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Elmer L. Towns
Liberty University

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THE RELATIONSHIP OF CHURCH GROWTH AND SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Elmer L. Towns*

In the past twenty years the Church Growth movement has grown in public recognition for several reasons. First, superchurches have emerged on the scene and become influential in determining and applying Church Growth strategy. Second, there is a growing interest in the science and practice of church planting. Third, there seems to be more exposure by media to growing churches in general than two decades ago. At the same time the Church Growth movement has become a discipline, and it has become more sophisticated as it uses both theological and sociological research to examine churches to determine principles of growth. The purpose of this paper is to examine these areas and answer the following questions: (1) What is Church Growth? (2) Is Church Growth a discipline? (3) How can Church Growth and systematic theology relate to each other?

I. CHURCH GROWTH DEFINED

The term "church growth" has several connotations. First, it is generally associated with churches that grow, both internally and externally; and as such, church growth has a generic meaning that began with the growth of the first church in Jerusalem.¹ Second, the term is associated with evangelism and/or missionary enterprises that imply outreach to the lost and their incorporation into a church, hence causing local church growth. Ten years ago C. Peter Wagner defined Church Growth as follows:

All that is involved in bringing men and women who do not have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ into fellowship with Him and into responsible church membership.²

This definition seems to define evangelism, but it is too broad for Church Growth because of the phrase "all that is involved," which could include the areas of Christian education, pastoral theology, missiology, or other disciplines.

The third definition of Church Growth adds the aspect of research and limits the things included in its scope. In a later definition Wagner writes:

Church growth is that science which investigates the planting, multiplication,

*Elmer Towns is dean of the school of religion at Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia.

¹The phrase "church growth" is used here with lower case to imply the generic meaning usually attached to the phrase. See below for technical definitions of "Church Growth" (capitalized to distinguish it from general growth of a church).

²C. P. Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow* (Glendale: Regal, 1976) 12.

function and health of Christian churches as they relate specifically to the effective implementation of God's commission to "make disciples of all nations" (Matt 18:19-20). Church growth strives to combine the eternal theological principles of God's Word concerning the expansion of the church with the best insights of contemporary social and behavioral sciences, employing as its initial frame of reference, the foundational work done by Donald McGavran.³

Wagner notes the following aspects of a definition of Church Growth: (1) It is scientific in nature, (2) its scope is Christian churches, (3) it is related to the implementation of the great commission, (4) it combines eternal theological principles with insights from contemporary social and behavioral sciences, and (5) its initial frame of reference is Donald McGavran.

Some have agreed with Wagner's definition but questioned the reference to one individual as its source. John Vaughan, research professor in Church Growth at Southwest Baptist University in Bolivar, Missouri, states that Southern Baptists have been guided by the objectives of the great commission, have followed principles derived from research, and have enjoyed success in Church Growth.⁴ However, while the Southern Baptist and other groups understood and employed with varying degrees of efficiency the principles of Church Growth, it is not until the general growth of scientific technology since World War II that Church Growth has become recognized in some quarters as a discipline. And while Donald McGavran has probably had a greater influence than any other in bringing attention to the modern Church Growth movement, even he said that "Church Growth is much bigger than Pasadena."⁵ Therefore an explicit definition of Church Growth should not be attached to an individual but to the principles he advocated. At the same time, the indispensable influence of McGavran on the movement should be observed, as it is by Vaughan.⁶ The following is suggested because it is more explicit in definition and recognizes the universality of the movement:

Church Growth is that science that investigates the planting, multiplication, growth, function, health, and death of churches. It strives to apply the Biblical and social principles in its gathering, analysis, displaying, and defending of the facts involved in implementing the great commission.

The heart of the Church Growth movement involves research into growth to establish principles to guide others in the harvest. Engel and Norton indicate that the harvest is not going well in certain fields because cutting blades are missing from the evangelistic instruments: "The cutting blades of any Christian organization are the research-based, Spirit-led strategy to reach people

³C. P. Wagner, printed class notes, Church Growth I (MN 705), "Church Growth Eyes," p. 6. Wagner also used this definition in his inaugural address when he was installed as the Donald A. McGavran Chair of Church Growth at Fuller Theological Seminary on November 6, 1984.

⁴Vaughan received a Doctor of Ministry degree from Fuller Theological Seminary, studying under C. Peter Wagner.

⁵E. Towns, J. Vaughan and D. Seifert, *The Complete Book of Church Growth* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1982) 105; included in chap. 16, "The Fuller Factor," by Vaughan.

⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 100-114.

with the Good News and to build them in the faith.”⁷ Workers are diligent in evangelism, but their church is not growing. They are not seeing souls saved, baptized and added to the church. The reasons for nongrowth are not mystical, nor are they subjective. Reasons for nongrowth are usually discernible. Workers are probably not applying the correct principles that would bring in a greater harvest. Principles and strategy based on research is one of the indispensable facts of the modern Church Growth movement. J. Robertson McQuilkin indicates that there are five indispensable principles in the modern Church Growth movement, and the fourth on his list is “science as a valid tool for outreach.”⁸ He concludes: “The Church Growth Movement would change completely in character if any of the five basic presuppositions were omitted.”⁹ Wagner lists six elements as an irreducible minimum of Church Growth. Number six is that “research is essential for maximum growth.”¹⁰

The Church Growth movement has been wrongly accused of being interested only in numerical growth. There are at least four types of growth for a local church, not all related to numerical expansion. First, internal growth focuses on two areas: the evangelism of children born into the church, and the evangelism of the unsaved existing church members. Internal growth also refers to nurturing believers into spiritual maturity. The principle of arrested spiritual development indicates that when a church stops internally, it ultimately stops growing externally. Second, conversion growth is evangelism of the unsaved and bonding them to a church. Third, transfer growth results when people move their membership to a local church. Biological growth is the fourth type and occurs when children are born to church members and their presence causes numerical expansion of the local church.¹¹

There are other aspects of growth in the Church Growth movement. Expansion growth is reaching the population of an immediate community. Extension growth is the creation of new church groups in another similar culture. Bridging growth is planting new congregations in a different culture (racial, class, or linguistic). The phrase “growth rate” is the numerical measurement of units of time at which specified percentages of net increases occur (increase or decrease related to base).

⁷J. F. Engel and H. W. Norton, *What's Gone Wrong with the Harvest? A Communication Strategy for the Church and World Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975) 14.

⁸J. R. McQuilkin, *Measuring the Church Growth Movement* (Chicago: Moody, 1973) 73–76. The five principles are (1) importance of numerical growth, (2) focus on receptive people, (3) people movements, (4) science a valid tool, and (5) right method guarantees large responses.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰C. P. Wagner, “Church Growth: More Than a Man, a Magazine, a School, a Book,” *Christianity Today* 18/5 (December 7, 1973) 11, 12, 14. The six principles: (1) Nongrowth displeases God, (2) numerical growth of a church is a priority with God, (3) disciples are tangible, identifiable, countable people, (4) limited time, money and resources require strategy based on results, (5) social and behavioral sciences are valid tools in encouraging and measuring church growth, and (6) research is essential for maximum growth.

¹¹A discussion of the types of growth is found in Towns *et al.*, *Complete* 113–114.

II. CHURCH GROWTH AS A DISCIPLINE

Wagner claims that the Church Growth movement has become a discipline¹² and lists seven reasons for this claim: (1) There is a history to the movement, even though only a brief history. He dates the beginning of the movement to 1955 when McGavran published *The Bridges of God*.¹³ This volume developed a whole new paradigm for evangelistic strategy, giving reasons for church growth or nongrowth. He suggested theoretical and practical instruments for fulfilling the great commission.¹⁴ (2) Church Growth has a center—Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California.¹⁵ (3) The movement has produced a body of literature including journals, popular magazines, theses, dissertations, textbooks, popular books, and other printed forms of communication. (4) The movement has developed a language framework (Church Growth scientists are known for coining new terms to name newly-identified principles).¹⁶ (5) Many evangelical and mainline denominations have established officers and/or positions of Church Growth. (6) Church Growth has created a number of critics, which implies either an identifiable method of research or content.¹⁷ (7) Church Growth is a discipline because of the growth of retail outlets that furnish programs, materials, tapes, etc., to help churches and denominations grow.

McGavran isolates five key events that have contributed immeasurably to the expansion of the movement: (1) establishing the Institute of Church Growth in 1961 on the campus of Northwest Christian College (Eugene, Oregon) to develop students knowledgeable in growth concepts; (2) publishing *Church Growth Bulletin* since 1964 by Overseas Crusades, Incorporated; (3) relocating the Institute of Church Growth from the campus in Eugene to Fuller Seminary (1965); (4) establishing the William Carey Library (1969) for the mass publication and circulation of Church Growth books; and (5) creating the Institute for American Church Growth in 1973 by Dr. and Mrs. Win Arn. McGavran also includes the Fuller Evangelistic Association department of Church Growth.¹⁸

¹²Wagner, *Church Growth I*, pp. 1-3.

¹³New York: Friendship, 1955.

¹⁴Vaughan suggests that the Church Growth movement should recognize the influence of A. Flake, *Building a Standard Sunday School* (Nashville: Convention, 1922).

¹⁵Towns *et al.*, *Complete*, identifies this influence under the chapter title "The Fuller Factor" (chap. 16, pp. 100 ff.). This includes the Fuller School of World Missions, The Institute for American Church Growth, and the Fuller Evangelistic Association department of Church Growth. These organizations constitute a significant influence on Church Growth.

¹⁶See the *Encyclopedia of Church Growth* (ed. C. P. Wagner, E. Towns, W. Arn; Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1986). This volume has a complete glossary of terms, personalities and principles.

¹⁷An illustration is *Theological Perspective on Church Growth* (ed. H. Conn; Nutley: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1976). Conn says church growth may be all right in principle but does not work in practice. Towns *et al.*, *Complete* 115.

¹⁸D. McGavran and W. Arn, *Ten Steps for Church Growth* (San Francisco: Harper, 1977) 7-8.

The above suggestions are all results, or implicit reasons, to suggest that Church Growth is a discipline. Is there a cause that has produced the above effects? Is there a body of truth or a unique discipline that makes Church Growth a separate discipline? Perhaps the answer is that Church Growth is a catalyst around a method of research that focuses on the implementation of the great commission. Perhaps Church Growth, like the modern movement of Christian education, is an interdisciplinary area that draws its content from several fields: history, education, sociology, anthropology, theology, etc. To suggest that it draws its content from theology, however, is to suggest that Church Growth is something separate from theology. Perhaps Church Growth falls under the broad umbrella of practical theology and is in reality a subdiscipline of systematic theology.

III. THEOLOGY AND CHURCH GROWTH

Theology has historically been known as the queen of the sciences. Since all truth comes from God, and since theology is the study of God, all other legitimate sciences should derive their pursuit of truth, both in method and content, from theology. Whether this orientation is recognized by those in other sciences is not the question. Rather, theologians should recognize, both in content and method, that their discipline is a fountainhead for all others. They cannot limit their study to God or "religious matters." The seeds of truth inherent in their discipline should influence other disciplines. Church Growth researchers, then, should recognize that they take their orientation from theology.

The area of Church Growth is connected to theology in both content and methodology. Church Growth must take its definitions for the Church, and hence its direction for research, from theology. It should not begin with behavioral science. This process raises a question as to the relationship between Church Growth with its method of research, on the one hand, and theology with its methods of research on the other. First a working definition for the Church should be suggested, and then a working definition for theology is needed.

The Church can be identified first as "an assembly" from the root meaning of the word *ekklēsia*. Second, an implicit definition of the Church is suggested by at least six descriptive pictures or metaphors in Scripture: (1) the body of Christ, (2) the building of God, (3) the bride of Christ, (4) the flock of God, (5) the garden of God, and (6) the family of God.¹⁹ The author's working definition is: "An assembly of baptized believers, in whom Christ dwells, under the discipline of the Word of God, organized to carry out the Great Commission, administering the ordinances, and evidenced by spiritual gifts."²⁰ Implied in this definition is growth, for when a church carries out the great commission it will make disciples, baptize them and instruct them in Christ's words. This process

¹⁹Towns *et al.*, *Complete* 226–251. By description, this chapter suggests that the six pictures of the Church imply that the Church should grow.

²⁰E. Towns, *Is the Day of the Denomination Dead?* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1973).

brings new people to a church, causing it to grow.

A definition of the Church, or any other aspect of theology, is determined by the process of gathering data, weighing them for their importance, arranging them into a consistent system, and then exhibiting and defending the result. The preceding process is described by Lewis S. Chafer: "Systematic Theology is the collecting, scientifically arranging, comparing, exhibiting and defending of all facts from any and every source concerning God and His works."²¹

Chafer's definition, while firmly grounded in revelation, includes three phrases that recognize the role of sociological research in determining Church Growth principles. First, the phrase "scientifically arranging" implies that truth—i.e., Church Growth truth—can be recognized by the scientific process of gathering data, suggesting an hypothesis, testing an hypothesis, and recognizing the result as a principle. Second, Chafer targets the source of theology as "all facts from any and every source." Here he suggests that the source of theology is greater than Biblical revelation, meaning that data can be drawn from nature, men, and presumably their interrelationships—i.e., sociology. Third, Chafer identifies the object of research, or content of theology, as "God and His works." The Church in general and the Church as a social institution is the work of God.

The mixing of scientific research with theological research in Church Growth, however, raises several problems. First, it is possible for some researchers to examine by social research and reject a principle of Church Growth that may be explicitly taught in Scripture. This happens when a correct principle is wrongly applied in a local church. Second, it is possible to examine and identify by social research a principle of Church Growth that is causing church growth, and yet that principle may not be Biblical—and may even be anti-Biblical—in its expression. Third, it is possible to accept or reject a Biblical Church Growth principle because one's sociological data are faulty or incomplete. Fourth, it is possible to accept or reject a Church Growth principle based on sociological observation alone (growth statistics), while the church that is growing in numbers does not meet the criteria of the NT in doctrine or practice.

The Church Growth movement must recognize the following principles to remain on track: (1) The Word of God is the ultimate standard of faith and practice, and no principle of Church Growth that contradicts Scripture, even if it produces numerical growth, is a Biblical Church Growth principle. (2) The Scriptures have not given a systematic presentation of Church Growth principles but, rather, have given the great commission, described the principles and circumstances of growing churches,²² given solutions to church problems²³ and dealt with different aspects of ministry that produce growth.²⁴ From these

²¹L. S. Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (Dallas Seminary, 1947), 1. 4.

²²Growing churches are described in the book of Acts.

²³Solutions to problems are found in 1 Corinthians and Galatians.

²⁴Books such as Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians are aimed at internal growth, which effects external growth.

data, Church Growth principles can be scientifically determined and then applied to various churches. (3) Where the Scriptures are silent, it is possible to gather data from natural revelation to determine or verify Church Growth principles. These principles, however, must be consistent with models, commands and principles that are explicitly found in Scripture. (4) There is a difference in basing one's Church Growth principles on those that are explicit in Scripture and basing them on those that are implied from Scripture. The Church Growth researcher should recognize the absolute nature of explicit principles, but when principles are only implied he should seek more data, test it through correspondence to other Scripture, test it through internal consistency, and then wait for confirmation through scientific research. (5) Where Scripture is silent, scientific research can determine Church Growth principles. These, however, must be in harmony with those explicit principles previously established. (6) Theological and Church Growth research are not two mutually distinct methods of research that lead to separate sets of principles, Church Growth then being forced to harmonize its findings with theology. Rather, both theology and Church Growth grow out of the same orientation to research, and harmonizing should be integrated in the total process. (7) Church Growth research and principles are not addenda to theological methods and principles but are at the heart of theology and its methods.

Once the Church Growth researcher has identified principles, he must be careful to distinguish between them and techniques or programs. The focus of his research is to establish principles, not programs. Baumann warns: "Mark it well—much is not transferable from one setting to another. Programs are *not* absolutes; biblical principles are. Take care to distinguish one from the other."²⁵

When viewing Church Growth we must remember the following: (1) Techniques and programs are not the same as Biblical principles. While a technique or program may accomplish a Biblical result because it contains some Biblical principles, techniques and programs are not absolute truths. (2) Techniques and programs may be used effectively by certain people at certain times in certain circumstances, but will not be equally effective overall. (3) Principles alone are Biblical; they transcend programs and techniques. (4) Programs and techniques tend to change with time and culture. (5) Programs and techniques may be effective in one contemporary setting but not the next. (6) Some programs seem to be effective when used in a specific time frame, but with changing circumstances they become ineffective. The program, while effective because it applies Biblical principles, becomes less effective when circumstances change. Principles do not change, but the way principles are applied must change.²⁶ Therefore the church worker must be grounded in Biblical principles

²⁵D. Baumann, *All Originality Makes a Dull Church* (Santa Ana: Vision House, 1976) 23.

²⁶Therefore programs such as busing evangelism, vacation Bible school, and fall evangelistic meetings are not as effective as in the past. The principles that made these programs effective will be effective in other situations. The author has used the phrase "anointed programs" to explain God's blessing on a program. It usually lasts for one decade or one generation and becomes less effective when circumstances change. The word "anointed" does not have a mystical implication but suggests that when we properly apply the correct principle to receptive people there will be a Biblical response.

and yet be flexible to determine what program and technique will best solve his problem and cause his church to grow. McGavran has suggested: "Analytical tools are available for pastors and concerned laypeople to determine whether their own churches have desirable growth patterns."²⁷

Biblical principles will lead to Church Growth strategy that is a total approach or tool for carrying out the great commission. Church Growth strategy is based on three things: (1) the Biblical objective of the church, which is the great commission; (2) application of the Biblical principles of Church Growth; (3) the identification of a Biblical model to evaluate the effectiveness of Church Growth.²⁸ The NT suggests models as it describes different churches in the pages of Scripture (the church of Jerusalem, of Ephesus, of Antioch, the "church in thy house," etc.). All of these aspects contribute to a Church Growth strategy. Wagner appropriately comments:

Missionary strategy is never intended to be a substitute for the Holy Spirit. Proper strategy is Spirit-inspired and Spirit-governed. Rather than competing with the Holy Spirit, strategy is to be used by the Holy Spirit.²⁹

²⁷D. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970) 162.

²⁸Sociological research has used modeling as a tool to aid Church Growth. There are seven models or "Church Growth types" suggested in Towns *et al.*, *Complete* 85–185: (1) fundamentalism, (2) the Fuller factor, (3) body life, (4) charismatic renewal, (5) evangelical Bible churches, (6) Southern Baptists, and (7) mainline denominations. Each church type is a catalyst of principles, values, attitudes and programs. In essence, each has a different strategy for Church Growth. Beyond these Church Growth types, there are Walwrath church types that identify a church with the sociological characteristics of its neighborhood. See the *Encyclopedia of Church Growth* (ed. Wagner *et al.*), "Walwrath Church Types."

²⁹C. P. Wagner, *Frontiers of Missionary Strategy* (Chicago: Moody, 1972) 15–16.



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