

PRINCIPLES OF CHURCH GROWTH AND LITERATURE

Let me lay before you three basic principles of church growth and set forth one or two applications for each. I shall be illustrating the kind of thinking we need to do, and indicating something of the length and breadth of the area where culture, communication, and God's passion for the redemption of men intersect. I shall not exhaust these principles. Much more could be said and, indeed, should be said about each. Please accept what I say as a brief example of the treatment needed, a brief glimpse through an open window at an area of enormous importance for the creation and use of literature.

Please note that I am dealing with one dimension only of the problem of Christian literature. I am not asking: How can Christian literature be made self supporting? What vocabulary and format will ensure wide reading of the material? What thought forms will present the truths of the Christian religion so that men will best understand them? If literature is to be used these questions must be asked and correctly answered. But I am probing a different dimension. We all realize that it is possible to have self-supporting Christian literature, the vocabulary and format of which assure wide reading, and which present Christianity in a way that men understand it, and yet get very little acceptance of Christ and very little growth of the Church! I am asking: What must we do (beyond getting literature understandable, widely read and self supporting) to encourage acceptance of Christ, baptism of believers, and multiplication of Christian congregations?

1. The first basic principle of church growth is this: church growth must be clearly intended believing that it is a chief and irreplaceable goal of Christian mission. We must take the great commission seriously. The Lord

said, "All authority has been given me, Go therefore and disciple all the peoples." This command, which sums up the principle purpose of the Incarnation, is the polestar of Christian missions. One large missionary society phrases this basic principle as follows: The supreme and compelling purpose of the Christian mission to the world is to proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and only Saviour and to persuade men to become His disciples and responsible members of His Church. That is well said.

Observe that the purpose is not, repeat not, "to do splendid church and mission work on the other side of the world among needy people." It is to communicate Christ and multiply His churches. All round the world in every non-Christian land in every continent, we see tens of thousands of pieces of mission work which, alas, are not dominated by the supreme and compelling purpose. Thousands of missions find themselves doing splendid mission work, whether the Church grows or not. Tens of thousands of ministers are doing splendid church work, whether churches multiply or not. It would be very easy to choose a country at random - Nigeria, let us say, or Japan, or Brazil - and find dozens of bands of devout missionaries and national Christians whose labors do little to communicate Christ, and who as a result see slow church growth. One such mission, with twenty eight missionaries, has been at work in Chile for more than 30 years and now has a total church membership in all its little congregation put together of 396.

If we believe the great commission, then the long range goal - the supreme and compelling purpose of the Christian mission - must dominate our short range goals. Please note that we do this not 'to be a success' but rather to be faithful stewards of the Gospel. Faithfulness to God dictates that His over-riding purpose, for which our Lord went to the cross, be our over-riding purpose too.

One of the damaging mis-steps, so easy to take in Asia, Africa and Latin America is to begin focussed on church growth and then gradually to shift over to other more readily attainable goals. This is how it happens. The first missionaries or national Christians work single-eyed for the communication of the Christian faith. They feel that the best way to win a hearing for the Gospel is to run schools, it may be, or do some other kindly service. Then the second and third generations of workers, seeing few come to Christ, turn to maintaining schools, not to propagate the Gospel, but to serve the people. Often the multiplication of churches is renounced as an unworthy and 'success ridden' goal.

It is specially important to recognize that the goal is not proclamation of the Gospel indifferent to whether any one becomes a Christian or not. You see, while the Bible tells us to proclaim the Gospel, the purpose is never that we proclaim it as an end in itself. In the Bible, the end is always that men, hearing the Good News, repent of their sins and accept the Saviour. We all must clearly see that seed sowing evangelism, while usually the first and necessary step, is never the ultimate goal. It is the means not the end. Fields, of course, must be ploughed and sown before they can be reaped; but the purpose is not to go on ploughing and sowing indefinitely. The purpose is to have the crop grow, and ripen, and be cut, and brought back to the Master's barn. To change the metaphor, the purpose is never to send messages or powdered milk to the prodigal son in the far country. The purpose always is to see him walking in through the front door, saying "Father, I have sinned and am not worthy to be called your son. Make me a hired servant. I've come home to stay."

In one Asian country, a band of missionaries in three jeeps arrives in a town, sets up a loud speaker, and for an hour blares forth the words of the Gospel. The missionaries, then pack up and go on to another town to

repeat the performance. They evidently consider preaching the Gospel an end in itself. But on the contrary, biblically, the end is always that men believe and churches multiply.

In Evangelical Literature Overseas, it is particularly important to hold firmly to the supreme and compelling purpose - to the long range goal - of Christian missions. Often missionaries encounter a resistant field. Always, at the very beginning of our efforts, 'becoming a Christian' seems to the people of the land an unknown and fearsome thing to do. A long period of little or no church growth is common. During this period - which may last for decades - we are tempted to forget the purpose and to do good work of some kind. In the midst of enormous human need there are always many good deeds waiting to be done. So, in literature, we write tracts about flies, malaria, good citizenship, or even the Gospel, - whether anyone becomes Christian or not.

The temptation should be firmly resisted. Every piece of literature which has a discipling, rather than a perfecting purpose, should be conceived, written, printed, distributed and prayed for with the supreme and controlling purpose of the mission in mind. Let me give you an example from the field of Bible distribution.

A certain organization is going to fly ten million copies of the Gospel of John into Red China. These will be dropped in rice paddies in plastic bags, anticipating that when found the Gospel will be secreted and quietly distributed from person to person. Some, of course, will be surrendered to the authorities and burned.

Hearing of this, a friend wrote to this organization saying, "Could each of the Gospels of John include on page - the last page, I think - saying, "Form an association of your close and trusted friends to study this book. Then give your minds and wills and lives to Jesus Christ Who walks

the earth today and is God at work. Study His Word. Pray to Him. Obey all His commands made known to you in this book and by His speaking to your own hearts. Do this openly if you can: secretly if you cannot. All who truly commit their lives to the Lord Jesus and live as His disciples - studying, praying, obeying - will be saved, will receive power, will be indwelt by the Holy Spirit. Associations may be of any size, from two persons to two hundred. They meet by day, by night, in homes, in caves, in the fields, and in village squares to worship God according to His revelation in this book. They learn His will for them, and live as sons of God."

In due time the organization implied saying, "Our board of operation has prayed about -our letter. Although our original plans were to have no markings, identifications, names, dates, places or additions other than the Gospel of John, we have felt led of the Lord to add a page giving a translation of your paragraph without name or comments. Your suggestion is beautiful and a blessing to our hearts."

You see, without the last page, the distribution of the Gospels tended heavily in the direction of seed sowing as an end. With that last page, emphasis shifted to bringing the people of China to faith and obedience (Ro. 16:25).

To take another example, here is a Bible Correspondence Course. As far as non-Christians are concerned, its true aim is not merely to study a Gospel but rather so to study it that the students believe in Jesus Christ, repent of their sins, are baptized and added to the Church. This aim, if clear in the mind of the person who prepares the course, will be implemented in suitable ways in the directions for study and the examinations.

Tracts, which are tools of enormous power, should never be 'just tracts'. They should always be HCP tracts. In 1956 I did a survey of church growth for the United Church of Christ in the Philippines and wrote Multiplied

Churches in the Philippines. One chapter in that book was entitled "HCP Tracts." I said.

HCP means High Conversion Potential. The literature I describe is aimed at producing church growth. It has HCP. I am not speaking of literature on morality, rural reconstruction, literacy, public health, stewardship, conferences, youth work and organizations - necessary as these good things are. I am speaking of tracts which address themselves to the central continuing task of the world mission - discipling the nations and multiplying conversions and churches.

You see, the first basic principle is that church growth must be clearly intended, believing it to be God's will. Church growth is rooted in theology. Policies concerning Christian literature must be theologically right. This, of course, means that the literature must be sound as to the basic doctrines of the Christian religion. But it must also be sound as to God's salvational purpose. It must be filled with Christ's passion that men be reconciled to God through Christ in His Church. This biblical position must inform and direct policies which have to do with goals, priorities, and emphases in all Christian literature.

II. The second basic principle is that major church growth ordinarily takes place in receptive homogeneous units of the population.

Church growth is rooted, not only in theology, but also in sociology. The communication of Christ never takes place in a vacuum. It always occurs among men - men exist in societies. They do not exist as separate units like stones in a pile; but rather in societies, like knots in a tennis net, all linked together with other members of their particular homogeneous unit. Men exist as classes, tribes, castes, clans, families, and language groups. Here in Chicago you have Puerto Ricans, Irish Catholics, German Catholics, Blacks, recent immigrants from Appalachia, and numerous other blocks of humanity. Mankind exists as a mosaic made up of hundreds of separate pieces, hundreds of separate societies.

Incidentally mankind is a myth. There is no "mankind": all we can see is thousands of pieces of the human mosaic. The great theologian Schliermacher, making this same point, took his students to a restaurant. "Waiter," he said, "bring me some fruit." The waiter hurriedly brought him a tray full of apples, pears, and grapes. Schliermacher angrily dashed it to the ground. "Waiter", he roared, "I told you to bring me some fruit. All you bring me is apples, pears, and grapes." Then he turned to his amazed students. "You see", he continued, "in all the world, there is no fruit. All we see is specific fruits. All generalizations are non-existent. Only the specific truly exists." All we see are the thousands of different pieces of the mosaic of mankind.

The mosaic, just illustrated from Chicago, is enormously more complex abroad. Here almost everyone speaks English, reads the same newspapers and listens to the same broadcasts, and drives the same kind of cars. But abroad, the different pieces of the mosaic commonly speak radically different languages and live in radically different places. In Indonesia, for example, are hundreds of islands and each forms a world of its own. On one small island, there are four mutually unintelligible languages. In West Camerouns in Africa, a land not as large as Massachusetts, live at least twenty different tribes each of which speaks its own tongue.

As the Gospel spreads throughout the world bringing light and life to the sons of men everywhere, it grows in each piece of the mosaic in a way specially suited to that piece. Each homogeneous unit of the population has its own language, its own thought forms, its own precious culture, its own power structure and its own political forms. Some units are patriarchal some matriarchal, some rich some poor, and some timid and some brave. Furthermore the Church in each is at a certain stage. Much depends on whether the Church at this moment is composed of one percent of the people or half of

them. A large denomination surging forward victoriously is one thing: a small denomination facing defeat and confusion is another. Each has radically different needs.

Much mission and church work goes astray here. Churches in India feel they are working with Indians or, in Indonesia, with Indonesians; whereas actually each is working with one piece, usually one very small piece, of the Indian or Indonesia mosaic. For example, the Presbyterians in Nagpur, India went in for educational work. They worked with the wealthy, the elite, the rulers and merchants of the city. The mission high school and college touched less than one percent of the total city population. The elite, as so often is the case, were highly resistant to Christianity. At the end of the first century of labor, the Church gathered by this mission numbered about 500 communicant Christians. At the same time in the city of Nagpur were two hundred thousand laborers, largely Mahars by caste. These people were receptive to Christianity - but the Church was not working in that receptive piece of the mosaic.

On the contrary in Chhota Nagpur in India the Lutherans found many castes of which two - the Uraons and Mundas - were receptive. The Lutherans concentrated on these - as did the Roman Catholics who came in about forty years later. Today there are four hundred thousand Christians of both Churches and that part of India is well on the way to becoming largely Christian.

This second basic principle - that major church growth ordinarily takes place in receptive units of the population - has much meaning for the production of Christian literature. To begin with, literature must be indigenous. In Multiplying Churches in the Philippines I wrote:

We need tracts redolent with the idiom, names, color, sociology, religious beliefs, and practices of the citizens of this fair land. They should mention Rizal, Mabini, and De los Reyes. They should

be written by Gonzales, Ibalzarossa and Fernandez. They should tell of turning from tuba, cock fighting and gambling, and be illustrated with pictures of carabaos, bananas and coconuts.

What I wrote was a generally recognized, if not widely practiced, part of the truth. Literature should be indigenous in that sense; but indigenous must mean not merely 'Filipino': it must mean suited to particular parts of the total population - the Tlaccanos, Cebuanos, Isnegs, peasants, or university students. Literature must fit the one part of the mosaic in which it is intended to spread the Gospel. It must be couched in the language and thought forms of that piece. It must be filled with names of persons typical of that piece, and tell stories about men and women of that segment. In a word, literature for Harlem or Watts must not merely be American, not merely written in English: It must fit Harlem. It should sound strange and possibly be repugnant to Anglo churches in Boston and Minneapolis. Christian literature overseas has a long ways to go to incarnate this principle.

Christian literature should not, with eyes closed, be talking to everybody about everything. It should be devising specific communications to specific groups in which the Holy Spirit is at work. The obedient steward, as a mark of his obedience, will discern where the finger of God is pointing. The alert servant, as a mark of his faithfulness, will observe when the spirit moves the waters of healing and rush to put the sick man in.

The following illustration from the field of advertising, of the need for devising specific communications to specific segments of the population must not be taken as, in any sense, presuming on the sovereignty of God. It speaks rather about the obedience and common sense of the servant.

Tom Dillon, president of Batten, Barton, Dinstine & Osborn, an advertising firm, as quoted by a Los Angeles Times staff writer, says:

The advertiser's primary aim is usually to get someone to make a purchase decision in his favor. In most cases, the decision is made by a relatively small percentage of the population. For

instance, about 80% of all beer is consumed by just 20% of the beer drinking population A mere 14% of those who drink whisky buy 90% of the bourbon sold in the country. Its very expensive to use ads to influence the decisions of people who are not really going to buy.

We, therefore, spend a lot of time finding those prime prospects - the small specific and receptive parts of the total population who are likely to buy the product. Then we learn what their problem is. After that, it is a matter of convincing them that we have a solution to their problem.

For example, the prime prospect for Philco color TV is a 37-year-old sports buff who still is not sold on the quality of color. When Campbell Soup wanted to single out a market segment of light users that could be converted into heavy users, our company found out that the prime prospect is the 29-year-old housewife with no children who worries over what to feed her husband (middle income, blue collar) when he comes home for lunch. Out of this came Campbell's "The Manhandlers" campaign, advertising thicker richer soups.

Once we advertisers talked to everybody about everything. Now we pinpoint the media and the creative content and talk to specific people with a specific frame of reference. That is what a noted advertiser says.

Christian literature, too, should be seeking out those small segments of the total population which have become responsive and constructing messages about God's grace in ways likely to appeal to those segments. They are our prime prospects. When God plans to bring some homogeneous unit out of Egypt into the freedom of Christ, Christian literature should learn the language, thought forms, and culture of that unit and construct meticulously stated messages suited to it.

May I give you an example from the field of radio. In northeast Ghana the Chokosi, a small tribe of 22,000, have started to turn to Christ. During the last five years, one thousand of the 22,000 have become Christians in a dozen village churches. The missionary judges that the whole tribe is responsive and could become Christian before 1980. Radio messages from the powerful Christian station in Liberia reach these villages with ease. Messages in the trade language about the Gospel, the life, death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus, can be heard; but few listen. General messages, in a language other than their own, do not move the Chokosi greatly.

But suppose that the mission working there were to sell cheap radios to every head man in every Chokosi hamlet and to prepare messages in Chokosi. Suppose every village elder who has become Christian with his people were to be interviewed and a tape cut which sounded even more specific and Chokosi than the following: "I am Monganga chief of the village of Chereponi. My mother's people live in Tola. My maternal uncles are Wakeena and Trabee. My daughters are married into the chief's family in Ibadola. We called the missionary to teach us. He came regularly for many months. All the people of my village decided to become Christians together. We built a church, learned how to worship God, were baptized and are following the Christian way. We want all our relatives to become Christians too. It is a good religion. If you call us we will come and teach you. I will send my son who has learned much of the Bible. Do not delay. The Bible says: Now is the day of salvation. All Chokosi are becoming Christian."

As villages requested instruction, their names would be broadcast. Deaths, sicknesses, recoveries and news would also be broadcast. Baptisms would be announced over the radio and attended by thousands. A constant stream of tapes would be sent to Elwa in Liberia for beaming out to this one small segment in all Africa which speaks Chokosi. As the dear heart language came in over the air and the Chokosi tribesmen recognized the voices of their relatives, how intently they would listen. Bible teaching and sermons, hymns, and passages to memorize in Chokosi could be broadcast for use by new congregations.

This high degree of specificity, (and remember, specific needs are all that exist. General needs are a myth) might reasonably be expected to shorten drastically the time needed to win a tribe to the Christian life. In the old days it took decades to spread the Gospel through half a population.

Today, why not harness radio to specific homogeneous units and Christianize them, affecting a radical transformation of their lives, in a few years. True, radio would only supplement the living and present deacons and elders, preachers and Bible teachers. These would have to be created both on the ground and through the air.

I have used an illustration from the world of radio, but literature, too, has much to gain by seeking out receptive homogeneous units of the population where a Christward march is on, and furthering that one march in every way.

III. The third basic principle is that conglomerate churches have difficulty communicating the faith whereas one-people churches grow much more healthily. Where converts one-by-one are pried out several social units and added to the Lord, there conglomerate churches arise. Their members come from many societies. To use a Chicago frame of reference, some are Puerto Ricans, some Swedish, some Irish, some Black, some rich, some poor, some highly educated and many illiterate. This kind of a church is born with a weak physique. It requires much care to survive and reproduces with difficulty, if at all.

In contrast, churches that grow by the people movement mode (one-people churches) have a more robust physique and can grow both more rapidly and more soundly. What is the people movement mode? Let me give you a considered definition: A people movement occurs when, within one people, a series of groups, each comprising perhaps five families and perhaps fifty, jointly decide to become Christians, while continuing on in their ancestral homes, earn their living in time-honored ways, and remaining in effective contact with their unconverted relatives; and when these unconverted, across the years after suitable instruction in the Christian religion, by similar group decisions, declare for Christ renounce all other gods, and become

Christians. Thus over the decades large and strong denominations arise often numbering hundreds of thousands.

Such people movements have occurred in all the continents and most countries of the world. One thinks immediately of Tzeltals of Mexico, Chilean Pentecostals, Javanese Moslems, Ethiopian Wallamos and Kambattas, Kikuyus of Kenya, Malas and Madigas of India, and hundreds of others.

The point to remember is that conglomerate churches grow slowly: people movement churches have the ability to grow soundly and rapidly. To understand what I am saying, in case the concept is new to you, you should study Bridges of God, which is the definitive book describing the Conglomerate Church and the People Movement Church.

I regret to say that most missions and denominations at present are pressing forward by the "one-by-one against the current" method of propagating the Gospel. Their church planting therefore proceeds hesitantly in low gear. Most literature also, I suspect, partly because it is prepared for the present missionary force, and indeed by it, usually conceives 'becoming Christian' solely in the one-by-one fashion. Hence much if not most literature is geared to slow hesitant growth.

Let us get at the matter by asking does the Christian literature you know expect one-by-one or family-by-family and group-by-group conversion? Literature will generally get what it expects. Does Christian literature quote those passages of Scripture which, superficially viewed at any rate, seem to require isolated individual action? Or does literature quote those many passages where the household pattern prevails? If one goes through the book of Acts and underlines each time that a household, or a multitude, or a synagogue community, or large parts of each of these units became Christian, he soon sees how completely "group action" was ordinary procedure in the New Testament Church. When God took a people out of Egypt, He took twelve

tribes - not individuals but tribes. When the synagogue at Berea turned to Christian faith, practically the whole community turned together.

Do the writers of our Christian literature know the people movement mode of becoming Christian, know how biblical it is, quote the Bible in describing it, and sometimes subtly and sometimes openly plead that readers move by social units into the glorious liberty of the sons of God? Do readers of Christian literature learn of many converts who have accepted Christ with their loved ones? Or does Christian literature convey the impression that to become Christian one must always break away from his family and act in anti-social ways? Does Christian literature encourage the conversion of odd balls and rebels and those who are already at outs with their clans and families? Or does Christian literature constantly set before men the desirability of acting in concert with loved ones. While, of course, stating clearly that if loved ones, after being wooed for months or years, will not become Christian together, the one who has deep Christian conviction must act alone, while using every way open to him to keep affectionately related to his as yet unconvinced family members.

Conclusion

Many other principles influence church growth. When career missionaries studying at the Fuller School of Missions, gain reasonable proficiency in recognizing and applying these principles, we say that they have gained "church growth eyes". It takes able missionaries several months to unlearn inadequate ways of seeing the task of missions and to get these 'eyes'.

Once they have them, they think biblically and realistically about propagating the Gospel. They can communicate the Gospel more effectively. They become better stewards of the grace of God. They intuitively determine priorities apportion budgets more suitably. They see roadblocks more clearly

and find ways around them more quickly. Opportunities are more swiftly recognized and developed. Such missionaries write more effective tracts, articles, stories, news items and letters. In short, they have married church growth theory to the preparation of Christian literature.