

CHAPTER 1

A THEOLOGY OF CHURCH GROWTH

A denomination that lacks a consensus about the theological purpose of the church becomes compulsive in its efforts to be busy in much activity. It dares not stop to ask itself about the value of its activities, because it has lost confidence that it has the answer.¹

Denominational analysts Will Willimon and Robert Wilson consider that an accurate characterization of United Methodism. They observe that there are “scores of congregations and their pastors who have become debilitated because of unfocused, unrealistic, unbiblical understandings—or should we say, biblical misunderstandings—about the nature and purpose of the Christian church;”² and they write, “When we lack a clear notion of what we are supposed to be doing as a church, we attempt to do everything.”³

To some degree this is the concern of Hadaway and Roozen. They write:

The most fundamental problem for the ebbing mainstream is the lack of compelling reasons for people to participate. It is no secret that many mainstream churches, and all mainstream denominations, have lost confidence in who they are and why they are.⁴

Diversity is beautiful when we speak of personalities, cultures, talents, gifts, experiences and races. It is an affirmation of our great Creator, and it offers an otherwise elusive gift, namely, perspective. However, when we talk about the central focus of any movement of people, there must be clarity of vision and certainty of conviction. Otherwise, purposeful movement is impossible. If a group in its interaction focuses on the margins, on how they differ, they accomplish no common goal outside their own entertainment and possible enlightenment. Teamwork, on the other hand, requires something tangible to which the team is committed.

¹ Willimon and Wilson, *Rekindling the Flame*, 27.

² *Ibid.*, 25.

³ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁴ Hadaway and Roozen, *Rerouting the Protestant Mainstream*, 75.

What then is the Christian team committed to? What is the vision or focus for followers of Christ?

Old Testament Roots

Followers of Christ embrace, as much as they are able, the vision of Jesus. Critical to Jesus' vision and work were the Hebrew Scriptures. He held them sacred. Jesus declared that heaven and earth will pass away before a letter of the law is irrelevant (Matt. 5:17-20). He told Sadducees, who believed in no resurrection, that their mistaken beliefs resulted from their lack of understanding the Hebrew Scriptures and the power of God (Mark 12:24). He told threatening Jews, "The Scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35). Moreover, He exemplified one who believes those affirmations by continually shaping His life and work in view of what those Scriptures teach and affirm.

The mandate for church growth and its priority are rooted in those Scriptures and especially in the account of our creation. In the first chapter of Genesis, the Scripture methodically offers a purposeful and progressive order of God's creative activity. At creation's climax, God creates humanity. Like the other elements populating this world, we are creatures of God; far more, we were made as reflections of God. God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule... So God created man in His own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female He created them" (Gen. 1:26-27). It is apparent that the world was carefully prepared for the presence of humanity and that God made us to spread over the earth (Gen. 1:28), to work and to care for His creation (beginning with the Garden of Eden, Gen. 2:15), and as people formed in His likeness, make His presence visible wherever we go. Both Isaiah and Habakkuk later prophesy that one day the earth will be filled with the knowledge of God much like the waters cover the sea (Isa. 11:9 and Hab. 2:14). These prophecies herald the restoration and realization of God's initial vision for humanity to make His presence visible everywhere on the earth.

G. Herbert Livingston notes that the idea of "image of God" appears in some of the Mesopotamian literature contemporary to the earliest Hebrew writings. For the Hebrews' neighbors, "image of God" was exclusively reserved for deified kings or idols that both represented and were empowered by individual deities.⁵ In radical, even revolutionary contrast, the Bible asserts that such a relationship, dominion and power is neither limited to

⁵ G. Herbert Livingston, *The Pentateuch in Its Cultural Environment* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1987), 141.

royalty nor bestowed on any creation or creatures other than human beings.⁶ All people, rich and poor, great and small, male and female, are formed in the image of God and are thus related to God. They carry a special likeness to God and exert unique power over the earth, which is given to them as their dominion. *The world is not the domain of the powerful; it is the domain of the people.*

In contrast to contemporary parallels of Mesopotamian belief that elevate individuals like the Dalai Lama or the Emperor of Japan to god-like status, the Bible teaches that we human beings all are “gods,” that we all are “children of the Most High,” even though we die as “mere men” (Psa. 82:6,7 and John 10:34). We have a special relationship, even a partnership with the Ruler of all creation. In Genesis, chapter five, that relationship is seen more clearly.

When God created man, He made him in the likeness of God. He created them male and female and blessed them. And when they were created He called them “man.” When Adam had lived 130 years, he had a son in his own likeness, in his own image; and he named him Seth. (Gen. 5:1-3)

Unmistakably, the Bible, using the language of “likeness” and “image,” teaches that we are God’s children. The context of this passage is the genealogical record of the peoples populating the world; and as John Sailhamer notes, the language indicates that we all share a common father in our Creator.⁷ The Apostle Paul affirms this as he tells residents of Athens, “since we are God’s offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone” (Acts 17:29).

In the beginning, a close, filial partnership with God was not a theological belief; it was human experience. In the third chapter of Genesis, God strolls through the garden in the cool of the day (Gen. 3:8-9). He is a father calling to His likeness, to His child, Adam, “Where are you?” Adam and Eve experienced a God who walked on the turf they knew as home. They experienced a God who called to them and visited with them. Innocence and intimacy were two characteristics of the relationship they had with God and each other. They were naked and felt no shame (Gen. 2:25). Their vision was innocent. Like a three-year-old playing in a bathtub with mother looking on, that first couple knew nothing of the dangers lurking about. They simply enjoyed the companionship of their Creator. Their life flowed along day after day

⁶ *Ibid.*, 141.

⁷ John Sailhamer, “Genesis,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gabelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 70.

in trust. Their partnership with God and each other was unhindered by any felt need to conceal or restrain themselves. That is innocence and intimacy.

Intimacy is lost, however, when innocence leaves. Fear arises and spawns acts of concealment. Something happened in the garden where God strolled with His children. His children did not grow up. They already were grown. Something robbed them of trust. Something stole their innocence. Something opened their eyes so that they saw things from a radically different perspective, because one day God strolled through the garden and found His children hiding (Gen. 3:8-9). Sensing something wrong, God sought out His fearful and hiding children. God called to them, “Where are you?” That call is an evangelistic cry. The mandate for church growth is rooted in this searching cry. This cry would become the heartthrob and guiding vision of the man known as Jesus of Nazareth (Luke 19:10).

In the Garden of Eden, God planted all kinds of trees that were attractive and that bore fruit pleasing to eat. Only two, however, are named in the Bible: “the tree of life” and “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (Gen. 2:9). Only the latter was forbidden (Gen. 2:16-17); yet, this tree became the focus of Eve’s attention. Satan embodied a snake and attacked Eve’s trust in her Father. When Adam and Eve acted in mistrust, eating fruit from the tree of the knowledge, “the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked” (Gen. 3:7). They were enlightened. They acquired a moral vision. Their former vision allowed them to enjoy their walk with God through trusting eyes. The new vision propelled them to hide in fear as they viewed their behavior as good or evil. It robbed them of trust.

Ted Haggard comments on this new vision. He writes:

When the Bible says that the tree of knowledge of good and evil had fruit that was desirable for gaining wisdom, it is obviously talking about more than fruit. The fruit that Eve partook could have actually been knowledge. Thus, for our purposes in contrasting the two trees, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is a worldview, a system of thought, a set of ideas or values that we wrongly think will “open our eyes” and make us “more like God.” Without a doubt, different knowledge produces different outcomes... Knowledge always produces fruit of some kind. The fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was pleasant to consume and looked fine, and truly was desirable because it appeared to be “wisdom,” but consuming this wisdom wasn’t as positive as Eve believed it would be. She thought it would open her eyes and make her more like God. She trusted her own misguided judgment instead of trusting God’s Word. As a result, she shared the knowledge of good

and evil with her husband and their eyes were opened, and both of them were poisoned and began to die.⁸

The knowledge of good and evil is moral knowledge. It is the knowledge of a judge. Genesis asserts that we were driven from the garden and forfeited eternal life not because God was mad, not as punishment for disobedience, but because our moral vision made us competitors.

And the Lord God said, “The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever.” (Gen. 3:22)

Some misread St. Paul in Romans 5:12-19 and believe he teaches that death came as punishment for disobedience. Paul teaches that death is a *consequence* of Adam’s disobedience, and eternal life is a *consequence* of Jesus’ obedience (Rom. 5:18-19). But the chains of consequence often contain more than one link. What Jesus did in obedience is as relevant as the fact he obeyed. The role of the cross is critical to Paul and other New Testament writers (see Rom. 5:6-10, 1 Pet. 3:18, Heb. 9:24-28). Similarly, there is not just one link to the consequence of death in Paul’s thinking. Paul notes that sin entered the world through Adam’s trespass of God’s command and then death through that sin (Rom. 5:12-14). Thus Paul notes a chain of consequences. What is more, all were not guilty of trespass (Rom. 5:14) for there was no law to break until Moses. Yet all sinned and suffered judgment (Rom. 5:12, 16). Paul’s language neither refutes nor reinterprets the words spoken by God in Genesis 3.⁹

God did not want his children to be damned with a competitive, mistrusting, moral vision forever. We were made to be partners, and partnerships cannot be sustained in distrust. Estrangement is inevitable. Estrangement was a condition God would not live with eternally. Death was a merciful judgment not merely because it would end the harm and pain inherent in a vision that mistrusts and competes with God; it was merciful, ironically, because it offered a

⁸ Haggard, *The Life-giving Church*, 55-56.

⁹ The Greek term that Paul uses for sin in this discussion is *hamartia*. It does not refer to breaking a command or doing evil. At root, it means “missing the mark.” Death reigned from Adam to Moses because all “sinned,” because all missed the mark. That is consistent with the assertion in Genesis that death was a result of our competing, moral vision.

point when such a destructive vision, and the life and behavior flowing from it, would cease. Incredibly, for the author of life, that cessation, death, opened the possibility of redemption.¹⁰

Haggard notes that the fruit, the moral vision, from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil leads to mean-spirited, moralistic church life. People operate as umpires judging one another rather than as lifeguards assisting each other in a saving relationship with Christ.¹¹ This moralistic vision may explain why some conservative churches, despite their evangelistic convictions, are less likely to grow than their liberal counterparts.¹² These conservatives focus on what Christians should do rather than on how they may best help people come to Christ. They focus on right and wrong, rather than on a life-giving relationship with Jesus Christ. They teach and act on the vision that comes from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. In doing so, they find themselves missing the point of Jesus' teaching. Jesus said, "For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him" (John 3:17).

Paul taught that reprobate thinking about right and wrong results from rejection of God (Rom. 1:18-32). Moral ignorance is due to the hardening of hearts to God, but life and truth are in a relationship with Jesus (Eph. 4:17-21). The antidote to such thinking is not ethical arguments, but regeneration and renewal in Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 6:9-11; Titus 3:3-7). Jesus claimed, "I am the way, the truth and the life" (John 14:6). He declared, "You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life" (John 5:39-40).

Donald McGavran posed a critical question for the Christian community in his foundational work, *Understanding Church Growth*: "Is to be a Christian an ethical achievement—or a redemptive relationship to Jesus Christ?"¹³ He observed:

Dedicated Christians in disciplined populations, where most persons consider themselves in some way Christian, for the most part think exclusively in terms

¹⁰ In the Old Testament, death was important to redemption and humanity's relationship with God. Not only was death a common sentence for many sins, it was the preferred means of sinful people relating to God beginning with Abel's sacrifice from his flock and later codified in the Mosaic covenant where the blood of animals was spilled.

¹¹ Ted Haggard, *Primary Purpose: Making it hard for people to go to hell from your city* (Orlando: Creation House, 1995), 109-111. Assisting people in a relationship with Christ does not preclude church discipline. In the Old and New Testaments, discipline is exercised with a radical dependence upon God for the purpose of strengthening people's relationship with God.

¹² Hadaway and Roozen, *Rerouting the Protestant Mainstream*, 106.

¹³ Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 3rd edition, rev. and ed. C. Peter Wagner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 122.

of “What should Christians do?” rather than “How do non-Christian populations accept Christ?”¹⁴

Churches with that attitude have gravitated toward the forbidden tree. Many years prior to McGavran, Martin Luther weighed in on the subject. He declared, “Morality is the concern of lawyers, judges, and hangmen. My concern is your God relation.”¹⁵

Morality is not irrelevant to the human condition. Many of the teachings in the Law, Prophets and Writings, which we call the Old Testament, are moral in nature.¹⁶ Similarly, Jesus and His apostles were never morally ambivalent. Jesus taught about good and evil. Yet he related these concepts to his Father again and again. He called his followers the light of the world and said their good deeds would bring praise to their heavenly Father (Matt. 5:14-16). He exhorted his hearers to love their enemies and pray for those who persecute them that they may be children of their heavenly Father (Matt. 5:43-48). Indeed, he spoke of good and bad eyes and their influence on our judgment and performance of good and evil: “If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!” (Matt. 6:22-23). Accordingly, he taught that good and evil deeds are related to people’s nature (Matt. 12:33-37). He warned of false prophets and said that a tree can be known by its fruit, good or bad (Matt. 7:15-20). He spoke of God’s goodness in comparison to ours (Matt. 7:11) and challenged a man’s thinking by telling him that only God is really good (Matt. 19:16-22, Mark 10:17-21). Moreover, he spoke of the kingdom of heaven as a wedding banquet where the initial invitations were rejected and the hall was populated by good and bad people wearing proper wedding clothes (Matt. 22:1-14). The concern for Jesus in all these things, was how people relate to God. Indeed, the thrust of the Bible’s witness, in its whole and in its parts, is a restored, trusting, intimate companionship with our Creator and Father.

In every case, this is true. In the life of the Patriarchs, the issue is a trusting relationship with God. In the Law of Moses, the focus is on a trusting companionship with

¹⁴ Ibid., 174.

¹⁵ Hunter, *Church for the Unchurched*, 38.

¹⁶ Morality is laced throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. The Hebrew term for evil *ra'* (from *the tree of the knowledge of good and evil*) appears 667 times. Good or the Hebrew *tob* appears 563 times. It is critical to understand that the vision coming from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is *not* a **controlling concept** in the Bible. The tree and the vision are not mentioned outside Genesis 3. However, the event described in Genesis 3 is a **seminal concept**. It provides the context for all that follows. In other words, it is meant to open eyes for understanding as to what human beings are doing and how the Creator is responding. Thus, the story in Genesis 3 steers eyes away from *ethics* as the central concern to the issue of *God-relation*. That is the focus in the narrative and teaching of the Old Testament.

God. The call of Israel's judges and prophets to the descendants of Abraham is not so much to an ethical standard but to an obedient, trusting relationship with their Creator and Father (Isa. 8:20, Jer. 9:13, Dan. 9:11).

The Old Testament introduces us to two visions that are incompatible with each other and vie for dominance: the vision of relationship or the vision of morality, the eyes of a companion or the eyes of a judge, the posture of a lifeguard or the posture of an umpire. It shows us an intimate partnership that was broken by the latter vision. It unveils the heinous harm that competitive vision unleashes in the world. It reveals a God who works through the sentence of death. It uncovers a God bent on restoring His children, recovering that partnership and removing that vision. It discloses a God who raises up and leads patriarchs, judges, prophets, kings, peasants, indeed, men and women in an unfolding plan to recover what was lost in the garden.

New Testament and Other Historical Examples

Christ's Mandate and Model

Just as God breathed spirit and life into dust-formed Adam, God breathed into the womb of a teenage girl named Mary. The Spirit of God overshadowed Mary; and consequently, Jesus was born the "last Adam" (1 Cor. 15:45-50). This last Adam was not preoccupied with a vision of good and evil but instead with the will of His heavenly Father. At age twelve He was lost from His parents for three days, while they visited Jerusalem and then began their trip home. Jesus spent those days in His "Father's house," the temple. Instead of pondering the rightness or wrongness of His lack of communication with His parents, He was surprised that they would not know He was there (Luke 2:41-50). His vision was dominated by partnership with God. At age twenty-nine or thirty (Luke 3:23), Jesus experienced a significant event. He submitted to the ministry of John the Baptist, and while he was praying after His baptism, the Spirit came upon Him. He heard a voice from heaven say, "You are my Son, whom I love; with You I am well pleased" (Luke 3:21-22). With His identity reinforced and "full of the Holy Spirit," He was led away by that Spirit into the desert for forty days (Luke 4:1-2). There He would face the one who had stripped Adam of his innocence. While weakened and hungry, He would hear the voice that attacked Eve's trust in God and eventually poisoned her vision.

Satan attacked Jesus' identity. "If you are the Son of God," he would bait. But Jesus refused to go along with those challenges. He refused to act in doubt; He instead focused His

vision and fixed His trust each time on a truth His Father had given Him in the Hebrew Scriptures. Satan even showed Jesus the kingdoms of the world and promised them to Him if He would worship Satan. It was a seemingly painless and tempting alternative to what He might face, but Jesus stuck with His vision and trust in His Father (Matt. 4:1-11 and Luke 4:3-13).

From that time forward Jesus, in partnership with his father, went on the attack, destroying the deception of Satan. He proclaimed, “The time is come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news” (Mark 1:15). In so doing, Jesus told His hearers that God’s unfolding plan now included them in a decisive moment. The rule of their loving Father was near. It was time for them to repent and believe this news for they needed liberation. Seizing control of the vocal chords of their victims, demons screamed and disrupted His presentations (Mark 1:21-26, 34). Jesus would silence the demons and expel them from the individuals they afflicted. Moreover, He healed different kinds of diseases using no standard method. Out of 1,257 narrative verses in the four gospels, 484 recount stories of Jesus’ ministry of healing. That is 38.5 percent.¹⁷ Healing and miracles were not so much proof of Jesus’ lordship (for they were also the work of Jesus’ disciples) as the inauguration of God’s liberating rule. God’s kingdom was being unveiled through proclamation and demonstration.¹⁸

Peter summarized the ministry of Jesus in his gospel presentation to the Gentile Cornelius. He declared:

You know what has happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached—how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how He went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him. (Acts 10:37-38)

Peter saw both Jesus’ word and works liberating people from the bondage and affliction of the devil. This was accomplished because of Jesus’ anointing with the Spirit. It was the Spirit’s power rather than the irresistible logic of “reason” or the winsomeness of His personality that liberated people. Indeed, Jesus claims that no one can come to Him unless the Father draws him (John 6:44, 61-65). This is true because the devil’s influence was so

¹⁷ John Wimber with Kevin Springer, *Power Healing* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 41.

¹⁸ Wimber, *Power Evangelism*, 5-6.

pervasive. Through various subordinate spirits,¹⁹ he at times dominated attitudes, relationships, weather patterns, physical conditions and government systems.²⁰ Indeed, Jesus gives Peter a troubling view of the human condition. He tells Peter that Peter is a rock on which Christ will build His church. He promises further that the gates of hell will not prevail against the church. Although Jesus does not elaborate as to what is locked in or out by those gates, His language elsewhere in the gospel makes it clear who is dominating the terrain. He does not dispute Satan's claim of authority over the world (Luke 4:5-7). He calls Satan the prince of this world (John 12:31). The gates of hell must be thrust open, the people and the terrain liberated, and the prince of this world driven out.

Jesus reveals that the human condition is even more dire than being enslaved by demons. Our fate is linked with our slave masters and their judgment. Christ teaches that the consequences of our vision and choices are torturous and eternal. He uses the term "Gehenna" (translated hell) six times in the gospel of Matthew alone to warn people of judgment (outside of Jesus, "hell" is not used in that manner in the New Testament), and he speaks of judgment and torment with the terms "weeping and gnashing teeth" six more times in that gospel.

Critical to liberating people from such enslavement and destiny are "the keys of the kingdom of heaven." Those keys were presented to Peter. They were presented with the following promise. Things on earth that he binds will be bound in heaven. Things that he looses will be unleashed in heaven (Matt. 16:17-19).

Rather than dwell on the details of this picture and the church's discussion of it in the past centuries and especially in the last decade, its tenor reveals a clash of two kingdoms and a church, which continues the liberating ministry that Peter described to Cornelius. John Wimber writes:

We are thrust into the middle of a battle with Satan: it's a tug-of-war and the prize is the souls of men and women. Satan's captivity of men and women has many facets, but denying them final salvation is his primary goal. But there are other types of dominion: bondage to sin, physical and emotional problems,

¹⁹ Peter attributed all Jesus' deliverance ministry, the freeing of the Gadarene demoniac from a legion of demons (Mark 5:1-20) for example, to being liberated from the power of the devil (Acts 10:38). All demonic activity was attributed to Satan's dominating rule.

²⁰ Job's travails with storms, raiding parties and illness are attributed to Satan (Job 1-2). These notions are reinforced as Jesus rebukes a violent storm (Mark 4:35-41), heals a stooped-over woman who was "bound by Satan" (Luke 13:10-16), and tells His politically powerful captors that "this is your hour—when darkness reigns" (Luke 22:51).

social disruption, and demonic affliction. Our mission is to rescue those who have been taken captive as a result of Adam's fall.²¹

The curious thing is that liberation is not totally accomplished when a demon is driven out or when the message of the kingdom is believed. The competitive, mistrusting, deceptive vision that dominates the reflexes of humanity, the habitual thoughts and feelings of God's estranged children, must die. Death was always critical to restoration. Christ's death gathered all the impact and influence of humanity's unbelieving eyes and destroyed it. Our debts to God were removed as Christ suffered the judgment from our harm-filled ways. Our obligation to the competitive vision was removed because our food, drink and very life were now not in a wisdom but in a Person. Our innocence was reestablished because we would begin life again as newly established children of God. As God raised Jesus from death and poured out through Jesus the same Spirit on His followers, the believers' destiny was inextricably tied with Christ's. He was the "firstborn among many brothers" (Rom. 8:29). The gospel call was to faith in Christ. Christ called some of His hearers to "follow Him" (Matt. 4:19, 8:22, 19:21). Christ called His followers to "believe in Him" (John 6:35, 11:25-26, 12:44-46). Although Christ did not directly claim to be "the tree of life," his many claims certainly suggest it. Ezekiel's prophecy about a river of life (Ezek. 47:1-12) looks very close to the picture of "the tree of life" in Revelation 22.²² The prophecy was remembered and reenacted at the Feast of Tabernacles. It was at this feast that Jesus called loudly, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him" (John 7:37-38). It is not a stretch to say that Jesus calls his listeners away from "the tree of knowledge" vision to "the tree of life" vision, which is a vision focused on him. Christ revealed that He was the living vine (John 15:1-8). He was the bread for the human family. He was the slain lamb, the liberating Savior. He was Lord with all rightful authority.

All the gospel writers, in relaying Christ's final instructions to His believers after His resurrection, clearly convey a two-fold mandate. Believers first were commanded to "go and

²¹ Wimber, *Power Evangelism*, 14.

²² "The tree of life" appears in the Bible three times in Genesis (Gen. 2:9, 3:22, 24) and four times in Revelation (Rev. 2:7, 22:2, 14, 19). Revelation 22 describes a river of life flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb. The tree of life stands on each side of the river, and its leaves are for the healing of the nations. The Jewish community celebrated a very similar picture. Ezekiel prophesied about a great life-giving river that comes from under the threshold of the temple. Its waters produce fruit trees, with leaves that heal, on both banks (Ezek. 47:1-12).

make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:19-20), “go into all the world and proclaim the good news to all creation” (Mark 16:15-18), preach “repentance and forgiveness of sins” in His name to all nations (Luke 24:47-49), go in the same manner that Christ himself was sent by His Father (John 20:21-23), be His witnesses “to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

However, there was a second part. They were to go after they received the power that comes with the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8). They were to wait until they had been “clothed with power from on high” (Luke 24:49). They were to welcome the Holy Spirit (John 20:22). They were to go with the presence of Christ (Matt. 28:20), proclaiming the message of Christ and performing the wonders of Christ (Mark 16:17-18,²³ John 14:12).

In a relationship that is intimate with Christ and our Heavenly Father, the church, counseled and empowered by the Spirit, is to go into battle with spiritual forces of evil, to unlock the gates that hold God’s alienated children back and to disciple these captives in a new vision through which people experience the liberation and fellowship of the risen and anointed Lord Jesus.

The Early Church Pattern

Liberation at times erupted with force for the apostolic church. At other times it came through exhausting wrestling matches. The vignettes in the book of Acts reveal a church utterly dependent on the Holy Spirit, urgently mobilized in Christ’s mission to liberate those near and those far away, and violently engaged with enslaving powers of evil. Wimber writes:

Any system or force that must be overcome for the gospel to be believed is cause for a power encounter [italics his]. In each case, unbelief is the evil that is conquered in a power encounter. In fact, unbelief is the kingdom of Satan, albeit a far less visible form of him than demons or illness. When we experience the Spirit and are able to convert unbelievers, we are the vehicles through which the kingdom of God defeats the kingdom of Satan.²⁴

Cognizant of the battle, the first believers devoted themselves to prayer as they awaited the clothing that had been promised them, the anointing of the Spirit (Acts 1:12-14). When the Spirit came on the day of Pentecost, 3,000 converts were added to the original 120 (Acts 1:15, 2:41). The means of liberation involved both proclamation by Peter and demonstration of God’s involvement and power as the Spirit altered the believers in disposition and

²³ Although the earliest manuscripts of Mark’s gospel do not include the verses that follow Mark 16:8, these additional verses offer us valuable insight into what the early church believed Jesus commanded of them. Moreover, in conjunction with other Scriptures, it offers us today a greater understanding of the commission Christ gave.

²⁴ Wimber, *Power Evangelism*, 16.

conviction, and performed wonders through them. Although what happened at Pentecost was clearly a work of God, the liberation of unbelievers was just as clearly a work of partnership by God and those formed (and reformed!) in His likeness. The Father and His likeness, His children, were partners again. They were working together in the domain God had originally given them. They were liberating and saving His estranged and entrapped children and the terrain for which they cared.

This pattern of partnership, this synergy with the Spirit, this dualism of proclamation and demonstration fuel the growth of the church throughout the book of Acts. Wimber calls this pattern of ministry “power evangelism.” He writes:

By power evangelism I mean a presentation of the gospel that is rational but that also transcends the rational. The explanation of the gospel comes with a demonstration of God’s power through signs and wonders. Power evangelism is a spontaneous, Spirit-inspired, empowered presentation of the gospel. Power evangelism is evangelism that is preceded and undergirded by supernatural demonstrations of God’s presence.²⁵

Power evangelism is seen in Jerusalem with healing (Acts 3), subsequent anointing of the Spirit (Acts 4:31), and wonders liberating the sick and “demonized” (Acts 5:12-16). It is noted in Samaria with the ministry of Philip (Acts 8:6-8). It is reported in Lydda, Sharon and Joppa with the healing of a paralytic and the raising of a dead woman (Acts 9:32-42). It follows in unexpected fashion with the Gentiles in Caesarea (Acts 10:34-48), in Cyprus (Acts 13:4-12), in Iconium (Acts 14:1-3), in Lystra (Acts 14:8-18), in Philippi (Acts 16:16-34), and in Ephesus (Acts 19:11-20).²⁶ Even in captivity as Paul travels to Rome, this distinct pattern of evangelism is seen as he is stranded after a shipwreck on the island of Malta (Acts 28:1-10).

Don Williams comments:

The biblical worldview is consistently supernatural: nature is controlled by God. At the same time, the biblical worldview is also consistently personal. Evil, therefore, is no abstraction; it is as personal as God himself. For example, when Jesus spoke to demons, they spoke back. However, the Bible shows that while there is a continual supernatural interaction between heaven and earth, the focus is on God’s covenant relationship with us rather than on the supernatural as such. For this reason, the Bible never indulges in speculative angelology or demonology. Since biblical history is the history of

²⁵ Ibid., 35.

²⁶ Particularly regarding Ephesus, the author of Acts notes the effect of the kingdom’s demonstration when he writes, “In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power” (Acts 19:20).

salvation, angels share this history only as they serve in Yahweh's court or rebel against that court and infect the earth with wickedness.²⁷

Williams' observation is important. To understand growth in the early church, one must grasp a perspective that is alien to Western consciousness. For the church, human vision and reason was not fully autonomous. It was affected by an inherited wisdom from Adam; the interplay of angels and demons in human relationships and thus their systems, institutions, and communities; and the succor and assaults of spiritual beings in their daily experiences.²⁸ The supernatural was not some force that occasionally stuck its head out like a prairie dog that makes it home underground. It was continuously present. Heaven and earth were seamlessly connected. Miracles were not the violation of natural laws (a notion that describes physical properties in moral categories) but simply the interaction of additional personal forces with what is normally experienced. Finally, the church believed that one's vision and reason was affected by one's choices.

Even as Adam's vision was affected by his choice, so our thinking is dominated by our choices. Paul writes, "For although they knew God, they neither glorified Him as God nor gave thanks to Him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened" (Rom. 1:21). Jesus declared that people hate the light and love darkness because their deeds are evil (John 3:19-21). Their deeds affect their affections.

For all those reasons, the early church with its piety and community sought from Christ a wisdom and perspective it could not itself achieve.

Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe... It is because of him (God) that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. (1 Cor. 1:20-21, 30)

The church proclaimed this wisdom as the Spirit personally directed them and empowered them. The growth of the church, for them, was both a wonder of God and a signal to humanity (1 Cor. 1:27-29, 2 Cor. 2:14-16).

²⁷ Don Williams, *Signs, Wonders, and the Kingdom of God: a biblical guide for the reluctant skeptic*. (Ann Arbor: Servant Books, 1989), 53.

²⁸ Good examples of the interplay of these beings are personal insight and temptations.

Historical Examples

The words and works of the kingdom that were so evident with Christ and so critical to the growth of the early church continued in the 500 succeeding years in varying degrees. Justin Martyr (ca. 100-165), Irenaeus (140-203), Tertullian (ca. 160/170-215/220) Novatian (210-280), Antony (ca. 251-356), Hilarion (ca. 291-371), Macrina the Younger (ca. 328-379/380), Ambrose of Milan (ca. 339-397), Augustine of Hippo (354-430), Gregory of Tours (ca. 538-594) and Gregory the Great (540-604) all documented or experienced expulsion of demons, healing of illnesses, unusual visions, dreams or abilities as they led the Christian mission.²⁹

John Wesley mused about the dearth of these signs and wonders in his reading of Christian history. He wrote in his personal journal:

By reflecting on an odd book which I had read in this journey, *The General Delusion of Christians with Regard to Prophecy*, I was fully convinced of what I had once suspected: (1) That the Montanists, in the second and third centuries, were real, scriptural Christians; and (2) That the grand reason why the miraculous gifts were so soon withdrawn, was not only that faith and holiness were well nigh lost, but that dry, formal, orthodox men began even then to ridicule whatever gifts they had not themselves, and to decry them all as either madness or imposture.³⁰

There was an undeniable shift in Christian history to a more reason-focused approach in sharing the gospel. Nevertheless, the growth of the church in non-Christian cultures and the life of the church in “christianized cultures” are two very different issues. The call of the church is to liberate. “When you enter a town and are welcomed, eat what is set before you. Heal the sick who are there and tell them, ‘The kingdom of God is near you,’” Jesus told the seventy-two as He sent them (Luke 10:8-9).

From Constantine to present, that pattern in Luke 10 appears responsible, by and large, for the growth of the church in the West. Although in the past few centuries the influence of the Enlightenment has caused many to look skeptically at the stories of conversion (such as Constantine’s) which are integral to Christianity’s expansion, it is difficult to fathom and impossible to reproduce a purely rational process that can account for the

²⁹ Wimber, *Power Evangelism*, 156-165.

³⁰ “An Extract of the Rev. Mr. John Wesley’s Journal, Number viii” [Wed. Aug. 15, 1750], *The Works of John Wesley*, 3rd edition, Complete and Unabridged, Vol. 2. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1979), 204.

dramatic transformation and displacement of competing ideologies that church growth brought in the various cultures of the West.

The growth of the church in the United States is inextricably tied to “supernatural” activity of the Holy Spirit. Although there have been many localized expressions, which today are seen in communities like Pensacola, Modesto and Stockton, historians have been better able to observe regional and national movements such as the awakenings of the 18th and 19th centuries.

The Fulton Street Prayer Meeting that began in late September of 1857 illustrates how the Christian community has moved at various times from mere congregational growth (that changes more the location of worshipers than the number of them in a community) to church growth (that raises both the number and percentage of believers and transforms cultural life).³¹ The prayer meeting and subsequent awakening began with Jeremiah C. Lanphier, a layperson hired by a New York City congregation to do calling. Lanphier, saddened by the lack of spiritual fervor and discouraged by his inability to make a difference, prayed incessantly and felt led to begin a noon-hour prayer meeting. Placing a large placard in his congregation and passing out many handbills in the streets, he eagerly awaited the results as the noon hour arrived. No one came until 12:30. In the end, six men had come, prayed for a few minutes and left after deciding to meet again the following week. A week later 20 attended; and when a week later 40 participated, something was brewing. On Wednesday of that week, October 14th, the nation was staggered by the worst financial panic in its history. Banks closed, businesses failed, workers were let go, and a number of families scavenged for food. Hundreds began attending as the meeting now took place daily. Crowds of more than 3,000 packed the church.³² By January of 1858, the Fulton Street and at least 20 other prayer meetings in New York City were serving over 10,000 businessmen in a city of 800,000. A local newspaper carried the headline, “New York Bows in Prayer.” As newspaper headlines continued to herald this awakening, noon prayer meetings took root in other towns and cities. The pattern in Philadelphia followed that of New York with small numbers (40-60) coming on

³¹ Glen S. Gabel, “*The Place of Prayer in Spiritual Renewal*” (unpublished paper presented to the clergy of the South Dakota Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church, 1971).

³² It is clear that the panic from financial collapse was a major factor in motivating many to prayer and spiritual awareness. Yet these very “natural” events, planned and orchestrated by no human being, carry a supernatural quality in their timing and effect. Historical factors played a role in the current Argentine revival, as we will later explore, yet they do not always lead to spiritual awakening and Christian faith. George Otis, *The Twilight Labyrinth*, 136-150, has found that natural disasters and other societal traumas are often the root of resistance rather than receptivity to the gospel.

a daily basis to pray. Suddenly on March 8th, 300 showed. Two days later, 2,500 jammed a larger auditorium. Beginning March 11th, not less than 3,000 attended each day. A prayer tent was erected in May and by September, 150,000 people had prayed in that tent. The churches of the city recorded around 10,000 conversions with one denomination picking up 3,000 new members. As the awakening spread to other parts of the nation in 1858, the church in the United States recorded a 10 percent increase in its membership. The northern and southern wings of Methodism picked up 178,905 new members that year for an increase of 12 percent. Baptists gained 92,243 members, a 10 percent rise. It is estimated that 50,000 conversions took place each week at the height of this movement. Although the striking, visible aspects of this awakening disappeared with the advent of the Civil War, it is reported that 150,000 Confederate soldiers experienced conversion in the bloody conflict and by war's end, more than a third of the soldiers and officers of the Confederate Army were now professing a vital faith in Christ.³³

Pablo Deiros has written more recently about the great evangelical awakening occurring in Argentina that has impacted that country for nearly a decade and a half.³⁴ He suggests that various historical factors have played a role in the developing awakening. Argentina suffered a loss in the war over the Falklands, emerged from a violent, repressive dictatorship, and suffers deep economic problems. “Nevertheless,” he writes, “to many the decisive factor was not political, social or economic, but was, quite simply, an extraordinarily powerful move of the Holy Spirit.”³⁵ He notes that Christian unity and demonstrations of the Holy Spirit's presence and power are characteristic of this growth-producing movement.³⁶

Contemporary Models and Principles

Three Models

Observing church growth today, C. Peter Wagner notes three models of congregational life that are making inroads into their non or nominally Christian culture. The first is the *Seeker-driven* model.

³³ Gabel in the “*The Place of Prayer in Spiritual Renewal*” documented the advance and effects of this revival. He noted three distinguishing characteristic of the awakening. It was a lay movement (except for Charles Finney and a few others, ministers were on the sidelines); it was non-sectarian (“denominational differences were forgotten”); and it was a revival of prayer.

³⁴ C. Peter Wagner and Pablo Deiros, eds., *The Rising Revival: Firsthand Accounts of the Incredible Argentine Revival—And How It Can Spread throughout the World* (Ventura: Renew Books, 1998), 30.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 31-37.

The whole philosophy of ministry of the church is prioritized around the felt needs of the unchurched. Architecture, dress, scheduling, music, sermons, church activities and ministries are all designed to communicate to unbelievers. Believers are also taken care of by the church, but the ultimate success of the church is measured by its effectiveness in converting unbelievers rather than nurturing believers.³⁷

He notes that Willow Creek Community Church is the most notable of these types of congregations. Each weekend Willow Creek gathers the largest number of worshipers in the United States in services designed for non-believers.

Wagner labels the second model *Seeker-sensitive*.

This is a modified version of the seeker-driven churches in which believers and their needs are given, in most cases, a similar priority to reaching out to the unchurched. In all the activities of the church, however, a concerted effort is made to eliminate or greatly reduce elements of church life known to irritate or turn off the unchurched.³⁸

In an interview, Rick Warren described to me his congregation, Saddleback Valley Church, in Mission Viejo, California, as seeker-sensitive rather than seeker-driven.

The third model is *Power-oriented*. Wagner writes:

In these churches, the magnetism of supernatural power, both in worship and in public ministry, located in nontraditional church settings, appeals to the unchurched. The more charismatically inclined new apostolic churches fit this category. In seeker-driven churches, for example, ...high-energy, sustained and heavily participatory worship... would not be appropriate, but it is in the power-oriented churches.³⁹

While all these models have been generating growth in varying degrees, the *power-oriented* model is responsible for the vast majority of growth occurring in the diverse cultures of the world. It is generating, along with the seeker oriented churches, rapid growth in the United States.⁴⁰

One reason the power-oriented model works so well is that it stimulates rapid mobilization of believers in witnessing. Clayton Berg and Paul Pretiz published a study of church growth in Latin America. They observed

³⁷ Wagner, *Churchquake*, 188.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., 189.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

People can be trained to witness and be exhorted to do so, but the ordinary person... is nervous and embarrassed... Most churches will give lip service to mobilization, but nothing happens. The ... (Grass Root) churches are often the ones in which mobilization really takes place. Theirs is a theology which empowers believers. People know that God will answer prayer about the person to whom they expect to witness, and they know that the Holy Spirit will give the witnessing Christian the words to say and take away their timidity.⁴¹

People who are excited about experiences that have grown out of their faith naturally want to share about them. Moreover, there is a convergence between what Berg and Pretiz observe and what the author of Acts reported. Threatened by both the imprisonment of Peter and John and the warnings given them, believers gathered in prayer. “After they prayed,” writes Luke, “the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly” (Acts 4:31). In other words, they were mobilized in witness through a powerful experience of the Holy Spirit. Mobilization is the most critical task in the mission of redemption. Christ told us that love mobilized our God: “For God so loved the world, that He gave His one and only Son” (John 3:16). The Apostle Paul taught that love was not only the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22), it is the very essence of the Spirit—“God has poured out His love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom He has given us” (Rom. 5:5). Love propels people in witness more than duty, obedience, or fear.

Four Principles

Four principles are suggested by the biblical witness and commission, the pattern of the early church, vignettes from church history and the form through which church growth is occurring today.

Principle one is a relational or “tree of life” vision. When congregations nurture a focus on redemptive relationship rather than on moral achievement, when they cultivate a lifeguard as opposed to an umpire mentality, when they ask, “How can we help people come to Christ?” rather than, “What should a Christian do?” they then embrace the gospel and its commission. It is in an intimate relationship with Christ that one has something to share.

Haggard writes:

Jesus had to transition those who wanted a relationship with God from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil to the tree of life. Because much of Judaism had become a religion of “godly” action instead of a relationship with

⁴¹ Clayton L. Berg, Jr. and Paul Pretiz, *Spontaneous Combustion: Grass-Roots Christianity, Latin American Style* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1996), 230-231.

God, Jesus had to challenge the fundamental way the Scriptures were being applied. So He emphasized that without a relationship with Him, a relationship with the Father was impossible... Christianity is more than an intellectual assent to the principles of the Bible; it requires actually consuming Him so His life dominates our lives. To gain life takes believing and more, it requires dying and becoming again, in Him.⁴²

It is this truth that makes Christianity and Christian experience unique. When our moral vision is not supplanted by the relational vision, we have little to offer. In his travels to religious sites that include every world religion, Haggard observes:

I find sincere people searching for God... Most of these worshipers pray, read holy books, burn candles, rub beads, give offerings, dip in rivers and pour water over statues in their deep pursuit of a relationship with the Almighty God. Few actually find Him, but they don't realize it because they experience a sense of spiritual fulfillment through the soulish satisfaction that comes from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Most religious people know they have had a spiritual experience because it has enlightened them; it has opened their eyes and they know good and evil. They also know that their spiritual journey has given them satisfaction; it's been "good for food." And as with Eve, their spiritual devotion produces a positive change in their lives; it's "pleasing to the eye." Unfortunately, these characteristics are universal in all religions, including Christianity. Many "Christians," Jewish believers, Islamic worshipers, adherents to Hinduism and Buddhism all enjoy the benefits and the consequences of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Only those who have pressed beyond religious practice and have come to know Him, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, through His Son, Jesus, can know God. For it's in knowing Him that the mystery of genuine godliness starts to unfold. And it is, indeed, a relationship that is a narrow path.⁴³

Principle two is partnership with the Holy Spirit. Changed people change people. The counsel and power of the Holy Spirit was the critical element for Jesus and His followers' ministry.⁴⁴ The perspective of the Latin American church is most helpful.

Pablo Deiros selects as one of the notable characteristics of *Protestantismo Popular* (Protestantism of the Masses, i.e. GR movements) in Latin America: *evangelismo de poder* (power evangelism). According to this concept of evangelization, the preaching of the gospel is not sufficient to give testimony of the presence of the kingdom of God. It is believed that along with the preaching, "signs and wonders" are a necessary part as authenticating the power of the gospel unto salvation. Furthermore, preaching is understood as

⁴² Haggard, *The Life-giving Church*, 69-70.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 61-62.

⁴⁴ Wimber, *Power Evangelism*, 31. Wimber notes that the Holy Spirit holds the key to power encounters and that our openness and availability to His direction and power is the catalyst for fulfilling the great commission.

not simply communicating the message of God, but as a direct confrontation with the power of Satan and his demons. The object of the Christian testimony is not so much that the person will simply arrive at a knowledge of the truth, but rather, that there will be liberation from the clutches of Satan and all of its consequences.⁴⁵

Human reason is not the all-encompassing weapon in the pursuit of truth that modern consciousness thought. In this postmodern era, we are relearning that some force greater than logic must liberate minds and hearts to embrace truth.

Principle three is focus on our commission. Congregations that clearly concentrate on the people of their community, especially those that exhibit estrangement from God, more clearly follow the direction and model of Jesus. They grow in nearly every demographic and lead the expansion of the Christian church. McGavran states it well:

In the midst of hundreds of good things to do, Christians should be clear that the chief and irreplaceable task of Christian mission is always that of bringing unbelievers to saving faith in Christ and into responsible membership in his church. Finding the lost, bringing them back to the fold, teaching them all things, and sending them out to find others is a main thrust, perhaps the main thrust of the New Testament. Goal setting should start by teaching that measurable church growth is biblically required.⁴⁶

Principle four calls for redefinition of the church. Although this principle will be explored in the next chapter, Christian unity is essential for the church of Jesus Christ to grow in any community or region.

⁴⁵ Berg and Pretiz, *Spontaneous Combustion*, 233-234.

⁴⁶ McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 279.