Liberty University
DigitalCommons@Liberty University

Faculty Publications and Presentations

Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary and Graduate School

Spring 2004

Review: Biblical Church Growth

William E. Brown
Liberty University, webrown@liberty.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/lts_fac_pubs

Part of the Biblical Studies Commons, Comparative Methodologies and Theories Commons, Ethics in Religion Commons, History of Religions of Eastern Origins Commons, History of Religions of Western Origin Commons, Other Religion Commons, and the Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons

Recommended Citation
Brown, William E., "Review: Biblical Church Growth" (2004). *Faculty Publications and Presentations.* Paper 240.
http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/lts_fac_pubs/240

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary and Graduate School at DigitalCommons@Liberty University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications and Presentations by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Liberty University. For more information, please contact scholarlycommunication@liberty.edu.

Ministry Studies

Biblical Church Growth, by Gary L. McIntosh. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2003. Pp. 184.

Gary McIntosh edits the *Journal of the American Society for Church Growth* and has served two terms as president of the society. He serves as Professor of Christian Ministry and Leadership at Talbot School of Theology. Since 1989 his consulting firm, McIntosh Church Growth Network, has served over five hundred churches. McIntosh credits his teacher, Donald McGavran, with the major concepts covered in this text. McGavran founded the modern church growth movement and shaped its early development. McIntosh presents the work as his effort to return the church planting movement to McGavran's founding vision. McIntosh's stated intention reveals an insider's assessment of the modern church growth movement. He says in his preface:

> I use the word [biblical] to make the point that, contrary popular opinion, church growth is not based on sociology, marketing, or demographics. Church growth is a biblical concept, exploding from the life-giving nature of God. Unfortunately, during the years when church growth first became a recognized paradigm for church ministry, many writers assumed that its biblical foundation was well known. At that time, most church growth authors wrote about practical issues concerning church growth, without laying a biblical foundation. Time has demonstrated that many people did not, and do not, understand the biblical foundation for church growth (9-10).

McIntosh understands the movement's foundation to be biblical but admits that much of the rapid growth occurred while focused on pragmatics and not theology. The challenge McIntosh faces involves this widely accepted understanding of the church growth movement.

Chapter 1 highlights the modern church planting movement's dilemma: If a majority of practitioners understand church growth to be a set of pragmatic exercises instead of biblical principles, then does not that make it so? If all decide to call a rose a dandelion, is it still a rose? With flowers one has the scent, color, and attributes; however, when perceptions involve principles and practices, more than a name is involved. McIntosh admits that church growth is perceived as techniques, methods, and models, and cites two popular critics, Charles Colson and Jim Cymbala, as examples. McIntosh states, "He [Cymbala] believes that church growth is just a methodology used to finesse people into a church to increase its numbers" (17).

McIntosh believes Colson and Cymbala "mean well"; they just do not understand the true nature of church growth (17). Actually, they do understand the current nature of the church growth movement. Chapter 1 frustrated this reviewer and tainted his receptivity to the rest of the book due to McIntosh's refusal to see the modern movement's evolution. McIntosh could have strengthened his position of "biblical" church growth with a frank appraisal of the movement's current status. Rarely does a church growth text spend time on theology. The exegesis of biblical passages is often shoddy and slanted, with the passage serving as a springboard for the author's methods instead of as the guideline for praxis. The fault for the highjacking of the church growth movement and the subsequent harsh critique rests within the movement. Conferences and texts focus on the pragmatics. Leadership seems to value advanced studies in the social sciences over theology. McIntosh needs to go beyond saying that church growth is misunderstood. Fortunately, the remainder of the text surpassed the opening chapter.

Chapter 2 surveys the biblical record of God's redemptive plan, validating McIntosh's premise that churches grow as "they cooperate with God in bringing life to a lost world" (34). McIntosh's discussion of the "seminar syndrome" and ministers' preoccupation with the "how" versus the "why" prepares the reader for the remaining eight chapters of the text by presenting key principles of biblical church growth. According to McIntosh, the "how" of methodologies and strategies, though popular, are temporary and location specific, whereas the biblical principles (the "why") span culture and time.

Chapters 3 through 11 present the elements McIntosh considers essential for a healthy, growing church: the right premise, priority, process, power, pastor, people, philosophy, plan, and procedure. Each of the chapters utilizes quotes from McGavran and ends with questions relating to the subject matter. The "right premise" is that the Word of God presents the need for a high view of itself. McIntosh does not leave the discussion at the point of authority but addresses the need for a passionate proclamation of the Scriptures. He asserts, "A church that is committed to the authority of God's Word and is passionate in articulating its beliefs and behaviors has increased potential for biblical church growth" (45).

McIntosh's work is a worthy one, with only a few areas that could be challenged. One area of concern occurs in the chapter on leadership, "The Right Pastor." McIntosh opens his section on pastoral teams with an acknowledgment that there are three synonymous terms for church leaders: overseer, elder, and pastor (100). He then describes the common usage of each term. The problem arises when McIntosh states that the plurality of elders is observed "in the church at Philippi (Phil. 1:1)" (100). Unfortunately, Phil. 1:1 actually uses the term *episkopos*, "bishop." McIntosh then uses the term "elder" throughout most of the section. It may seem a minor point, but faulty exegesis is a major concern in a work committed to returning a movement to its biblical roots. With many Baptist seminarians being attracted to an ecclesiological polity of elder boards, a more judicious treatment would have been beneficial. McIntosh could have alternated the terms and reinforced their synonymous nature or used the term "pastor," which is a more modern descriptor of function common to all denominations than the polity-specific term that "elder" has become.

What does one do when he has focused on the various principles yet still is not experiencing church growth? Read the final chapter. Church growth is not a formula with automatic results. A pastor requires wisdom in evaluating his church's health and blending the appropriate amounts of each principle to promote church growth, according to McIntosh. *Biblical Church Growth* fills a void in church growth movement literature.

McIntosh's work uses more Scripture than most of the genre's texts combined. Except for the above-noted instance concerning elders, Scriptures were used frequently and appropriately. McIntosh deftly uses examples from his extensive experience to illustrate his biblical principles of church growth. If other key figures would likewise return to an emphasis on theology and the Scriptures, the church growth movement would not stray from McGavran's original intent.

William E. Brown

Planting New Churches in a Postmodern Age, by Ed Stetzer. Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2003. Pp. 365.

Dr. Stetzer seemingly has done the impossible: He has built from both experience and research a methodology for planting new churches that is simultaneously educational in teaching the method, intriguing in example, and faithful to the biblical paradigm of establishing new works. He does this by careful "grouping of principles related to the task at hand." The thirty-one chapters are grouped into six parts, each part leading the reader in a logical manner into the next stage of understanding, from both theological and practical standpoints, the task of planting churches.

The first four chapters relate to the basics involved in planting a church: the biblical basis and models. Dr. Stetzer begins to "think outside the box" in chapter 2 with "Redeveloping a Missional Mindset for North America," bringing in the idea that church plants need to be considered under missiology rather than merely as missions of the local church.

Chapters 5-8 (part 2) address the interaction of the people involved in the church plant, offering both a definition of the participants and their relational placement within the plant itself. For example, in chapter 6 the question is posed, "No Structure, or Too Much Structure?" Stetzer then goes on to bring in the different models of structure and their attributes, giving the biblical basis for each one.

Part 3 (chapters 9-14) takes a turn from what one might call the "basics of a church plant," to consider the multifaceted "paradigm of culture." The author lays a groundwork that allows the modern-day church planter to incorporate methods for reaching different people groups living in the same geographical

area, i.e., North America. Chapter 11, "Culturally Relevant Ministry in a Postmodern World," considers the dilemma of cultural change. "Being a missionary is never easy, but when the culture change has taken place in one's own home, it is even more difficult"(131). Again, Stetzer contributes not only to the theology and methodology, but also to the missiology of church planting.

In part 4 he takes a detour from the "science" of reaching the postmodern generation to consider the ecclesiology of a new church plant. In six chapters, Stetzer gives a workable outline that will allow an inexperienced planter to put in place the foundation of a new church. Touching on subjects such as focus, evangelism, core groups, small groups, finances, and choosing a name and logo, Stetzer provides a paradigm designed for success.

"If you build it, they will come," is sometimes far from the truth with regard to church planting. Stetzer realizes this and gives (in part 5, chapters 21-28) the aspiring planter a list of all the details that easily overwhelm a novice church planter. Chapter 21, "Finding a Meeting Place," leads the reader to consider how all the integral parts of the plant (i.e., focus group, location, and needs) are taken into consideration in selecting a place to worship. His strongest statement in this chapter is that "a meeting place is indispensable to the life of a church, but facilities should never control the direction of the church. . . . The building in which you meet is God's gift for ministry, not a monument to be protected" (251).

In the final section (part 6), Stetzer discusses the desired end result of a church plant: congregational formation. Here the church moves from being a mere concept to a legal and administrative entity. At this stage, churches plant churches, and the new congregation becomes a reproducing and sponsoring church. In chapter 30, Stetzer presents a formula for church reproduction. Drawing on "vision casting," he repeats a biblical truth: The vision of the church planter must not come from method or technique but "from the pulpit, from the words and heart of the pastor. This vision must come from the pastor because God has uniquely anointed him to present God's vision to the congregation" (320).

In a unique twist, Dr. Stetzer returns in chapter 31 to the beginning of the work: the biblical, theological, and spiritual foundation of the new church plant. The "congregational formation" section gives insight and instruction on how to become a full-fledged church through choosing laypeople to prepare both the church constitution and supporting documents.

The final chapter draws on all the information given previously and returns to the essential point of church planting preparation: the spiritual. Stetzer reminds the reader that Jesus did not advocate the "centrality of methodology, but the centrality of deity: He promised that He would build His church" (329). This chapter lists all parts of a planter's work as they relate to Jesus, personal reflections on all the church plants in which the author has taken part, and a checklist of church planting that both the new and the experienced planter will find helpful.

At first glance, the work may seem a bit verbose, especially to the experienced planter. This is not true. Dr. Stetzer has carefully chosen the points that