



STATEMENT DC-248

VIEWPOINT

**When Communers Become Consumers:
Church-Growth Rules That Could Be Making Yours Sick**

by Greg Laurie

Once I had a friend — I'll call him Bill — who worked out everyday at the gym. When we got together, he liked to flex his bicep and say, "Greg, feel this!" Bill's muscles were rock hard.

Then one day I heard terrible news. Bill had died of a heart attack. Even though he appeared robust and powerful, his heart was diseased. Inwardly, as it turned out, Bill was a weakling.

I keep Bill in mind when I think about the church today. Outwardly everything can look promising. A ministry may appear to be going very well. Yet the inside reality can be another story. What makes a church body grow big doesn't necessarily make it grow healthy.

The past two decades have witnessed a dramatic increase in the number of large churches, including "megachurches" (congregations of 1,000 or more), around the country. As a result of pastoring a large congregation, I'm frequently asked about our success at Harvest Christian Fellowship. What kind of church-growth formula do we follow? Can what we do at Harvest be applied to any church, anywhere, with similar results?

I understand these questions and the motivations behind them. Pastors would rather preach to people than to open spaces. And let's face it, something would be terribly wrong if Christians weren't interested in seeing churches grow. But it's time to take a hard look at what church growth means.

In a recent article entitled "The Myth of Church Growth" featured in *Current Thoughts and Trends*, David Dunlap cites some troubling statistics. For example, during the very time megachurches have sprouted across the landscape, the proportion of Americans who claim to be "born again" has remained a constant 32 percent. According to Dunlap, growth isn't coming from conversions but from transfers — up to 80 percent of all growth taking place today. He goes on to quote C. Peter Wagner, one of the leading spokesmen for the church-growth movement, who admits, "I don't think there is anything intrinsically wrong with the church growth principles we've developed...yet somehow they don't seem to work."

I would suggest that one reason they don't work is because they tend to approach church as if it were a business. For example, some church growth experts are telling pastors their "customers" no longer attend to commune with God,

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but to “consume” a personal or family service. In a recent survey of 1,000 church attenders, respondents were asked, “Why does the church exist?” According to 89 percent, the church’s purpose was “to take care of my family’s and my spiritual needs.” Only 11 percent said the purpose of the church is “to win the world for Jesus Christ.”

These attitudes concern me and many other observers deeply. A business-driven response may make things only worse. In the long run, if we train consumers instead of communers, we’ll end up with customers instead of disciples. It might fill up an auditorium, but it will never turn the world upside down for Christ.

The last thing I want to do is discourage any person or ministry, or cause division. We must be careful about limiting the ways God can work; but we also need to be aware of how our strategies — even well-intentioned, statistically valid ones — can actually take us off course.

Allow me to suggest how certain popular church-growth “rules” can put a church’s health at risk when slightly misapplied or taken to extremes.

Risky Rule #1: If it brings people in, it pleases God.

Recently I attended a pastor’s gathering where many participants expressed frustration with the lack of numerical growth in their churches. One pastor said to me, “My feeling is, whatever works, and if it pleases God, that is what I want to do.”

I understood his good intentions, but I couldn’t agree with him. “You know, I don’t want to be nit-picky,” I said, “but I really have to differ with you. It’s not whatever works; it is whatever is pleasing to God. Period.”

Why? Because if it’s pleasing to God, it will work.

If there was ever a church growth plan that did work, it was the one the early Christians used. Talk about numbers. Talk about effectiveness. This church exploded. Why? Because they knew why they were here on earth and what they were supposed to do.

A careful reading of Acts 2:42-47 shows that the early church didn’t make bigger and better their business. Instead, they focused on five priorities: worship, prayer, evangelism, learning, and loving. The passage ends with the words, “And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved” (KJV). The first church didn’t have a problem with growth because God took care of the growth as they took care of honoring His principles.

Church growth is ultimately God’s business, not ours to control. Our commission is to live out the gospel individually and whole-heartedly in community. Then, in keeping with God’s will, “the Lord added to the church daily” will become the success story of our church. Not every pastor will necessarily have a “megachurch,” but he will have a growing one.

Risky Rule #2: The less confrontive or overt the gospel message, the better.

One positive aspect of the recent growth movement is the emphasis on getting nonbelievers to come to church. I’m concerned, however, that in a sincere effort to get their churches to grow, some pastors are exchanging entertainment for exhortation and gimmicks for the gospel.

We recently conducted a survey at our church and found that over 40 percent of those who attended had become Christians at one of our services. If people walk away from our services with a good feeling but no idea who Jesus is, I know we have really missed the boat.

Graham Scroggie said compromise is what “prompts us to be silent when we ought to speak for fear of offending.” Of course, drama, videos, music, and other media used to communicate Christian faith in churches today aren’t

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compromises by themselves. Yet we must be sure that gimmicks don't take the place of the gospel. Let's be sure we are actually proclaiming the whole gospel — including sin, judgment, and salvation.

Risky Rule #3: Find out what your church is hungry for and feed it to them.

People and churches develop an appetite for what they are accustomed to being fed. A church with a steady diet of feel-good sermonettes in place of solid teaching from Scripture might eventually grow to become a large congregation — but it will be weak and immature.

You could easily conclude that many congregants want the church to be light and hassle-free. No heavy meals or five-course messages. But just because people have developed an appetite for empty calories doesn't mean their bodies have no need for nutritious meals.

When our two boys were younger, they didn't understand why my wife, Cathe, and I wouldn't let them exist on a steady diet of Hostess Twinkies and Ding-dongs. Nevertheless, we insisted on a balanced diet. Why? Because the boys' appetites didn't feed their real, long-term hungers.

There's a reason Scripture tells pastors to "devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching" (1 Tim. 4:13). Whether they always feel it or not, human beings have a deep need to know the meaning of life and the reason for their existence. The answers people need can be found only in God's Word and in a living relationship with Jesus, "the bread of life" (John 6:35).

Risky Rule # 4: Target your church to a particular demographic.

Despite their diversity, the believers of the early church maintained a love and unity so powerful that they enjoyed the favor of all (Acts 2:47). Who wouldn't want to join in on such a love feast? As a result, their numbers exploded and thousands came to Christ.

Nevertheless, one trend in church growth is the attempt to target churches to a particular niche of "consumers." You might call these designer churches. Every decision has a particular "consumer" in mind — Gen-Xers, executives, surfers, Boomers, and so on.

Now, there's nothing wrong with trying to find ways to reach out to a specific segment of society and make a connection or with using common interests as a springboard for the gospel. Yet we need to be cautious about mistaking our circles of comfort for our calling. Philip went to an Ethiopian court official (Acts 8); Peter went to a Roman centurion named Cornelius (Acts 10); Paul went to a Philippian businesswoman (Acts 16). Each one of those contacts was instrumental in helping to spread Christianity around the known world.

A problem with catering only to a certain group of people is that we miss out on the great power and beauty of diversity. Something exciting happens when we walk into a church and see different ages, cultures, tastes, and races with one thing in common — Jesus Christ. That is a truly loving church. And that church will grow.

I believe the church in our generation has a unique opportunity to have an impact on the world. God has opened doors, and we can use this opportunity to get the gospel out and turn the world upside down for Jesus Christ.

As we do, we should remember that God's church is not a business. It may grow larger to some extent when it's treated like one; but it will probably not be God-centered, nor will it have a good prognosis for living out that dynamic first-century example. Ultimately, God's church is based on heavenly, "upside-down" principles that nearly always go against the world's grain.

We simply need to do the Lord's work the way God has taught us in Scripture, as demonstrated for us in the Book of Acts. Clearly and systematically, we need to present "the words of eternal life" (John 6:68). That's how God will bring

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change and growth to His church, and that's how the church will change the world.

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