

#107 “Dangers of the Church Growth Movement, Part 1”

by Brent Barnett

www.relevantbibleteaching.com

There are many dangers of the church growth movement which are already being felt and some of which will be felt more by succeeding generations. This article hopes to analyze the underlying philosophies of the church growth movement and then show how these beliefs are in direct contradiction to Scripture. It will become readily apparent as to how great a deception this movement is and how dangerous its effects have really become.

False belief #1

Success is defined by numerical growth.

Pragmatism is the underlying premise of all that church growth proponents do and say. If a pastor somehow gets a following of thousands, he is declared successful. He is then able to talk as an expert to other pastors whose congregations are smaller as if he has somehow solved the ministry dilemma with his creativity and innovation. Any challengers to his “new” philosophy are silenced by the argument that what he is doing is “working” by “bringing people to Christ.” This belief thus attributes church growth to the work and ingenuity of man rather than the work and power of God according to His Spirit and Word. Scripture clearly teaches that only God brings growth (1 Corinthians 3:6-7). The church growth movement thus usurps the role of God, which only leads to disaster and an appearance of results that may or may not really be genuine. Numerical growth ought to be desired, but it is not necessarily indicative of success, as God lets things grow and be harvested as He orders and ordains. Neither is the fact that a church is large indicative of health or sound pastoral leadership. Having a huge church is not a definitive criterion for looking to a person for advice. Numerical growth and spiritual growth are in the hands of God. How arrogant then is a church growth expert to take credit for God’s work, if indeed God is behind the work! What is even worse is that the growth may not even be Biblical growth, so he stands condemned in his boasting. Either way, when we define truth as success rather than adherence to Scripture, we will lose.

Success must be defined as obedience to the Word of God and faithfulness in His service. It cannot be altered to mean an increase in church membership, attendance, or professions of faith. There are many unbiblical ways to manipulate professions and to entice people to join a “church.” Faithfulness will lead to success as God defines it and as God allows and enables. There is no alternative for adherence to the revealed Word of God.

False belief #2

It is possible to make the unregenerate man think the worship of God according to the Word of God is exciting and relevant.

The only way to make church (i.e. the worship service) appealing to the natural man who follows fleshly lusts is to change what church actually is. Church growth proponents

change church to incorporate some secular music and some entertaining theatrics and dance with little core theology. They alter the messages so that they are kept to twenty minutes or less with helpful hints for enabling listeners to be successful in their present endeavors. If this is done, of course more people will attend. It goes without even having to think that asking the world what they want will force church leaders into giving them just that if they want them to come to “church.” We are not to ask the world what they want in a worship service, but we are to challenge them to conform to what God says true worship actually is. How ridiculous it is to ask an unregenerate heart and mind which doesn’t know the Bible or worship God how God should be worshipped and how His body should function!

The man who is outside of Christ is not going to find truth, theology, preaching, the gospel, or Jesus Christ palatable, relevant, or interesting unless the Spirit gives him a longing for Himself. The longing is supernatural, spiritual, and divine, not dependent upon man creating an environment that is conducive to manipulating “conversions” and drawing in “members.” True worship of God must be in spirit and in truth (John 4:23-24). It must be led by believers, and it must ascribe glory to God and be in accordance with the Word of God. Preaching must be relevant but thoroughly Biblical, whether the seeker likes it or not. If he is a genuine seeker of truth (one whom the Spirit is drawing), then we absolutely must preach the whole counsel of God because his only hope of salvation comes through hearing the Word of God (Romans 10:17). We have nothing to fear except not giving enough knowledge for salvation. To worry about losing attendees because of sharing the whole gospel message (including sin, hell, and repentance unto obedience) is like making an alliance with the devil, thus jeopardizing the hope of true conversions.

The bitter irony of the church growth movement is that the one means through which the church actually grows, gospel preaching, is the thing most minimized. Romans 1:16 makes it clear that the gospel is the “power of God unto salvation.” The power is not in the atmosphere, the entertainment, or the performance. It is not in the preacher, the singers, or the multimedia. It is in the Word of God declared with authority, conviction, and in totality according to the full truth of the gospel message.

False belief #3

How a person presents (i.e. teaches or preaches) is more important than what they believe and what they know.

This principle is in direct contrast to Paul, who pretended to know nothing except the gospel and did not come in clever or persuasive words of wisdom (i.e. trying to sell or market something). If he had done this, he said that he would have made the power of the cross and the gospel void (1 Corinthians 1:17). This ought to be frightening for those who rely upon their own presentation abilities, gimmicks, and stage presence. Just because some people are great entertainers and orators does not make them Biblical, spiritual, or eternally effective. It does work for luring carnal men to attend a carnal performance on Sunday morning, but it does not bear spiritual fruit that lasts.

Having assessed the target market of religious consumers, the seeker-driven experts know that they cannot preach a forty to fifty minute message going expositionally through a text of Scripture. Thus, they must find other means to keep the attention of those in attendance. When man-made tricks and gimmicks become the center and focus of a message, they detract from the truth and the power of the gospel which is self-contained. All God requires is a delivery person, a messenger. The truth is the main attraction, not the preacher. This is totally abused in the seeker-driven churches. Theology and correct belief must be the centerpiece; indeed, it is what formulates the very definition of Christianity. Ideally, one should hone their skills so they can communicate effectively, but at the end of the day theology and truth still outweigh presentation ability in terms of spiritual effectiveness. What is fundamentally the issue is the belief in the sufficiency of Christ and His Word. For the church growth proponents, God and the Bible need their help.

False belief #4

Preaching must be to the felt needs of the “seeker.”

The preacher who adheres fully to the doctrines of this movement does not sit in his office and wait to hear what God is leading him to preach upon from the Word. He already knows what people want to hear because he has assessed the religious market. From his perspective, preaching really isn't all that hard. All one has to do is go to the bookstore and see what is selling: books on success and prosperity, books on contemplative prayer, books on worldly leadership principles applied to the church, and books questioning the validity of theology to begin with, just to name a few. People want to know how to get rich, powerful, and successful. If we preach to that end and give them a god that they can handle and manipulate, then we will have them glued to us. The problem is that there is no eternal value in gaining an audience and leading them to build themselves up. God calls us to deny ourselves, take up our crosses, and follow Him (Matthew 16:24). God is not in the business of building our self-esteem but in causing us to find our worth and identity in Christ. He is not about enabling us to fulfill our ambitions, but He calls us to surrender our desires to Him. He is not about overcoming mistakes and disappointments with self-help strategies, but He requires us to call sin sin, to repent, and to let Him be our victory by faith. God's message is simply impossible to mass market. It has no appeal to the natural man or to the carnal lifestyle. True church practice calls people to face a holy God and to deal with sin by the power and grace of Christ. But the seeker-driven churches know that such an emphasis is not what will work to add numbers. They believe that they have found what will, and their methodology does work from the standpoint of earthly success standards. Yet their “success” is at the expense of violating the Scripture and altering the gospel, something Paul says is worthy of being accursed (Galatians 1:8-9).

The problem with preaching to felt needs is that we are easily self-deceived, thinking we need to hear one thing when in reality we need to be told something else. That something else is usually not something we like to hear. This is why we need the preaching and

reading of the Word of God. We don't know what we need to hear, but the Word will tell us what we need to hear, whether it is appealing or not.