

**THEOLOGICAL CONCERNS WITH  
THE “CHURCH GROWTH MOVEMENT”  
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This paper is an evaluation of some of the theological issues raised by many who hold to the “Church Growth” philosophy of ministry. The purpose of this paper is not simply to criticize what other Christians may be doing. It is my desire to theologically evaluate their message and methods in order to avoid the pitfalls and benefit from the good. We must remember that though similar in many ways, those in the “Church Growth” movement do have significant differences. *It is therefore wrong to generalize from one ministry to another.*

**1. What Is “The Church Growth Movement”?**

It is a philosophy of ministry that is “seeker” driven. It sets out to determine what will attract the unchurched and then arranges services and designs ministries to appeal to the felt needs of the unsaved.

**2. What Common Features Characterize “The Church Growth Movement”?**

**a. They apply a business marketing approach to ministry.**

- They rely heavily upon sociological and demographic data.
  - ◆ George Barna states, “This is what marketing of the church is all about providing our product (relationships) as a solution to people’s needs.”
- They design their ministries to attract a certain focus group.

**b. Sunday morning services are designed to attract “Seekers.”**

- Casual dress and style
- Contemporary music
- Drama
- A “positive” message
- Most avoid anything that would make the unchurched feel uncomfortable. This includes controversial doctrines and topics, long prayers, and meditative or contemplative songs.

**c. They believe that “people will not learn the way they used to.”**

**3. Who Are The Major Personalities In Our Day?**

**a. Bill Hybels**

- Pastor of Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, Illinois
- 1972 began “Son Life” ministry to high school students
- 1973 began “Son City” outreach to unbelieving youth. The message, music, and environment were adapted to the audience.

- ◆ The “Son City” model became the prototype in the founding of Willow Creek Community Church. It is a youth ministry strategy applied to adults.
- 1975 Hybels attended Robert Schuller’s leadership conference.
  - ◆ He returned the Chicago area and recruited individuals to join him in starting a church.
  - ◆ After starting Willow Creek he took approximately 25 members of Willow Creek’s leadership team to Schuller’s Conference.
  - ◆ Since then the two have shared teaching at each other’s conferences.
- 1992 he founded the Willow Creek Association (WCA)
  - ◆ Over 5,000 churches worldwide, from more than eighty denominations, belong to the association.
  - ◆ More that 65,000 church leaders and volunteers attended one of their conferences or training events in the year 2000 alone.

**b. Rick Warren**

- Southern Baptist pastor who followed Schuller’s pattern of using a community survey in founding Saddleback Valley Community Church in Orange County, California.
- Author of *The Purpose Driven Church* (Grand Rapids, Mi: Zondervan, 1995)
- His conferences and seminars have had an attendance of over 100,000 people from all over the world.
- He is the most definitive and articulate writer of church growth theology and philosophy to date.

**c. Lee Strobel**

- A former teaching pastor at Willow Creek and now on staff at Saddleback.
- Board member of the Willow Creek Association
- Author of numerous books including, *Inside The Mind Of Unchurched Harry And Mary*, *The Case For Christ*, and *The Case For Faith*.

**d. George Barna**

- Christian pollster and the leading advocate of the evangelical use of marketing techniques
- Formerly attended Willow Creek and still has an ongoing association
  - ◆ “It was during my time in Wheaton, Illinois, while attending the Rev. Hybel’s church that I first had my eyes opened to the meaning of evangelism and church growth. If I had my way, there would be 100,000 Willow Creek Churches in this country.” (George Barna, *Marketing the Church*, 7-8)
- He has become an authority for much of the movement through his research and absolute statements of what will and will not work in the modern church.

#### 4. Of What Theological Concerns Do We Need To Be Aware?

##### a. Theology Proper (The Doctrine Of God)

- ***Beware of presenting an inaccurate view of God in order to attract people.***
  - ◆ In many churches which hold to the “Church Growth” philosophy there is a tendency to present an unbalance view of the nature of God.
    - ◇ From his study of Willow Creek, G. A. Pritchard writes, “I found only four messages in which God’s holiness was presented clearly over the course of the year. This amounts to about 7 percent of the messages, in contrast to 70 percent of the messages emphasizing God’s love. For every message that stressed God’s holiness, there were about ten messages that emphasized God’s love.” (Willow Creek Seeker Services 261)
  - ◆ Theologian Millard Erickson writes, “Where either is overemphasized at the expense of the other, the orthodox theistic conception is lost.” (Erickson, Christian Theology 302)
    - ◇ Emphasizing God’s love over His holiness
    - ◇ Focusing on God’s immanence over His transcendence
    - ◇ Teaching an affirming God, not a demanding one
  - ◆ There is also a tendency to emphasize that God is to be experienced rather than obeyed.
    - ◇ Sociologist Robert Wuthnow suggests that in contemporary America, God has been molded to satisfy people’s needs
    - ◇ He writes, “God has, in a sense, become “subjectivized” rather than existing as a metaphysical transcendent, or omnipotent being . . . God is relevant to contemporary Americans mainly because the sense of God’s presence is subjectively comforting: that is, religion solves personal problems rather than addressing broader questions.”

##### b. Anthropology (The Doctrine Of Mankind)

- ***Beware of exchanging a Biblical view of mankind for a psychological one.***
  - ◆ Psychological terminology and diagnosis are often preferred above biblical assertions and terminology by some in the movement.
    - ◇ Prichard found that, “Hybels and his fellow speakers regularly use psychological terms to describe the Christian life. The leaders of Willow Creek admit in interviews that a significant amount of weekend messages’ content comes from psychology.” (WCSS 155)
    - ◇ “Hybels not only teaches psychological principles, but often uses the psychological principles as interpretive guides for his exegesis of Scripture.” (WCSS 156)
    - ◇ “Three of the most recommended, read, and influential books in the church are the psychological self-help books *Codependent No More*, *Please Understand me*, and *When Your World Makes No Sense*.” (WCSS 227-228)

- ◇ Self-identity, temperament, family history, importance of emotions, self-analysis, addiction, self-esteem, boundaries, detachment, control issues and conflict resolution were all prominent topics.
- ◆ Psychological categories have become central to people’s worldview. It affects how individuals view themselves, their relationships, and life in general. It is the basis upon which people determine right and wrong and view personal responsibility for sin.
- ◆ Secular psychological personality theories provide alternative and rival understandings to the Christian view of the person.
  - ◇ Self-esteem, self actualization, co-dependency, addictive personality, temperament, etc
- ***Beware of using psychological categories and concepts to better identify with the unchurched. They ultimately distort the Christian message.***
  - ◆ Psychology doesn’t accurately define mankind’s problems or God’s solutions?
  - ◆ When we seek to translate the gospel message into the language of psychology there is a subtle changing of the gospel.

### c. Soteriology (The Doctrine Of Salvation)

- ***Beware of altering the gospel in order to attract “seekers” or gain converts.***
  - ◆ Marketing distorts how Christians view nonbelievers and the process of telling others the gospel.
- ***Avoid the trend of presenting the gospel as the solution to emotional needs and personal fulfillment.***
  - ◆ The focus of our message can subtly change from sin and redemption to fulfillment and self-esteem.
  - ◆ The gospel can be changed to being simply a means of fulfillment and the church becomes another place that promises to satisfy emotional desires.
  - ◆ Though the gospel is clearly understood by the staff at Willow Creek, the message is often blurred from the pulpit.
    - ◇ Pritchard writes, “In the year I studied, it was only rarely that Hybels or another speaker would proclaim the whole gospel during one message.” (WCSS 173)
  - ◆ The central theme most often is that the Christian life is an adventure and a means of personal fulfillment.
    - ◇ Christianity is presented as the answer to anxiety, pain, meaning, identity, self-esteem, loneliness, marriage, sex, parenting, and work.
    - ◇ In essence the “seekers” are being told that Christianity will satisfy their felt needs and is the best means to make them happy.

- ◇ Strobel describes how many unchurched “Harrys” hesitate to make a commitment to Christ because they don’t want to give up the excitement in their lives: They’re afraid that if they receive Christ as their forgiver and as their leader that they’re gonna lose out on all the excitement in life. “Say, you know, am I going to be able to go out and party anymore?” “Am I gonna be able to have fun anymore?” “Am I gonna be able to be aggressive at work anymore?” (WCSS 142)
- ◇ In response Strobel claims, “The Christian life is uniquely exciting.” He asserts, “If you sign up for this kind of spiritual safari . . . it’s more exciting than any kind of safari that a travel agent can book you on.” (WCSS 142)
- ◇ Willow Creek evangelism director Mark Mittelberg explains, “We’re seeing more and more that Harry relates to a message that shows how Christianity helps his daily life more than how he can make sure he’ll get to heaven in thirty or forty years.” (WCSS 145)
- ◆ But Jesus does not guarantee that his followers will find personal fulfillment in this life. cf Mt 10:34; John 15:19-20
- ◆ Jesus made it clear that sinners cannot come to Him on their own terms. cf Luke 9:23
- ◆ The Bible doesn’t teach a fulfillment theology, but a theology that includes suffering. cf John 16:33; 2 Timothy 3:12; Hebrews 11:35-39; Revelation 2:10 etc.
- ◆ The gospel is not about meeting felt needs and psychological problems. It is about sin and forgiveness.
- ◆ People cannot understand God’s grace without understanding God’s law and their own sinfulness.
  - ◇ The scriptures, not the felt needs of the audience, should dictate the content of our message.
- ***Avoid the tendency to soften the gospel in order not to offend the unsaved.***
  - ◆ A primary goal of “Seeker Services” is that unbelievers are to feel comfortable.
    - ◇ This is good in most areas, but not if it involves watering down or changing God’s message to the unsaved.
  - ◆ There is a temptation to tell people what they want to hear rather than what they need to hear.
  - ◆ The emphasis too often is that rejection of Christ leads to pain, disappointment, and broken relationships. Judgment and hell are seldom mentioned.
  - ◆ There is a temptation to tone down the message so as not to upset or confront the unsaved.
    - ◇ But, salvation is impossible without the discomfort of facing our sin and guilt.
    - ◇ Jesus had a ministry of confrontation and regularly challenged and drove away “seekers” who came to hear Him. cf John 6:22-70

- ◇ Jesus and the gospel are frequently said to offend. cf Mt 13:57; 15:12; John 6:64-66; 1 Corinthians 1:18-25; 1 Peter 2:6-7; Romans 9:33 etc
- ◇ Jesus warned His followers that they would be hated even as he was hated. cf Mt 10:22; 24:9; Lk 6:22-23, 26; John 7:7; 15:18-19, 24; 17:14
- ◇ Paul did not soften or alter his message to avoid offense. cf 1 Corinthians 1:18; Galatians 1:10; 5:11) When Paul said that he became “all things to all men,” he was not saying that he altered his message.
- ◆ Tragically, many “seekers” today don’t come to church to learn doctrine, be reproved, corrected, or gain instruction in righteousness. 2 Timothy 3:16 cf vv. 2-5
  - ◇ They don’t come to learn, minister, truly worship, be challenged or to change. They come for feelings. They come to be emotionally uplifted and “inspired.”
  - ◇ This is not the type of person Jesus sought to be His disciple. Mt 10:32-39
- ***Beware of thinking that people are saved as a result of using the right human methods and programs.***
  - ◆ Rick Warren writes, “There are some types of people your church will never reach, because they require a completely different ministry that you can provide.” (PDC 174)
  - ◆ Warren later writes, “It is my deep conviction that anybody can be won to Christ if you discover the key to his or her heart. That key to each person’s heart is unique so it is sometimes difficult to discover. It may take some time to identify it. But the most likely place to start is with the person’s felt needs.” (PDC 219)
    - ◇ Can any person be won to Christ if we can just come up with the right way to relate the gospel to him?
    - ◇ If Warren is right, then Jesus failed to find the key to Judas’ heart and to that of many others.
  - ◆ Jesus taught something very different.
    - ◇ John 6:44 No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day. cf vv. 37-39, 64-65
    - ◇ John 10:26 But you do not believe because you are not of My sheep.
    - ◇ John 12:37-40 But though He had performed so many signs before them, yet they were not believing in Him. 38 This was to fulfill the word of Isaiah the prophet which he spoke: "LORD, WHO HAS BELIEVED OUR REPORT? AND TO WHOM HAS THE ARM OF THE LORD BEEN REVEALED?" 39 For this reason they could not believe, for Isaiah said again, 40 "HE HAS BLINDED THEIR EYES AND HE HARDENED THEIR HEART, SO THAT THEY WOULD NOT SEE WITH THEIR EYES AND PERCEIVE WITH THEIR HEART, AND BE CONVERTED AND I HEAL THEM."
    - ◇ cf Acts 13:48; 1 Cor 2:14
- ***Beware of viewing music as the key to winning the lost.***

- ◆ Rick Warren writes, “If you were to tell me the kind of music you are currently using in your services I could describe the kind of people you are reaching without even visiting your church. I could also tell you the kind of people your church will never reach.” (PDC 281)
  - ◇ Is music really the determining factor of who you can and cannot reach with the gospel?
  - ◇ If music is that central to evangelism, why is the New Testament silent on this issue?
- ***Be aware that the true seeker is God.***
  - ◆ Romans 3:11; Psalms 14:1-3 - “There is none who seeks after God.”
  - ◆ Though we are frequently called to seek after God, none does so apart from the special work of God in his heart.
  - ◆ “Aquinas said that we confuse two similar yet different human actions. We see people searching desperately for peace of mind, relief from guilt, meaning and purpose to their lives and loving acceptance. We know that ultimately these things can only be found in God. Therefore, we conclude that since people are seeking these things they must be seeking after God. People do not seek God. They seek after the benefits that only God can give them. The sin of fallen man is this: Man seeks the benefits of God while at the same time fleeing from God himself. We are, by nature, fugitives.” (*Chosen By God*, by R.C. Sproul).
  - ◆ No person, on his own, will seek for God.
  - ◆ The Seeker is God
- ***Beware of thinking that people have changed so that they can not learn in the same ways they used to?***
  - ◆ Since the original sin, mankind has been spiritually dead in trespasses and sins. Ephesians 2:1ff
  - ◆ Satan has always blinded the minds of the lost. 2 Corinthians 4:4
  - ◆ No person has ever come to Christ except:
    - ◇ He was drawn by the Father cf John 6:37-40, 44
    - ◇ The Holy Spirit convicted (John 16:8) and regenerated him. (Titus 3:5)
    - ◇ Someone presented the gospel to him. Romans 10:14 cf 1 Cor 2:1-5;
    - ◇ The power of God’s word brought him to salvation Romans 1:16; cf Hebrews 4:12
  - ◆ William Smith wrote, “Because we have little confidence in offering the only thing we have to offer- the ministry of the Word . . . we send the seeking soul away entertained but empty. Because we are afraid to offend and so want to help, we baptize pop-psychology with a Bible verse or two, rather than proclaim the timeless gospel which alone is the power of God unto salvation. (World Magazine 7/17/99 p. 33)

- ◇ Though it is critical that we clearly present the gospel, it is not our cleverness, music or methodologies that ultimately saves the sinner. It is God's Spirit using His word that brings about regeneration.
- ◇ 2 Timothy 4:2-3 preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction. 3 For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires,

#### d. Ecclesiology (The Doctrine Of The Church)

- ***Be aware that God desires for His church to focus on people of all ages, races, and social economic groups.***
  - ◆ The church growth movement emphasizes that identification with a target group is necessary to be effective.
    - ◇ Rick Warren writes, "No single church can possibly reach everyone. It takes all kinds of churches to reach all kinds of people. (PDC 156).
    - ◇ Later Warren comments, "Explosive growth occurs when the type of people in the community match the type of people that are already in the church, and they both match the type of person the pastor is." (PDC 177)
  - ◆ How does this compare with the diverse multicultural view of the church in the NT? Titus 2:1-10; Ephesians 2-3; James 2:1ff; Philemon, etc.
- ***Beware of not confronting sin in the church in order to appear loving and tolerant to the unchurched.***
  - ◆ Too often a desire to market the church can cause the leadership to soften its teachings and response to sin. This is particularly true at Willow Creek.
  - ◆ A survey of the Willow Creek congregation found that in a 6 month period: 33% had lied, 18% had stolen, 12.5% had committed adultery, and 27 % of the men had viewed pornography. Worse yet, 25% of the singles, 38% of single parents, and 41% of divorced individuals admitted to having illicit sexual relationships during that same time period (WCSS 264)
  - ◆ Hybels did not call the congregation to repent for their rebellion against a holy God. He did not call upon them to examine themselves to see if they were truly of the faith. Instead he emphasized God's compassionate love:
    - ◇ "We are a love-starved people, with broken parts that need the kind of repair that only he can give long-term. We need to bring our brokenness out into the light of his grace and truth." (WCSS 264)
  - ◆ The Bible teaches spiritual accountability and church discipline. Matthew 18:15-17; 1 Corinthians 5:1-13
    - ◇ 1 Corinthians 5:5-6, 11-13 I have decided to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. 6 Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole

lump of dough? . . . 11 But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he should be an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler-- not even to eat with such a one. 12 For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Do you not judge those who are within the church? 13 But those who are outside, God judges. REMOVE THE WICKED MAN FROM AMONG YOURSELVES.

- ◆ Hybels has commented in public meetings that hundreds of Willow Creek marriages have broken up over the years. “Detachment” is used as a justification for why individuals at Willow Creek separated from and divorced their spouses. In fact, Willow Creek’s official divorce policy allows individuals to divorce their spouses if “their spouse is unwilling to be a viable marriage partner.” (WCSS 236)
  - ◇ Detachment is a psychological term used of separating from a “co-dependent” relationship. Melody Beattie argues in her book “Codependency No More” that the first step in resolving relational problems is to detach from the people one has the problem with. This theory in practice justifies how individuals can and should leave difficult or painful situations. (cf WCSS 235)
- ◆ Willow Creek’s policy is in sharp contrast to the teachings of Jesus, Paul, and Peter in the New Testament. (cf Matthew 19:3-9; 1 Corinthians 7:7-14; 1 Peter 3:1-2)
- ***Beware that you don’t neglect edifying the saved in your attempt to evangelize the lost.***
  - ◆ In the New Testament we find the church gathering for the teaching, fellowship, prayer, and worship. cf Acts 2:42 They generally went out into the community to evangelize.
  - ◆ The Bible doesn’t prohibition church meetings set aside for evangelism, However it has been found that when Sunday morning services are geared primarily for the unsaved, true worship and edification generally suffer.
    - ◇ One staff member acknowledges that Willow Creek produces “numbers but not disciples.” (WCSS 278)
    - ◇ Only one third of those who attend the weekend seeker services at Willow Creek attend the midweek teaching service. Roughly 91% of those who don’t attend mid-week claim to be Christians. (cf WCSS 268; 275-278; 286)
    - ◇ Therefore the majority of those who claim to be Christians are not being taught how to grow in their faith.

**e. Epistemology (The Basis Of Knowledge)**

- ***Beware of letting marketing strategies rather than the Bible determine the nature of your ministry. (message, methods, and focus)***
- ***Beware of determining what is right by what works.***
- ***Beware of measuring your ministry’s success by numbers.***
  - ◆ Though they sometimes deny it, an evaluation of the literature shows that numbers and crowds are frequently used to define expertise, credibility, and success.

- ◆ Too often the primary question is, “Does it work?”
  - ◇ “Never criticize any method that God is blessing.” (Rick Warren, PDC 156)
- ◆ God evaluates our success by faithfulness, not numbers.
  - ◇ 1 Corinthians 4:1-2, 5 Let a man regard us in this manner, as servants of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God. 2 In this case, moreover, it is required of stewards that one be found trustworthy. . . . 5 Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts; and then each man's praise will come to him from God.
  - ◇ Jeremiah preached 35 years with only one known convert.
  - ◇ Luke 6:26 "Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for their fathers used to treat the false prophets in the same way.
  - ◇ Jesus' teaching drove away the crowds in John 6.
- ◆ The allure of “success” carries with it many temptations.
  - ◇ Manipulation
  - ◇ Pretense and phoniness
  - ◇ Building and trying to maintain an image or reputation.
  - ◇ Compromising or toning down the message
- ◆ Our central goal should be to glorify God, not to promote our image or to not offend the unsaved.
  - ◇ We should not seek to please men, but God. 1 Cor 2:1-4; Gal 1:10; Eph 6:6; I Thess 2:4-6; cf John 12:42-43
  - ◇ Instead of being concerned primarily with numerical growth or of what others think of us, we need to be concerned with who and what we are. (Integrity)
- ◆ If numerical growth is the ultimate focus, there is a temptation to modify the message.
  - ◇ 2 Timothy 4:3 For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires,
- ◆ In the guise of spiritual growth, the purpose of the church can become numbers, success, and achievement rather than honoring and glorifying God.
- ***Beware of using marketing methods and ideas that shape the Christianity we present.***
  - ◆ The problem with this is that marketing makes the audience sovereign as the church tries to shape or create products to satisfy the audience's felt needs and desires.
    - ◇ The result is often a tame God, a distorted gospel, a misplaced faith, still births, and disillusioned pastors.

- ***Beware of letting the culture's categories, language, music, worldview, and priorities shape your message.***
  - ◆ A psychological view of mankind and his problems.
  - ◆ A benign user-friendly God.
  - ◆ A man-centered user-friendly gospel.
  - ◆ A self absorbed, materialistic, fulfillment oriented view of the Christian life.
  - ◆ etc

## **5. What Can We Learn From The Church Growth Movement?**

- a. It is important that we have a strong understanding and commitment to our God-given purpose.**
  - Rick Warren, “The starting point for every church should be the question, ‘Why do we exist?’ Until you know what your church exists for, you have no foundation, no motivation, and no direction for ministry.” (PDC 81)
- b. Our churches must have a genuine heart, vision, and strategy for reaching the lost.**
  - We must encourage and look for creative ways to engage unchurched people.
- c. It is helpful to understand your audience.**
  - Helpful, but not necessary.
- d. Contemporary music is not the enemy.**
  - Just because it was written 200 years ago in Europe doesn't make it holy.
    - ◆ It was contemporary then.
  - *However, we must remember that both the words and the style of music shape how we view and relate to God.*
- e. Excellence in programming reflects a God of excellence. cf 1 Corinthians 14:33, 44**
- f. It is important to be culturally sensitive. 1 Corinthians 9:22**
  - But do not to the point that we remove the offense of the gospel.