

EVANGELISM AND CHURCH GROWTH by Donald McGavran

Today a furious discussion of evangelism and church growth is going on. Dr. George Peters, in his able 1968 addresses at the Winona Conference of missionary society executives, cast much light on the whole important matter. A conference on the subject is to be held at Geneva, Switzerland in late 1969.

Much of the discussion centers on the nature of the Church. Is it a divine fellowship into which men come feeling it a part of God's new order? A fellowship of the concerned, of the redeemed, of new creatures in Christ? Is the Church the kind which wins and holds men because of what it is? Evangelistic campaigns, it is argued, must not appear to be temporary excitements from outside the church conducted by specialists who evangelize, win decisions, and leave. Evangelism rather, is the church living normally, being itself, doing its thing.

Much of the discussion is couched in theological terms. Deep rooted patterns of training the ministry are involved and must be evaluated. The biblical background is considered at great length. Finally, there is the practical question as to how we can turn the present churches around - perhaps a full 180 degrees - so that in God's hand they become more effective instruments of conversion and consolidation, i.e., of finding and folding.

In some countries of Latin America many, wishing to escape from Roman Catholic tyranny, "decide for Christ" and then in Protestant churches find another tyranny which tells them 'you cannot do this and this'. Many who decide for Christ leave Protestant churches without even progressing to baptism. Christ is preached as light and life, joy and freedom; but the Church often seems repressive and negative. How can we make the Church a real Church - truly the Body of Christ, truly living and forgiving, vital and radiant?

This is to state the issue as it is likely to appear to a Eurican missionary, who does not take the social structure of the congregation into account. This way of thinking, while true and helpful in congregations made up of like minded individuals, is not the whole truth and not particularly helpful in conglomerate congregations. This way of thinking neglects social units. It assumes that if only the Church is theologically sound and really Christian it will inevitably provide the warm, friendly koinonia which the indwelt Church is.

Church growth men believe staunchly that the Church is a divine institution, in very truth the Body of Christ, and is made up of redeemed men and women who are new creatures in His love and power. They believe that to make the Church more effective her real nature must be stressed. Christians must hold a high view of the Church and never think or speak of her in mechanical or merely human terms. True conversion, real penitence for sin, more practice of God's presence, more waiting for His blessing are urgently needed.

They also believe that social structure plays its part. The whole man is man-in-society. Evangelism produces more and better church growth when it takes societal organisms into account. Evangelism which disregards social classes, linguistic barriers, economic stratification, caste feeling, racial antipathies, and cultural configurations fails to find and fold as many lost sheep as evan-

gelism which takes such matters into account. We must remember, for example, that no matter how friendly and really Christian a congregation is, unless it is structurally congenial, the new convert finds it cold and even distasteful.

If, for instance, the congregation speaks French and the convert does not, he is usually lost in it, no matter how Christian it is. Or to change the form of structure, if members bathe in hot water with soap every day and the convert has neither soap nor hot water, he finds their style and they find his repulsive. Or if the church members do day labor and the new convert is a "Europe returned" man with 1000 acres of land, then no matter how "Christian" the church, it rubs him the wrong way.

One must not push the matter of structural congeniality too far. Some churches on receiving men and women who are blood of their blood and bone of their bone, treat them so indifferently that the converts are lost. Wherever found, coldness and indifference are to be condemned. The Church is, of course, a gathering of those in Christ.

Church growth men, however, emphasize that much more attention must be paid to social strata. Whenever possible, churches made up of the same kind of men must be formed. Full weight must be allowed to different degrees of education and culture - without stigmatizing them as things which ought not to count. There is no sin in having a Portuguese speaking congregation for Portuguese immigrants in Massachusetts. Indeed, it is common sense. It is just as valid, truly Christian and honorable as an English speaking one. There is no sin in having Yakima Indian congregations in which leadership is rigorously preserved for Yakimas, in which no white man is allowed to teach, preach, lead the choir, or be an usher. Indeed, it is common sense to provide congregations which pagan Indians can visit, feeling 'this is ours. We feel at home. The blighting shadow of the majority community does not fall on us.'

In the same way, ample provisions must be made for men belonging to various pieces of the Latin American mosaic to come into their own homogeneous unit-churches. Aymaras into Aymara congregations, Tseltsals into Tseltsal, Chol into Chol, West Indian into West Indian. The blighting shadow of the majority community must not fall on those who become evangelicals.

The time will no doubt come when the minority as a whole will want to merge into the majority community. When it does, then churches which insist on integration will prosper exceedingly. When that time comes, it is well to insist on integration as a pre-requisite of baptism. The mistake is to jump the gun, i.e., to judge that integration is welcome to a sub-culture simply because a few of its young turks think it is, when as a matter of fact, the great majority is not ready for it. Then insisting on integration as a pre-requisite of baptism, slows down church growth or actually stops it.

Sociology and theology complement each other. The Church as it expands across the world must not choose one and refuse the other. An evangelism which issues in multitudes of viable, on-going congregations will be both theologically and sociologically sound. Where the theology is at fault, it must be corrected. Where the anthropology or sociology is, it must be. The test is this: are men and women catching fire? Are they being redeemed? Are churches multiplying? If they are not, then both theology and anthropology should come up for review.