

Principled Growth

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The Church Growth Movement is “one of the most *stimulating*, yet *controversial* developments in today’s church”¹ according to a special report quoted by Dr. C Peter Wagner, a leading movement spokesman. This movement is making significant inroads into assemblies of Christians, which have traditionally been known for their emphasis of New Testament church principles. Being true to its reputation, this new influence has proved to be both *stimulating* and *controversial*.

We do need stimulation. The growth and multiplication of churches is as biblical (Acts 9:31; 16:5; 1 Corinthians 3:6; Ephesians 4:11-16) as it is vitally important to our Lord. If our children stopped growing, we would become desperate. Nothing short of an accurate explanation of the hindrances to healthy growth and an adequate and effective treatment of the malady would alleviate our concern. As the Lord’s people we should share His concern for spread of the word and the growth of the churches.

We do need the stimulation. We don’t need the controversy. Controversy has arisen. Some advocates of church growth seem to identify adherence to New Testament church principles (sometimes termed “assembly distinctives” or “Brethren traditions”) as hindrances to growth. Our Brethren propose some changes, which prove no small cause of concern to those of us committed to gathering according to the simplicity enunciated in the New Testament.

The present writer left a denominational church adopting convictions about the New Testament principles of gathering as an adult. My food and drink is church planting. Concern for church growth on the one hand and commitment to assembly principles on the other have forced me to do some hard thinking about these issues. I’ve often been reminded of my parent’s warning concerning unprincipled men,

whose actions were not governed by commitment to principle, but by the ends they were intent on pursuing. Their end justifies and sanctifies the means. Admittedly church growth is a lofty biblical principle, but it is not the only principle under consideration. Our commitment is to the whole counsel of God. When a church growth strategy impairs the application of other biblical principles, the result could be termed “*unprincipled growth*”.

Not every expression of growth is healthy and desirable. As a matter of fact unprincipled growth in the human body can be lethal. Cancerous growth could be termed “growth for growth’s own sake at the expense of the principle of health”. Putting on weight may be a growth of sorts, but it could hardly be deemed desirable. Healthy growth, be it in a physical or in a spiritual body, will not only be quantitative but also qualitative.

The advent of the Church Growth Movement polarizes and prods us toward one of two unsatisfactory options. Some will get on the Church Growth bandwagon. Others may resist even healthy change, reemphasizing instead principles held by an ever-diminishing number of churches. The former option we’ll *call growth at the expense of principle*. The latter has been derisively dubbed “*faithfulness without fruitfulness*”. Neither scenario stands up under the scrutiny of scripture.

Scenario 1: growth at the expense of principle

We may begin by planning our “marketing strategy”. Dr. Wagner calls it “*Philosophy of Ministry*” (POM). Case studies of successful mega-churches may play a key role in our strategy sessions. After all if it worked at Willow Creek or at Saddleback, it can work for us too. Demographic studies will show us, who the prospective buyers out there in our target area are, and what their needs and their “likes and dislikes” are. This data will prove to be invaluable.

¹ C. Peter Wagner. *Your Church can Grow*. Ventura, CA: Regal Books.

able as we tailor our marketing program, catering to the needs and wants of the buyers.

The studies show that many are willing to visit the church meeting on the Lord's Day. Furthermore a certain percentage will return for more, if we make a good first impression. *Visitor retention* is a proven method of church growth. If the folks are happy and keep on coming back, the percentages are on our side. And in these days of waning loyalty to principle, Christians are "bunny hopping" all over the place. If our programs are to their liking, maybe we could provide them with a new church home.

The consumer is King. The Lord's Day can become the People's Day. We may unknowingly adopted the motto "vox populi" or "the voice of the people" rules. Studies show that as of this year more college-educated women than men will enter the work force. There are a lot of feminist out there, who need Jesus too. We don't want to scar them away. It's high time we re-think the woman's role in the assembly. Studies show that 56% of adult Americans like rock music. We'll give them music with a beat. Drama is "in", and we've made time for it. We shortened the sermon, due to attention spans. Studies show that people don't come back, when the preacher's a bore. So we hand off to our best ball carrier every down. We decided not to call it "one man ministry". But our man had better be relevant! We find out what topic the people want to hear, and we preach it. That's relevant! The competition is tough, and the stakes are high. We'd better rehearse the whole production again! Let's take it again from the top!

What if the church folks don't like all these innovations? They had better read 1 Corinthians 9. We have "become all things to all men, so that we might by all means save some". Call that contextualisation. Call it marketing. Call it what you will. We are on the grow! If we can't find consensus on our POM, we may form a church-planting team and go elsewhere.

Let us take time to pose some critical questions before proceeding to the other untenable alternative.

First of all, is the concept of *visitor retention* scripturally sound? The Lord Jesus certainly seems to have ignored it. He generally avoided publicity and wooed people, not with "relevant" sermon topics, but with a ministry of love and the gospel of grace. At the same time He winnowed them with His stringent terms of discipleship. The Lord wasn't distraught, when people quit coming due to His "hard sayings" (John 6:60-f; Luke 16:16-23). Commitment to the truth would hold people like Peter in its grip (John 6:66-69). In his instruction to the young preacher Timothy Paul even contrasts the practice of preaching topics agreeable with the people to the faithful ministry of the Word (2 Timothy 4:1-4). The sermons of Peter, Stephen and Paul reveal a clear understanding of their hearers, but apostolic preaching coupled with the primitive church's holy standards tended to repel, rather than attract the uncommitted.

During a time of unprecedented church growth, unchurched "dared not associate with them; however the people held them in high esteem" (Acts 5:12-14). It was conceivable that unbelievers might wander into the assembly ministry meeting in Corinth (1 Corinthians 14:23-25). But one searches the scriptures in vain to find a reference to the assembly's gathering to evangelize. They scattered to do that! The Bible leaves no doubt as to the goal of the church's gathering. They came together for edification, fellowship, remembrance and prayers (Acts 2:42; 20:7; 1 Corinthians 11:17-f; 14:23-26). Scripture militates against the visitor retention marketing strategy.

Growth through the visitor retention scheme brings other disadvantages. It is all too easy for a non-Christian to become gradually assimilated into the church fellowship, when his contact with the assembly is designed to make him feel so much a part of things. The line of demarcation fades when "going to church" comes before conversion. Not-very-well-converted church members are in great danger themselves and can pose a danger for the church fellowship at a later date.

An added disadvantage of the visitor retention marketing strategy is the illusive nature of the resultant growth. Catering to religious consumers will attract not only the un-churched,

but also dissatisfied Christians and members of other local churches. I was encouraged to read of one North American assembly, that grew from fifty to four hundred in just two years. One of the elders later told me that they had seen twenty conversions during this time. Simple mental arithmetic revealed 330 transfers. Real church growth means addition through genuine conversion (Acts 2:47; 4:14), not through transfer growth at the expense of other fellowships.

Transfer growth breeds more pluralism, which in turn further weakens a fellowship's commitment to New Testament principles of gathering. Assembly distinctives don't seem to be fairing very well in tandem with current philosophies of ministry. Those who would continue to pay lip service to principles tend to be reductionist, who have broadened or redefined our distinctives to the point of non-distinctiveness. The great Czechish Statesman, Thomas Masaryk, said, "Nations live from the ideals, which stood at their inception." Dutiful reference made to our "Brethren roots" won't cut it. New Testament church principles should form our POM and not vice versa.

Is "one man ministry" simply a matter of re-definition? Is the order of service strictly a question of POM? Does the scripture have nothing to say about the matter? Paul writes of the orderly ministry of the Word through the multiple participation of various gifted brethren under the leadership of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 14:26-34; Ephesians 5:18-21).

And those studies? Studies show us a lot of things. They can be very useful, as we seek more effective ways and means to reach various segments of our society. However founding a church on the sands of convention is risky business. If the studies lead to revision of our practice of New Testament principles, they are misleading. Today one misses the clarion call, "the Word of God says..." in the clamor pollsters.

Is it scriptural to quote 1 Corinthians 9 as one's authority for changing the order and function of the assembly ministry meeting? Is it fair to refer to this verse, when talking about "the church gathered"? Have we forgotten, that Paul is defining the limits of the necessary

spiritual freedom and cultural flexibility accorded an individual evangelizing among different ethnic groups in the world? The apostle isn't talking about introducing elements familiar in the heathen or Jewish world into the assembly meeting at all. The world doesn't make itself at home in the church! The Greeks were the world experts at drama. For all their worldliness the Corinthians didn't introduce drama into the meeting (1 Corinthians 14). Paul is writing about what to order for dinner after a heated discussion in the synagogue, or how to behave at a heathen dinner table. Inward restraints of the "law of Christ" (the Lordship of the Lord Jesus) determine our life and culturally sensitive witness in the world! Other principles also enunciated in this same Corinthian epistle govern our behavior in the assembly gatherings.

Little is said of genuine repentance, of true brokenness, of the crucified life, of doing the first works, or of waiting on God for revival in church growth circles. It would seem that marketing strategies threaten to replace the time-tested concept of the blessing of God. One leading expert told his seminar group that the principles and methods taught in his church growth seminar are equally applicable in various organizations. He went on to say that they would work for the Mormons or for the Kawanis Club, and they will work for the church. But our real problems are spiritual in nature, and real renewal of our assemblies hinges on our spiritual condition, not on the application of various tools, methods and gimmickry. Even valid methodologies and insights become an arsenal of carnal weapons if overemphasized or relied upon.

Juan Carlos Ortiz tells of a lesson he learned from the Lord after two years of organizing and outreach:

The first thing He said was, "You are promoting the gospel the same way Coca-Cola sells Coke, the same way Reader's Digest sells books and magazines. You are using all the human tricks you learned in school. But where is my finger in all of this?"

I didn't know what to say.

Then the Lord told me a second thing, "You are not growing," He said. "You think you are,

because you've gone from 200 to 600. But you're not growing – you're just getting fat."²

Scenario 2: "faithfulness without fruitfulness"

The incongruence of this strain of "faithfulness" rattled me during an early encounter with Christians committed to assembly principles. A well-meaning brother praised an assembly, which had dwindled down to a couch-full. Apparently there was no pastor sitting on the couch. The group gathered weekly to break bread in a manner, which many of us still appreciate. Our brother said, "They are just being faithful." I remember making a mental note to think about that one. *Faithfulness and barrenness? What strange bedfellows!*

While allowing for varying conditions in various fields, one is none-the-less forced to note the connection between faithfulness and fruitfulness in other quarters. Certainly the Bible links the two. Becoming fishers of men is a function of following Christ (Mark 1:17). Fruit bearing is the proof of true discipleship (John 15:8). Harvesting is the promise to those who faithfully persevere in doing good (Galatians 6:9).

An excerpt from a letter from a leading brother in North America sums up this modern anomaly nicely:

"We hear many saying today that 'assemblies are dying' or 'without change we are passe.' But the fact is the assemblies that are dying have *abandoned 'first principles'*. They have forgotten about evangelism and bemoan the lack of growth."

What then is the problem? Lack of faithfulness! How can the neglect of "first principles" of evangelism, both personal and corporate, of effective shepherding and of the training of leadership be termed "faithfulness"? Our real problem is not so much our barrenness as our unfaithfulness to "*first principles*".

The prevailing stance might be more accurately described as selective faithfulness. We have remained faithful to important biblical

principles, which have been neglected in other quarters, and which to our chagrin are presently being cast aside by some assemblies. As a result we redouble our efforts to maintain our distinctive faithfulness. But attention to and the cultivation of these distinctives does not liberate us from faithfulness in other weighty matters. "Faithfulness without fruitfulness" means tripping over our own principles.

The expression "*truth without growth*" is another variation on the same theme. If faithfulness and barrenness are strange bedfellows, truth without growth is a sadly unnecessary divorce, a divorce often caused by a lack of love. Paul associated truth with church growth in the Ephesian epistle. It is by "speaking the truth in love" that "we are to grow" as an assembly (Ephesians 4:15-16). If the holiness of the early church repelled unbelievers, it was their love and unity of the assembly, which attracted them (Acts 4:32-5:14). When church growth analysts tell us that friendliness and warmth are among the most important factors for a growing church, they are only reporting the obvious. Some of my friends have visited certain assemblies, only to be frozen out!

Survival without vision is impossible. People and churches perish for want of vision (Proverbs 29:18). I once asked the dominant elder of a declining assembly, what he would prefer. Would he rather see some new families added, so they could continue to meet, or the mobilization of the assembly's resources to evangelize the lost and train a new generation of leadership? I was shocked by his preference for the former option. I'm not shocked by the news that the chapel is up for sale. Apathy toward growth, low expectations or unbelief and satisfaction with the substandard status quo are the deathknell for many churches.

The more excellent way: "Principled Growth"

There need be no doubting and despair at our plight. There is a more excellent way! *New Testament principles do work!* They are at work in a number of exemplary churches across North America. Missionaries and nationals on various fields are proving that they work today. We have been laboring in an affluent Western European country known for its resistance to

² Juan Carlos Ortiz. Disciple. Carol Sream, IL: Creation House.

the gospel for ten short years. Working together with one other missionary couple and Austrians we trained, we've witnessed the birth and growth of more than a dozen assemblies in our area. The growth rate of the work over the past ten years has astonished us. God is blessing! We are more convinced of the timelessness of New Testament principles than ever before, and would like to state briefly some practical suggestions for those interested in "principled growth". Some suggestions will coincide with the stimulating counsel of some church growth experts.

1. Honest appraisal of the spiritual condition of the assembly

The church leadership could begin by taking stock of their own lives and ministries. Do we as a group lack vision? Are we too busy with secular concerns? Are we deeply consecrated to the Lord and committed to the upbuilding of His church? Are we resistant to change? Are we actively involved in shepherding the flock?

New Testament churches are made up of New Testament Christians. How would we describe the spiritual condition of the flock? What are the biggest difficulties we face as a church? Which major hindrances to growth can we identify? Does our assembly have clear-cut goals, which are known and shared by the majority of those in fellowship? Are we really practicing the "first principles?" Is our meeting characterized by love? criticism?

Are we experiencing adult conversions with any regularity? Are they being integrated in the church? How many in the past two years? Which means of evangelism have we tried? What has proved effective?

A loving realistic self-appraisal may unmask negligence and sins of omission, giving occasion for repentance and confession of sin. Weaknesses discovered should culminate in clear cut decisions and planning for change.

2. Commitment to spiritual renewal

The church is a spiritual organism and the majority of the hindrances to our growth are spiritual in nature. The mighty weapon of prayer all too often neglect by those who know better. Existing prayer meetings often lack vital-

ity. Someone described a typical prayer meeting, as a place where you go to hear who is sick or out of work. Our assembly goals and especially that of evangelizing should play a central role here. We leaders meet Tuesdays at 6 a.m. for prayer. We are accountable to one another. It keeps us sharp spiritually.

3. Visitation and shepherding

Many elders act primarily as managers and decision-makers rather than shepherds. Many assemblies have no visitation program. We need to do something about this.

4. Training for the equipment of co-workers

Evangelist, shepherds and teachers are not only given to the church as ministers to her need, but as equipers and trainers of the saints for the work of the ministry. God's plan for the principled church growth is an ever-growing number of workers, who have found their function in the body and have been equipped to minister there (Ephesians 4:11-16). New Testament assemblies are structured for such function, but training and encouragement is often sadly lacking.

Our training includes personal time with a few, and group training for a wider circle. Personal evangelism, visitation training, discipleship training, teacher training, Bible study methods, shepherding, New Testament survey, preaching, the life of a leader are major subjects, which we have tackled in Austria in the past nine years. Our long-term investment is paying dividends. We do our "staffing" with homegrown men and women. BILD International³ offers an excellent curriculum for those who don't have time for course development.

We found upon review of the adult believers in fellowship in the Salzburg assembly, that a number of very positive willing believers weren't active in the ministry. They were waiting on us to take initiative. We have in many cases. We don't ask ourselves, "Who's the right man for the job?" We ask instead, "What is the right job for this believer?" Ideally we should cultivate an atmosphere, where the saints feel free to take initiative in the work of the Lord.

³ BILD-INTERNATIONAL, 4911 West Lincoln Way, Ames, Iowa 50010

5. Evangelistic training available to all

All should be taught the fundamentals of the Gospel message, the principles building relationships to those around them and at least some simple gospel presentation. Many helpful books on the subject are available.

Each believer relates to a whole network or web of unbelievers. We need to help the saints identify these networks, and to use these natural opportunities for the gospel.

We should provide "harvest vehicles" for who those contacted by our believers. Every baby Christians can say, "Come and see!" Evangelistic bible studies, Gospel courses and specially planned Gospel meetings with special speakers are but a few of the many opportunities available. A large percentage of the believers in Land Salzburg were converted through a combination of personal witness, Gospel meetings in a living room or in a local hotel and evangelistic visitation on the part of the believer with the contact and the evangelistic speaker.

6. Warmth in the assembly meeting and hospitality in the homes

Many of us were initially convinced of the relevance of the Gospel message, not by rhetoric or even by preaching, but through the visible love and unity of the saints. This is an oft neglected New Testament principle.

7. Training in NT assembly principles

I have encountered much gratitude in North America for talks I gave and for personal discussions I participated about New Testament principles of gathering. We take too much for granted. Many raised in assemblies don't seem

to be well taught concerning our principles. When we should emphasize meaning and content. Our concern in Austria led us to write a 150-page course with 14 homework assignments.

When we talk to believers about reception into fellowship we present them with an article about the goals and convictions of our assembly. We explain our distinctive convictions as well. This has never been difficult with someone converted from the world, only with the transfers. One freshly converted woman whispered, "Why are the women veiled?" Her neighbor whispered, "First Corinthians eleven." "Oh, thanks, I've only gotten as far as Luke!" A former feminist and chairwoman of the socialist teachers said much the same.

New Testament church principles didn't hinder church growth in the first century. They certainly didn't hinder growth in the last century either. Properly applied they won't hinder healthy church growth today. It's high time we reexamined our de facto philosophy of ministry in the light of the New Testament. We can best profit from the suggestions and the examples of our apparently successful brethren by testing every thing we hear and read, holding fast only that, which holds up under the scrutiny of the scriptures. We need not apologize for our adherence to assembly principles. In fact we must return to the "first Principles" if we want to experience "principled Growth".

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