangelist's message**

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J. I. Packer described the evangelistic message as containing four key elements. He said that the gospel is a message about God, about sin, about Christ, and about our necessary response of faith and repentance.<sup>26</sup> While Donald McGavran did not define the gospel as succinctly, his writings reveal much about his understanding of the content of the message of salvation through Jesus Christ.

**Lostness: the need for evangelism.** McGavran believed firmly in the biblical truth that men, women, and children without Christ are hopelessly condemned. He frequently used the word *lost* when describing those for whom God is searching. Although McGavran sometimes differed with his colleagues on matters such as the proper mode of baptism or the structure of the church, he once wrote, “on one thing there is total agreement: men and women without a personal relationship with Jesus Christ are doomed to a Christless eternity.”<sup>27</sup> Perhaps he spoke most clearly when he described “the doctrine of the lostness of the human race” as one of five “key axioms” for an evangelical theology of mission:

God, by His Word and His glory, freely created the world out of nothing. He made Adam and Eve in His own image as the crown of creation, that they might have fellowship with Him. Tempted by Satan, they rebelled against God. They were estranged from their Maker, yet responsible to Him. Therefore, apart from grace, we humans are incapable of returning to God. We are fallen beings. Unless we turn in faith to the Redeemer, we are lost.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>26</sup> J. I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1961), 57–73.

<sup>27</sup> McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 9.

<sup>28</sup> McGavran, “Contemporary Evangelical Theology of Mission,” 103.

Clearly, McGavran held an orthodox evangelical understanding of mankind's relationship to God outside of Christ. He believed firmly Romans 6:23, which proclaims that "the wages of sin is death" (ESV).

**Jesus Christ: the solution to lostness.** The second part of Romans 6:23 adds that "the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (ESV). Donald McGavran believed that it is only through Jesus Christ that lost mankind could be reconciled with God. "The only mediator between God and the human race is Christ Jesus our Lord," he wrote, "God's eternal Son."<sup>29</sup> McGavran reacted strongly to efforts to recognize other ways to God. He affirmed as "magnificent" the Frankfurt Declaration on Mission of 1970, which strongly challenged "all non-Christians, who belong to God on the basis of creation, to believe in Him and to be baptized in His name, for in Him alone is eternal salvation promised to them."<sup>30</sup> The same declaration condemned the notion that "Christ himself is anonymously so evident in world religions, historical changes, and revolutions that man can encounter Him and find salvation in Him without the direct news of the gospel."<sup>31</sup>

56 McGavran believed and taught the substitutionary atonement of Christ. In India, McGavran asked students to memorize the truth that Christ was God incarnate and "that he died in our place there on the cross."<sup>32</sup> That sacrifice provided the way for mankind to be reconciled to the Creator. "There is therefore no way to be reconciled to God," he wrote, "other than believing and trusting in the atonement He has wrought by Christ."<sup>33</sup> McGavran's changing views on the Scripture were reflected in his changing understanding of the atonement.

**Conversion and Salvation.** Donald McGavran's theology of conversion is clouded by his earliest writings on people movements and on the stages of Christianization, discipling and perfecting. While these elements are vital to McGavran's missiology, they do not make clear exactly how he understood theologically the way that men and women become Christian. Fortunately, his later writings help to clarify his thought.

*The Bridges of God* is in many ways a pragmatic book rather than a theological text. McGavran's purpose in writing the volume was methodological rather than doctrinal.<sup>34</sup> He described the ways that peoples come to Christ and analyzed the factors influencing that decision rather than prescribing how peoples *ought* to

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Donald McGavran, "Background of the Declaration," in *Eye of the Storm*, 283; "The Frankfurt Declaration on Mission," in *Eye of the Storm*, 289.

<sup>31</sup> "The Frankfurt Declaration," 289.

<sup>32</sup> McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 56.

<sup>33</sup> McGavran, "Contemporary Evangelical Theology of Mission," 103.

<sup>34</sup> McGavran, *Bridges of God*, 109. The thesis of the book listed here is that modern mission strategy should "hold lightly" all mission station work where growth is less than fifty percent per decade—most definitely a pragmatic approach.

become Christian. At the same time, McGavran argues that missionary evangelists should as much as possible facilitate such movements. The people movement concept was a reaction to traditional models in which new believers came one by one and were removed from their culture and networks. That model, according to McGavran, was the reason for the slow growth of churches in India. If new believers cut their ties to family and community, then they were unable to communicate the gospel across those natural networks.<sup>35</sup>

People movements are made up of born again individuals. In what seems to be an understatement, McGavran wrote,

Obviously the Christianization of a people requires reborn men and women. A mere change of name accomplishes nothing. While the new convert must remain within his people, he must also experience new birth. . . . The power of any People Movement to Christ depends in great measure on the number of truly converted persons in it. We wish to make this quite clear. The Christianization of peoples is not assisted by slighting or forgetting real personal conversion. There is no substitute for justification by faith in Jesus Christ or for the gift of the Holy Spirit.<sup>36</sup>

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McGavran believed that, for some cultures (and culture is a key factor), participation in the group decision to follow Christ was true conversion. When a group took the decision to turn away from idols and to Christ, all who participated in that decision were converted. Some in the group, however, would not decide to follow Christ, and those would not be saved. “In the initial discipling of a people,” wrote McGavran, “participation in a group decision is a sufficient following of the light to confer salvation on each person participating in the decision. It is *not* ‘membership in the group’ but ‘participation in following Christ’ which is the vital factor.”<sup>37</sup> McGavran defined conversion, even in groups, as turning and following Christ.

The issue of conversion is further complicated by McGavran’s distinction between discipling and perfecting. Discipling is the initial stage of conversion described in the paragraph above. Perfecting, however, is the necessary step in which new believers are folded into the church and become responsible church members. McGavran expanded on the stages of discipling and perfecting in his second major work, *How Churches Grow*, published in 1959. There, he clarified that the two stages are often intertwined and indistinguishable. As men turn to Christ, they grow in faith even as they lead others to Christ. Both are the work of God and

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

the fruit of faithfulness to biblical teaching.<sup>38</sup> Even though the two-stage concept of Christianization or conversion is problematic, McGavran's emphasis on responsible church membership was a significant contribution to missiology.

Sakari Pinola argues that McGavran's emphasis on the two stages of discipling and perfecting was but a "pragmatic and strategic Church Growth principle utilized in order to emphasize as strongly as possible the importance of actual disciple making" rather than a precise theological statement on conversion.<sup>39</sup>

McGavran's later writings support this contention. In his most explicit statement of theological principles of evangelism and mission, McGavran condemns modern theologies that define conversion as anything other than "turning from other gods, self, and sin to belief in Christ as Lord and Savior and becoming a member of His body, the church."<sup>40</sup> "Through faith in Jesus Christ and His atoning death," he added, "we are justified by God, our sins are forgiven, we receive eternal life."<sup>41</sup>

58 In terms of people movements and group conversions, McGavran clarified his earlier writings by arguing that group conversions are multi-individual and mutually interdependent. While this may seem to be a semantic adjustment, it is significant. Conversion, in these cases, "means participation in a genuine decision for Christ, a sincere turning from the old gods and evil spirits, and a determined purpose to live as Christ would have his followers live."<sup>42</sup> McGavran here addressed concerns that people movements produce nominal believers and "cheap grace," contending that every individual must decide for Christ.

Repentance, for McGavran, is also a necessary part of conversion. He argued that the good news of the gospel is "that sinners by repentance and baptism in the name of Jesus Christ are saved by grace through faith."<sup>43</sup> While this relationship between baptism and repentance may reflect McGavran's Disciples of Christ background, nowhere else did he advocate baptismal regeneration. McGavran did, however, indicate in other writings the necessity of repentance.<sup>44</sup>

For Donald McGavran, the evangelist's message is based on the biblical truth that mankind is separated from God because of sin, but that because of Christ's substitutionary sacrifice, lost mankind may be reconciled to God by faith in Christ and repentance from sin, enjoy the presence of the Holy Spirit, and be a part of God's family, the church, for all eternity.

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<sup>38</sup> Donald McGavran, *How Churches Grow: The New Frontiers of Mission* (London: World Dominion Press, 1959), 98–99.

<sup>39</sup> Pinola, "Church Growth," 135.

<sup>40</sup> McGavran, "New Mission: A Systematic Reinterpretation of the Concepts of Mission," in Glasser and McGavran, *Contemporary Theologies of Mission*, 54.

<sup>41</sup> McGavran, "Contemporary Evangelical Theology of Mission," 103.

<sup>42</sup> McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 227–28.

<sup>43</sup> McGavran, *Bridges of God*, 92.

<sup>44</sup> See also, McGavran, "Missionary Confession of Faith," 133.

**God's work in salvation.** One final area of McGavran's theology of evangelism and conversion that must be discussed is his understanding of God's work in the salvation of individuals and peoples, especially election and regeneration. While he did not address the issue often, McGavran believed in the doctrine of election. In terms of the doctrine of election, McGavran argued in an article responding to the new Presbyterian confession of faith in 1967 that any confession or creed claiming to be true to biblical revelation must "express the overriding intention of God that men, in answer to God's choice of them, believe on Christ, repent, and live in him."<sup>45</sup> McGavran's understanding of the work of God in salvation may also be seen in his practical application of the principle of receptivity. People movements are a gift of God, and peoples become open to the gospel only when God opens their hearts to the gospel. "Receptivity does not arise by accident," McGavran argued. "Men become open to the Gospel, not by any blind interplay of brute forces, but by God's sovereign will. Over every welcoming of the Gospel, we can write, 'In the fullness of time God called *this* people out.'"<sup>46</sup>

While he never went into detail regarding the specifics of election or regeneration, McGavran believed firmly that God is the power behind the conversion of men and the growth of the church. "God gives the growth," he proclaimed, "God ripens the grain. God chooses the workmen. God commands them to reap."<sup>47</sup>

## analysis and conclusions

How, then, would Donald McGavran respond to the question, "What must I do to be saved?" Perhaps, McGavran would be inclined to reframe the question, "What must *we* do to be saved?" Based on this study of his major writings, he would respond to individuals or groups by saying, "Turn from your idols and sin, place your faith and trust in Jesus Christ alone, be baptized, and become responsible members of Christ's church." While this may very well be an adequate, if simple, answer, McGavran's teaching does leave some opening for criticism.

McGavran's foundational understanding of group conversion and people movements is a difficult issue. The central problem is that practical aspects of missiological principles appear to conflict with theology. McGavran adequately defends his thesis on several fronts. First, he finds in the Scriptures evidence of group movements. In the earliest days of the church, thousands came to Christ and

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> McGavran, "Why Neglect the Gospel-Ready Masses?" 18.

<sup>47</sup> Donald McGavran, "The God Who Finds and His Mission," *International Review of Missions* 51 (July 1962), 315.

were folded into the church (Acts 2:41, 47; 10:48; 16:33). McGavran also defends his position with a cultural argument. He is correct when he argues that it is extremely difficult for Western readers who are steeped in individualism to understand the dynamics of group decision-making.<sup>48</sup>

A more problematic element of McGavran's teaching on evangelism and mission is his distinction between discipling and perfecting. While he refers to the fact that the thousands of new believers in the early church could not possibly have been taught the complete truth of the gospel before conversion, he finds his biblical support for this conviction from the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19–20. McGavran draws a strong line between the command to “make disciples of all nations” and “teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (ESV). Exegetically, it is difficult, if not impossible, to separate the two commands.<sup>49</sup> Fortunately, McGavran's later teaching on this issue clears up some of the issues surrounding discipling and perfecting while maintaining McGavran's important contribution on the necessity of responsible church membership.

A final issue is McGavran's emphasis on church membership. While few pastors or theologians would argue against the importance of church membership for believers, McGavran's insistence on including membership as part of conversion appears to conflict with passages such as Ephesians 2:8–10, which emphasizes salvation apart from any type of works while indicating that works are the natural product of salvation. In his list of “theological axioms” of church growth thought, McGavran acknowledges that “eternal salvation is not gained by living a moral life or accepting one of the humanly devised ideologies or religions,” but he does not clearly affirm that salvation is only by grace.<sup>50</sup> He says instead that church membership is “the normal fulfillment of conversion.”<sup>51</sup> The contemporary controversy over “Lordship Salvation” addresses similar concerns, but even advocates of responsible church membership make clear that “it is a great error to change the meaning of faith to include acts of obedience and repentance.”<sup>52</sup> McGavran treads dangerous ground in tying conversion too closely to church membership.

Regardless of these criticisms, Donald McGavran's missiological application of theological truth concerning evangelism and salvation makes a significant contribution to the church's understanding of the way believers proclaim the

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<sup>48</sup> McGavran, *Bridges of God*, 9.

<sup>49</sup> Guder, “Evangelism and the Debate Over Church Growth,” 149.

<sup>50</sup> McGavran, “Contemporary Evangelical Theology of Mission,” 103.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>52</sup> Michael Horton, ed., *Christ the Lord: The Reformation and Lordship Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992), 209.

gospel and persuade others to accept it. His emphasis is more on how believers share the gospel than on the gospel itself; he speaks more of strategy than of the content of the message. But this reflects McGavran's passion and his understanding of the great need for renewal in the church's evangelistic focus. He desired to influence missionaries, and later the churches in general, to do everything necessary and possible to get the good news of Christ to all the peoples of the world. McGavran's concern that the nations not only hear the gospel but that they accept it and live for Christ is much needed, even today. As our own culture becomes more and more like a mission field, pastors, theologians, and believers in general must consider the biblical teaching on conversion and apply that teaching among every tongue, tribe, and nation. We must be willing, like Paul, to give ourselves in order that all may hear and know that Christ is Lord.

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