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Donald McGavran and  
Church Growth, A Quarter  
Century After His Death

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DONALD MCGAVRAN AND CHURCH GROWTH,  
A QUARTER CENTURY AFTER HIS DEATH

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# Editorial: Why another look at Donald McGavran?

**GEORGE H. MARTIN**

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Donald McGavran and his church growth principles remain controversial and are regularly debated. Whatever one's evaluation of McGavran, he stands as a giant among 20th century missiologists, having done some of the most important missiological research and writing of the previous century. He introduced concepts that remain components of missions vocabulary and practice. Current missions scholarship and practice would not be what they are without Donald McGavran's contributions. Who among us, even with little specific knowledge of McGavran, has not heard, or used, terms such as "church growth," "harvest fields," "people groups," etc?

An important figure, Donald McGavran remains a lightning rod for criticism. At times, McGavran's critics have argued that his writings and recommendations seem unclear and that he appears to find indisputable biblical support for his positions, when, in actuality, the support appears vague or merely inferred. (See Morris, below: "Missiologists... differ as to whether the principles described by McGavran are grounded in Scripture.") Perhaps one of the strongest critiques of McGavran is that he could have done much more to address numerous abuses of church growth methodology by those who followed him.

Whatever one's opinion of Donald McGavran, one cannot legitimately ignore him. His impact on church planting and missions strategy has been

wide and deep. A year beyond last year's 25th anniversary of his death (July 10, 1990) affords a timely opportunity for scholars and practitioners of a new generation to take a look. The authors contributing to this issue help us to think carefully and helpfully about Donald McGavran and his impact on current ministry. The present effort makes no attempt to be either pro- or anti-McGavran; let readers consider the presentations and arguments found here and decide for themselves.

At its founding, The Billy Graham School at Southern Seminary was linked to McGavran; its original name included the terminology "Church Growth." Dr. Thom Rainer served as founding dean, and with his voluminous published scholarship on McGavran and church growth matters, the school continued to be linked to McGavran and the discipline of church growth. This issue provides not only the opportunity to acknowledge last year's 25th anniversary of McGavran's death, last year, but also to recognize God's providential oversight and blessing of The Billy Graham School. Several of the contributors to this issue are alumni of the Graham School.

Much history is found in any consideration of Donald McGavran: the details of his life and research on the mission field, his relationship with Fuller Seminary, the controversies surrounding his work and his responses, his later years. These historical and biographical matters are not the focus of this issue of SBJME, however. Rather, we take a look at some of his key contributions to missiology, matters that remain parts of contemporary scholarship and practice. Among the contributors, the reader might expect to find some of the better known names connected to McGavran and church growth: Peter Wagner, Elmer Towns, Thom Rainer, and others. The journal, however, has given space to a new generation of writers, current voices examining church growth principles within the contemporary context, and writing with a passion about the issues they presently face.

The reader will discover, among the contributors to this issue, varying degrees of comfort with McGavran. The journal believes that these different views should be heard as the conversation continues. We often hear about Donald McGavran that he taught this or that. But what did he really teach? Mark Morris, President of the Great Commission Research Network, gives attention to this question. Morris reaches his conclusions by way of a heavy reliance upon McGavran's own writings.

In the increasingly multi-ethnic and multi-racial society that is 21st century

America, Troy Bush, so immersed in that reality as pastor of Rehoboth Baptist Church, examines McGavran's homogeneous unit principle and the American mosaic and gleans from McGavran's work lessons for the practice of ministry.

In light of the strong focus by so many missions groups on the global unreached population, Todd Benkert reminds us that God would have us not overlook places where he is working. In reconsidering the matter of receptivity, Benkert draws out a number of often forgotten missiological positives for reaching the unreached.

Two current cross-cultural workers, Kevin Baggett and Randy Arnett, challenge the validity of the categories anticipated in the work of McGavran, upon which much evangelical missiological strategy rests. They propose additional analogical categories that allow a more complete representation of the dynamic, complex relationships of the world's people groups.

In the article on caste, the reader will note quite a degree of discomfort with McGavran. Aubrey Sequeira, Harry Kumar, and Venkatesh Gopalakrishnan are particularly concerned about caste in India, which they believe McGavran understood inadequately and with harmful consequences. The reader who has found much to commend McGavran will discover three Indian voices that offer a strong cautionary word about caste in India. These are voices that should be heard.

Rocky Coleman provides an annotated bibliography. Though not exhaustive, the bibliography is extensive, and it presents many of McGavran's most important works. And finally, though he needs little additional introduction to the denomination he serves, the journal considers it an honor, by way of offering David Platt's sermon "Our Obligation to Reach the Unreached," to let our readers hear his heart for reaching the nations with the gospel. In a sermon published as transcribed from the spoken message, Platt reminds us that we have the obligation to reach all peoples, whether they are found in traditional harvest fields or among the unreached and unengaged.

Donald McGavran and his church growth principles continue to be debated. In light of this reality, I conclude with an adaptation of a word of counsel from Dr. Thomas J. Delaughter, my Old Testament professor in seminary. Much material is available, both from McGavran's own pen and from his promoters and from his detractors. Let the reader chew it all up, the good meat along with the bone and gristle and fat. Swallow the good and spit out the bad.



# McGavran on McGavran: What Did He Really Teach?

**JOHN MICHAEL MORRIS**

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*Donald A. McGavran was one of the most influential missiologists of the twentieth century. John Michael Morris asserts that McGavran's teachings have often been misunderstood and unjustly criticized. In light of his many contributions, evangelicals will do well to reexamine his teachings with a view toward ascertaining his actual positions versus his purported positions that actually diverge from his thinking. This reexamination clarifies and argues for the continuing relevance and correctness of the missiological principles that he described.*

## INTRODUCTION

The phrase “Church Growth Movement” (CGM) has bad connotations for many people. This reality is one reason the American Society for Church Growth changed its name to Great Commission Research Network in 2009. The organization was founded upon the principles described by Donald A. McGavran. Many of the criticisms of the CGM have been directed toward particular fragments of the classic McGavran movement, not toward the principles described by McGavran. Sonny Tucker explained, “Critics of the Church Growth Movement fall into two categories. The first category includes



critics of McGavran's church growth philosophies. . . . The second category of church growth critics consists of modern day critics who mainly are focused on non-McGavran genres of church growth."<sup>1</sup> The non-McGavran genres identified by Tucker are the "American Popular Church Growth" stream, the "Third Wave Church Growth Movement," and the "American Neo-Orthodox Church Growth" stream.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, some serious misconceptions exist in regard to some of McGavran's key missiological principles expressed in the classic Church Growth Movement.

### **FIRST MISCONCEPTION: THE SUPPOSED RACIST IMPLICATIONS OF MCGAVRAN'S HOMOGENEOUS UNIT PRINCIPLE (HUP)**

Thom Rainer (a past winner of the McGavran Award for Outstanding Leadership in Great Commission Research) observed, "No single tenet of church growth theology has received so much criticism as the homogeneous unit principle."<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the principle is considered to be anathema by many people who misunderstand it. In the first edition (1970) of McGavran's magnum opus, *Understanding Church Growth*, he characterized the HUP: "Men like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers."<sup>4</sup> In the second edition (1980) of the book, McGavran described an adverse reaction to the HUP: "In 1976, an eminent white Christian, on reading for the first time the sentence that heads this chapter [quoted above], wrote me indignantly saying, 'Of course they like to, and must not be permitted to.'"<sup>5</sup>

In light of the current emphasis on multiethnic and multicultural churches, the HUP may seem to be an anachronism. Does it have intended or unintended racist implications? The answer is emphatically negative. Anyone could also claim that the Bible has racist implications when it discusses slavery, but such a person would be guilty of misinterpreting the Bible. Similarly, many people have been guilty of misinterpreting the HUP.

McGavran clarified that the HUP "should not be understood as condoning white racial pride."<sup>6</sup> He also emphasized that the focus of the principle is on non-Christians, not Christians.<sup>7</sup>

McGavran did not want churches intentionally to exclude anyone on the basis of race: "My own considered opinion is that, in the United States, the refusal of any congregation to admit blacks as members is sin."<sup>8</sup> He also believed that "structuring society into the classes and masses is displeasing to God" and that

God's "ideal is a society in which all men . . . are judged by the same standards . . . receiving equal opportunity and equal justice."<sup>9</sup> Rainer concluded, "The homogeneous unit is a possible starting point for evangelizing: no one should be required to leave his or her culture to become a Christian. Yet homogeneity is not an ideal state."<sup>10</sup> Racism stems from fallen world influences and sinful flesh, but the maturation process gradually reduces Christians' racist impulses and impels them to make positive changes in their environment.

McGavran understood that conversion is the necessary starting point for the maturation process. Mark Terry agreed that the HUP emphasizes evangelism: "McGavran was not a racist. . . . McGavran's point is simply that people cannot demonstrate a kingdom ethic until they come into God's kingdom. He believed that homogeneous churches would bring more people into God's kingdom."<sup>11</sup> Examples of homogeneous churches abound: "cowboy churches" and first-generation immigrant churches are types of homogeneous churches that can be effective in reaching particular groups in today's diversified American cultural milieu, but again, McGavran would say that such churches should not intentionally exclude anyone. He understood that people are attracted to groups that have similar life experiences.

The HUP is not nullified by churches that are truly heterogeneous in composition. Such churches can utilize homogeneous small groups to evangelize diverse groups of people. McGavran admitted that in some cities, where "cross-class marriages are taking place," an exception to the HUP is evident.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, a person who claims to attend a heterogeneous, multicultural church may in fact be visiting a building that contains several homogeneous churches. If the various homogeneous groups that meet under the same roof do not get together on a regular basis for worship, evangelism, education, ministry, and fellowship, then one cannot say that a truly heterogeneous, multicultural church meets in that building.

Many Southern Baptists have struggled with racism and are particularly sensitive about the racism issue in regard to the HUP. Interestingly, the 1925 and 1963 versions of the *Baptist Faith and Message* did not mention racism, but the 2000 version added it to a list of sins to be opposed:

All Christians are under obligation to seek to make the will of Christ supreme in our own lives and in human society. Means and methods used for the improvement of society and the establishment of righteousness among men can be truly

and permanently helpful only when they are rooted in the regeneration of the individual by the saving grace of God in Jesus Christ. In the spirit of Christ, Christians should oppose racism, every form of greed, selfishness, and vice.<sup>13</sup>

McGavran would be in hearty agreement with this addition and the emphasis given to the necessity of regeneration before permanent changes can occur in the social environment. He would employ the HUP as a strategy, first, to direct people to the gospel, and once regenerated and a member of a congregation, he would expect the new convert to grow and to throw off the sinful baggage brought into his new life in Christ.

#### **SECOND MISCONCEPTION: THE SUPPOSED NEGLECT OF UNREACHED PEOPLE GROUPS BY MCGAVRAN'S HARVEST THEOLOGY AND RECEPTIVITY PRINCIPLE**

McGavran distinguished between search theology, which "maintains that in Christian mission the essential thing is not the finding, but going everywhere and preaching the Gospel,"<sup>14</sup> and harvest theology, which emphasizes "a vast and purposeful finding."<sup>15</sup> He did not deny the validity of search theology, but he saw it as "partial" and "true for some men and some populations."<sup>16</sup> He said that search theology "is false only in so far as it claims to be the sole theology of evangelism and applicable to all men."<sup>17</sup> McGavran defined the receptivity principle, which is strongly related to harvest theology: "Evangelism can be and ought to be directed to responsive persons, groups, and segments of society."<sup>18</sup>

David Garrison charged that "the Church Growth Movement has directed many missionaries to focus on perceived 'harvest fields' or 'responsive fields' at the expense of unreached and what may appear to be unresponsive fields."<sup>19</sup> Garrison argued that unreached people groups "have often been dismissed by those looking for responsive harvest fields."<sup>20</sup> In a review of Garrison's *Church Planting Movements*, Ralph Winter disagreed with Garrison's assessment: "He says the CGM has steered people away from unresponsive fields. Most missions were already avoiding unresponsive fields. McGavran, however, emphasized taking note of the 'bridge of God' represented by even one lone believer in the back of the church, especially if that person comes from an apparently 'unresponsive' group different from the rest of the congregation."<sup>21</sup>

McGavran prioritized fields that are both unreached and responsive: "The

rule which guided missionary societies during the nineteenth century—‘Go where no one has been before’—is currently not a good rule. Today’s rule, especially for beginning societies, is ‘Find populations in which many want to become Christians, but are not being evangelized. Go there.’”<sup>22</sup> McGavran unquestionably had a great burden for reaching the unreached people groups in the world:

Christian mission, world evangelization, must take a new and significant step if God’s will is to be done....

... Most mission resources—ambassadors and money—should now be spent working directly or indirectly to multiply sound churches among the two and a half billion lost men and women *who are presently locked out of and locked away from any personal witness within their group.*

Thus, here in America, in order to do our fair share of this global task, we must soon found thousands of new groups of Christians dedicated to multiplying congregations of biblical Christians in every unreached ethnos in the world....

Africa south of the Sahara will soon be as Christian as North America. The Holy Spirit leads us to ripe harvest fields. He also calls us to many which have yet to be sown. The great day of Christian mission (in which Christians of all six continents will spend themselves) is dawning. We can at least set a good example for other concentrations of believers to follow....

Now is the time to move forward. Let us “furiously” organize frontier missionary societies in every congregation of every denomination in North America. And other nations will follow.<sup>23</sup>

Notice that McGavran said that the Holy Spirit leads people to ripe (responsive) fields but also to “many” fields that need sowing. He explained that “stony fields must be plowed” but that they “should not be heavily occupied lest ... they become even more resistant.”<sup>24</sup>

McGavran believed that missionaries should be sent to unreached groups, but he believed that the responsive groups should be prioritized over the resistant groups. He understood that responsiveness waxes and wanes. He

said that more missionaries should be sent to particular groups when they become responsive.<sup>25</sup> Some people have argued that a few recently converted national Christians can rapidly multiply themselves and effectively handle the unreached fields that are receptive without help from outside missionaries, but knowledgeable and spiritually mature missionaries are needed in great numbers in such fields to efficiently harvest the fields and to guide new converts until enough national Christians are thoroughly disciplined and biblically qualified to be church leaders.

To conclude, McGavran emphatically believed that, ideally, all people should hear the gospel; however, when resources are limited, he believed that receptive fields should take priority over resistant fields: "Since the Gospel is to be preached to all creation, no Christian will doubt that both the receptive and the resistant should hear it. And since gospel acceptors have an inherently higher priority than gospel rejectors, no one should doubt that, whenever it comes to a choice between reaping ripe fields or seeding others, the former is commanded by God."<sup>26</sup> The receptivity principle is the most important missiological principle taught by McGavran, and it has far-ranging implications for missions policy.

### **THIRD MISCONCEPTION: THE SUPPOSED LACK OF BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR THE HUP, HARVEST THEOLOGY, AND THE RECEPTIVITY PRINCIPLE**

McGavran believed that "church growth" (the group of principles he described) "looks to the Bible for direction as to what God wants done."<sup>27</sup> Missiologists, however, differ as to whether the principles described by McGavran are grounded in Scripture. Charles Van Engen, for example, observed, "Church Growth theory is grounded in a foundation of Scripture that draws from a classical reading of the Bible regarding God's mission (*missio Dei*)."<sup>28</sup> In contrast, Howard Snyder stated, "Clearly the Bible reveals fundamental truths about the church and the gospel that are normative for all times and cultures. Whether these yield 'church growth principles,' however, is less clear."<sup>29</sup> Many critics of McGavran's teachings regard them as totally pragmatic with no Scriptural basis. Efficiency, however, is not unbiblical, and good stewardship of resources is certainly biblical. An exhaustive treatment of McGavran's biblical foundations for the key principles previously discussed

in this article is not possible, so a few samples of his thought must suffice.

As mentioned earlier, for McGavran, the HUP had a clear evangelistic implication: “We must make sure that we ask people to become Christians where they don’t have to cross barriers of language and culture and class and wealth and style of life.”<sup>30</sup> He commented on 1 Corinthians 9:22: “First Corinthians 9 and 10 is usually thought of as Paul’s comments on eating meat offered to idols, and, of course, he is talking about that. However, what guides the entire thought of these two chapters is the conviction that all Christians should be all things to all men, *in order to win some*.”<sup>31</sup> McGavran used that passage to emphasize the need for contextualization: “The science of world evangelization (which is what missiology is) says clearly: If you are to be understood, you must speak the language of your listener. You must know his culture and speak from within it... You must be all things to all men *in order to win some*.”<sup>32</sup> McGavran recognized that cultural and language barriers exist when he proposed the HUP, and he understood that non-Christians would be more receptive to the gospel when cultural and language barriers are removed. Of course, Scriptural principles should never be compromised in the contextualization process, but some neutral cultural elements can be adapted to reach particular homogeneous groups without compromise.

Galatians 3:28 is sometimes used to refute the HUP: “There is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”<sup>33</sup> McGavran responded that Galatians 3:28 describes Christians, not the non-Christians upon whom the HUP is focused.<sup>34</sup>

McGavran provided a Scriptural foundation to harvest theology’s emphasis on finding, not merely searching. He mentioned that “our Lord instructed His disciples to pray that God would send laborers into *His* harvest.”<sup>35</sup> He understood that God’s intention is not merely seed sowing; God wants laborers to reap the harvest. McGavran also utilized the Great Commission to defend harvest theology.<sup>36</sup> He perceived that the Great Commission commands Christians to make disciples (find), not merely sow seed (search).

McGavran described a Scriptural foundation for the receptivity principle involving the biblical command to shake off the dust after encountering rejection and to move on to receptive people.<sup>37</sup> Jesus set this policy of shaking off the dust (Matt. 10:14, Luke 10:8-12), and the policy was followed by Paul (Acts 13:51, 18:6), who set the example for evangelistic missionary work. Affirming the receptivity principle, J. Robertson McQuilkin explained that

“it is thoroughly biblical for the Church to concentrate on the responsive elements of society.”<sup>38</sup> McQuilkin also agreed with McGavran that resistant people are not neglected by the receptivity principle: “The second reason for God’s selective approach to the responsive is, then, that through them the unresponsive may be won. ... [McGavran] says that the best way to reach the resistant is to win the responsive first.”<sup>39</sup> Obviously, responsive people can positively influence their resistant friends and also provide needed resources for reaching resistant people that are not yet friends.

#### **FOURTH MISCONCEPTION: THE SUPPOSED EQUIVALENCE BETWEEN PEOPLE MOVEMENTS (PMs) AND CHURCH PLANTING MOVEMENTS (CPMs)**

Dane Winstead Fowlkes expressed a common misconception about PMs and CPMs: “It would seem a fair and accurate conclusion that a church planting movement (as observed and described by the International Mission Board’s Office of Overseas Operations) is the same as a people movement (as observed and described by Donald McGavran), as well as a mass movement (as observed and described by J. Waskom Pickett).”<sup>40</sup> David Garrison, however, contrasted PMs and CPMs: “Church Planting Movements are not just people movements. Beyond mass evangelism is mass conversion where great numbers of lost people respond to the gospel. These are sometimes called ‘People Movements’ which should not be confused with Church Planting Movements.”<sup>41</sup> Marc Byrd considered CPMs to be “a very specific kind of People Movement.”<sup>42</sup>

At Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, during a church growth seminar for Ph.D. students, taught by Steve Wilkes in 2006, the group of students composed of former International Mission Board missionaries and other practitioners developed a list of characteristics showing how PMs and CPMs are different. A portion of that list follows:

PM – Official church buildings and large groups are okay.

CPM – Rapid multiplication of small groups is normative; groups should stay small and meet in houses, open spaces, or other non-official structures.

PM – These phenomena only occur among responsive groups.

CPM – These phenomena supposedly can occur among any groups. ...

PM – These phenomena happen spontaneously.

CPM – These phenomena are planned and intentionally started.

PM – These phenomena are well-defined.

CPM – These phenomena are not well-defined.

PM – These phenomena have been seen all around the world.

CPM – These phenomena are localized, but we've tried to universalize them.

PM – An underground factor in the midst of persecution is irrelevant.

CPM – An underground factor in the midst of persecution seems common.

PM – Missionaries stay and nurture the movements.

CPM – Missionaries leave fast (MAWL: model, assist, watch, leave).<sup>43</sup>

Rapidity is one of the most noticeable characteristics of CPM theory. Garrison defined CPMs: "A Church Planting Movement is a *rapid multiplication of indigenous churches planting churches that sweeps through a people group or population segment*."<sup>44</sup> McGavran did not use the word "rapid" in his definition of PMs.<sup>45</sup> Byrd agreed that a "movement need not be characterized by rapid growth to be considered a People Movement."<sup>46</sup>

McGavran commended a "thorough system of training lay leaders" and warned that without thorough discipleship PM churches will be "confirmed, not in the faith, but in ignorance and nominalism."<sup>47</sup> In contrast, Garrison denied the necessity of thorough training of potential church leaders in CPMs:

Church Planting Movements are rapidly multiplying movements of people. People can multiply truth or error. The secret to keeping them on track is not to slow them down long enough to indoctrinate all of their leaders before they are allowed to reproduce. The secret to keeping them on track is to build fidelity to Scripture into the DNA of the earliest reproducing church models.<sup>48</sup>

Garrison also advocated using new converts as leaders:



Relying on local leaders can be difficult for missionaries. Even today, some missionaries insist on pastoring the new churches they help to plant.... This pattern of external dependency has never produced a Church Planting Movement.

Those who are reluctant to transfer this kind of authority quickly point to Paul's instructions in 1 Timothy 3:6 where Paul advises young Timothy that a bishop 'must not be a recent convert...' However, Timothy's church was already well established enough to reference several generations of believers (see 2 Timothy 2:2). In such an environment it was natural for Paul to delegate church oversight to those who had been closest to the original message delivered by the apostles, but *nowhere* does Paul place church authority in the hands of outsiders.

When a new church is started, Paul does not hesitate to appoint local leaders right away. In Acts 4:23, immediately after winning converts in Lystra, Iconium, and Asia Minor's Antioch, "Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust."

Meeting with the Church Planting Movement taskforce we posed the question, "When do you pass the torch to new leaders?"

Their unanimous response was, "In a Church Planting Movement you begin with the torch in their hand."<sup>49</sup>

Thus, McGavran advocated the training of converts before they are put into positions of leadership, whereas Garrison did not.

Another important difference between PMs and CPMs concerns expectations. Byrd explained:

People Movements are not possible for all peoples, because all peoples do not have the close relational ties necessary for a People Movement to occur....

On the other hand, Garrison asserted that Church Planting Movements are not bound by any such limitations.... This assertion has profound implications for the development and implementation of missions strategy, and particularly for the expectations of missionaries regarding the results of their ministries. It has

resulted in the adoption of strategies to pursue a Church Planting Movement among every people without regard for the lack of societal and relational ties among certain peoples (Western individualistic peoples, for example), which are necessary for such a movement to occur, according to McGavran.<sup>50</sup>

Jeff Brawner noted that “CPM methodology sets up the majority of missionaries for a sense of failure” because “if the ultimate goal is to see a church planting movement occur, then any other result falls short of the assigned task.”<sup>51</sup>

### **CONCLUSION: THE CONTINUING RELEVANCE OF MCGAVRAN’S MIS- SIOLOGICAL TEACHINGS**

Whether recognized or not, McGavran’s teachings remain relevant. Missionaries continue to focus their efforts on homogeneous units, although they typically call them “people groups.” Robin Hadaway has noted that the HUP “became the basis for tailoring individualized strategies for particular ethnic groups that has become the norm today.”<sup>52</sup> Todd Daniel Kube provided a good summary of the HUP’s value:

In summary, the HUP is both culturally relevant and sensitive with the expectation that kingdom people are the best people to affect cultural change to the glory of God. In addition, on the surface, the working definition of the HUP may appear too pragmatic or anthropocentric. However, as explained and illustrated, at its systematic, theological core, the HUP is a theistic worldview that acknowledges that God is at work and strives to be wise and faithful to the presence and activity of God. Failing to accept and respond to God’s work or activity is practical deism and poor stewardship.<sup>53</sup>

Although the emphasis on homogeneous groups is generally accepted, a great missiological divide exists in regard to whether search theology should be the sole emphasis of missions agencies. Search theology has predominated among missiologists in recent decades, but some missiologists have been calling for a more balanced approach.

Hadaway stated that the “harvest mandate is one that seems to be neglected today.”<sup>54</sup> He warned of the dire consequences of ignoring the receptivity principle: “Rather than looking to receptive places to place missionaries,

most mission groups are sending their personnel to resistant places. Many of these somewhat hostile people groups are indeed becoming more resistant due to the large number of Christians being sent their way.”<sup>55</sup> Todd Benkert agreed that receptive groups should be prioritized: “We must continue to go to the unreached peoples of the world, but the emphasis of our resources should be on those unreached peoples where God is at work and people are responding to the gospel.”<sup>56</sup>

After decades of popularity, speedy search theology, which utilizes CPM methodology and is solely employed by many missionaries in dealing with unreached people groups (UPGs), is now being viewed as inadequate by some missiologists. Daniel Kim, for example, said that the highest priority should be “discipling Undisciplined People Groups (UdPGs), not just reaching UPGs.”<sup>57</sup> The ultimate result of the sole use of speedy search theology can be disastrous, as David Sills explained, “Missionaries report that evangelicals in China are losing ten thousand house churches each year to cults because their church leaders have no theological training.”<sup>58</sup> Sills maintained that a balance of search and harvest theologies is needed.<sup>59</sup> McGavran admitted that for search theology “there is some excellent biblical authority.”<sup>60</sup> He also believed that search theology is “partial.”<sup>61</sup> After surveying the current situation, some missiologists are again looking favorably at the dual mandates, which were popular in an earlier era with leaders at the Foreign Mission Board (now the IMB) of the Southern Baptist Convention. These mandates emphasize sending resources to responsive harvest fields and also to unreached people groups that are possibly resistant. David Hesselgrave discussed the balance that he thought is needed:

A major contention of the Church Growth movement is that great growth can occur only when we concentrate our efforts on those areas and peoples where responsiveness assures us that large numbers of people will embrace Christ and join the churches. Resistant areas should have a missionary witness, but it should be more of a “holding action” until the people become more responsive to the gospel.

Understandably, those who work among difficult populations in North Africa, Europe, and Asia, and in the inner cities of North America, are disturbed about this ordering of priorities.... They are greatly concerned that concentration upon

receptive areas will diminish interest in resistant areas where, they feel, we have little more than a holding action at present.

Balance is needed.... In faithfulness to Christ, most missions should give consideration to maintaining a witness in some difficult area(s) even as they send reapers into the whitened harvest fields of receptive populations.

Still another argument has to do with whether we should give priority to those who are unreached—those who have never had a chance to hear and believe the gospel....

Once again, however, balance is needed. The question of priorities should never be settled on the basis of simple slogans like, “Why should anyone hear the gospel twice before everyone has heard it once?” How many Christians would there be in the world if the number were reduced to include only those who believed after one hearing? And how will the gospel continue to go to remote tribes and “hidden peoples” unless we plant growing churches everywhere—churches which provide the resources for those operations?<sup>62</sup>

McGavran agreed with search theology advocates that all people groups should be reached with the gospel; he simply differed with their strategy for doing so. He summarized what he really taught by defining the goal and central task of Christians: “The goal is to multiply sound churches in every people, every homogeneous unit, on earth. The central task is the communication of the Gospel to the billions who have yet to believe.”<sup>63</sup> Thus, the main issue involves strategy. Should Christians attempt to reach all unreached people groups at the same time without consideration for receptivity, or should currently receptive and unreached groups receive more priority than currently resistant and unreached groups? Hadaway’s answer to this question, directed to Southern Baptists, is correct and should be taken to heart by Southern Baptists and other evangelicals: “It is impossible for the IMB, as large as it is, to be everywhere at once in equal force. The best strategy would seem to be to find those places that are at the same time both least reached and most responsive.”<sup>64</sup> McGavran would give a loud “Amen” to that statement.

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- 2 Ibid., 28-31.
- 3 Thom S. Rainer, *The Book of Church Growth: History, Theology, and Principles* (Nashville: Broadman, 1993), 254.
- 4 Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), 198.
- 5 McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), 238.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Ibid., 239.
- 9 Ibid., 280.
- 10 Rainer, *The Book of Church Growth*, 262.
- 11 John Mark Terry, "The Church Growth Movement," chapter 13 in *Developing a Strategy for Missions: A Biblical, Historical, and Cultural Introduction*, John Mark Terry and J. D. Payne, eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 123.
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- 14 McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 2d ed., 27.
- 15 Ibid., 38.
- 16 Ibid., 39.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Ibid., 257.
- 19 David Garrison, *Church Planting Movements: How God Is Redeeming a Lost World* (Midlothian, VA: WIGTake, 2004), 25.
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- 21 Ralph Winter, "Church Planting Movements: Does This New Book Really Represent a Break with McGavran's Thinking?" *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 21, no. 3 (Fall 2004): 129.
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- 26 Ibid., 291.
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- 30 McGavran with Win Arn, *How to Grow a Church* (Glendale, CA: Regal, 1973), 45.
- 31 McGavran, *Effective Evangelism: A Theological Mandate* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1988), 19.
- 32 Ibid., 20.
- 33 Holman Christian Standard Bible.
- 34 McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 2d ed, 230.
- 35 Ibid., 33.
- 36 Ibid.
- 37 Ibid.
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- 39 Ibid., 29.
- 40 Dane Winstead Fowlkes, "Developing a Church Planting Movement in India" (PhD diss., University of the Free State, 2004), 43.
- 41 Garrison, *Church Planting Movements*, 24.
- 42 Marc Byrd, "People Movements vs. Church Planting Movements," *Journal of Evangelism and Missions* 6 (Spring 2007): 16.

- <sup>43</sup> "Class Summary of Differences between People Movements (PM) and Church Planting Movements (CPM)," Church Growth Ph.D. Seminar, Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, Memphis, TN, 2006, discussion.
- <sup>44</sup> Garrison, *Church Planting Movements*, 21.
- <sup>45</sup> McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 2d ed, 335.
- <sup>46</sup> Byrd, "People Movements," 26.
- <sup>47</sup> McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 2d ed, 350-51.
- <sup>48</sup> Garrison, *Church Planting Movements*, 269.
- <sup>49</sup> Ibid., 187-88.
- <sup>50</sup> Byrd, "People Movements," 23-24.
- <sup>51</sup> Jeff Brawner, "An Examination of Nine Key Issues Concerning CPM," *Journal of Evangelism and Missions* 6 (Spring 2007): 8-9.
- <sup>52</sup> Robin Dale Hadaway, "A Course Correction in Missions: Rethinking the Two-Percent Threshold," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 57, no. 1 (Fall 2014): 20.
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- <sup>54</sup> Hadaway, "A Course Correction," 26.
- <sup>55</sup> Ibid., 27.
- <sup>56</sup> Todd Benkert, "A Biblical Analysis of Donald A. McGavran's Harvest Theology Principle" (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2008), 213.
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- <sup>58</sup> M. David Sills, *Reaching and Teaching* (Chicago: Moody, 2010), 44.
- <sup>59</sup> Ibid., 105-06.
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- <sup>61</sup> Ibid., 39.
- <sup>62</sup> David J. Hesselgrave, *Planting Churches Cross-Culturally: A Guide for Home and Foreign Missions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1980), 95-96.
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# The Homogeneous Unit Principle and The American Mosaic

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Donald McGavran's Homogeneous Unit Principle (HUP) perhaps remains the most controversial of his teachings. Looking back to McGavran's death, one question regarding the HUP stands above the rest: What value does McGavran's Homogeneous Unit Principle have for pastors and church planters today? This article offers five responses to this question and addresses current discussions regarding the HUP.

More than sixty years after Donald A. McGavran published *The Bridges of God*, his thoughts about race and evangelism continue to be discussed vigorously, and the racial trajectory of the U.S. suggests these conversations will continue for some time.<sup>1</sup> McGavran is the father of the modern Church Growth Movement, and his influence spanned the globe through the North American Church Growth Movement and global missions strategies based on his teachings.<sup>2</sup> Among his many principles and teachings, the Homogeneous Unit Principle (HUP) remains the most controversial with some



declaring it unbiblical and racist.<sup>3</sup> Even so, increased global migration and the dramatic changes in racial demographics in North America provide a timely opportunity to revisit McGavran's HUP to see what benefit it has for pastors and church planters today.

### THE AMERICAN MOSAIC

I serve as the lead pastor of Rehoboth Baptist Church, a congregation founded in 1854 in the Atlanta metropolitan area. Our current membership is made up of those born in the U.S., Central America, South America, Africa, Asia, Oceania, Canada, and Europe (Western and Eastern). We have white members. We have black members born in the United States and second-generation black members whose parents immigrated from Africa. We have fourth-generation Hispanic members who grew up in majority Hispanic communities in the U.S. We have members in monoethnic marriages and members in multiracial marriages whose children are multiracial. We share our campus with 10 congregations, most of which have services and ministries in languages other than English. The children in our county public schools speak 142 languages and are from 157 countries.<sup>4</sup> Our experiences in making disciples across languages and cultures will soon be the norm for churches in most communities of North America, particularly those found in urban areas.

In 1965, a new era of immigration began in the U.S., significantly increasing the number and diversity of immigrants who call America home. Their arrival has initiated an ethnic transformation that is making the United States of the twenty-first century "more culturally diverse—and more Asian and Hispanic—than at any time in its history."<sup>5</sup> Educators and coaches, business leaders and public safety directors, and pastors and church planters face a tsunami of diversity that reaches from the boroughs of New York City to the suburbs of Kansas City. In 1960, the population of the United States was 85 percent white; however, sometime in the 2040s, whites will comprise less than 50 percent of the national population.<sup>6</sup> William Frey, an internationally recognized demographer and senior fellow at the Brookings Institute, asserted, "I am convinced that the United States is in the midst of a pivotal period ushering in extraordinary shifts in the nation's racial demographic makeup."<sup>7</sup> These shifts, well underway, have already invalidated the long-held

perception of “chocolate cities” and “vanilla suburbs.”<sup>8</sup> For many older and middle-aged white Americans, their neighborhoods, workplaces, and churches will look, sound, and feel very differently than during their youth.

Neighborhood segregation, school segregation, and multiracial marriages are three useful indicators of racial interaction. Since 1970, black-white neighborhood segregation levels have steadily declined across America. Atlanta neighborhoods have gone from 82 percent segregated in 1970 to just under 60 percent in 2010. Dallas went from 87 percent segregated in 1970 to just above 55 percent in 2010.<sup>9</sup>

Reductions in neighborhood segregation are encouraging, but Frey cautioned they “should not in any way be confused with its elimination. Segregation levels in the 50-60 range, found in many large metropolitan areas, are still substantial by any standard.”<sup>10</sup> Hispanic and Asian neighborhood segregation increased slightly in the 1990s and has since plateaued, due in large part to a continued inflow of immigrants that gravitate toward more homogeneous neighborhoods. In fact, new destination metropolitan areas for Hispanics are experiencing increased segregation. Likewise, cities such as Richmond, Atlanta, Las Vegas, Dallas, Orlando, and Phoenix are experiencing a twenty-year increase of at least five points in Asian segregation.<sup>11</sup>

A few details stand out when considering the typical neighborhood in which a person in the U.S. might live. First, segregation looks different from locale to locale; for example, segregation in the average neighborhood in Minneapolis-St. Paul looks vastly different than segregation in the average neighborhood in Los Angeles. Minneapolis-St. Paul has a higher percentage white population than Los Angeles, and Los Angeles has substantially more minorities than Minneapolis-St. Paul. Second, high or even complete segregation can exist in some neighborhoods, even when most neighborhoods reflect more diversity.<sup>12</sup> Third, high levels of neighborhood segregation exist in many cities. For example, in Atlanta, the average white person lives in a neighborhood that is 67 percent white. The average black person lives in a neighborhood that is 57 percent black. Fourth, the neighborhood of the average white person is more diverse today than it was in 1980, when it would have been almost 90 percent white. This trend toward living in more diverse neighborhoods is also true for black, Hispanic, and Asian residents.<sup>13</sup>

Segregation among children, especially minority children, is more pronounced than among adults of the same race. In a recent report published

by the Civil Rights Project at UCLA, the authors stated that 74 percent of black students attend majority non-white schools. The same is true for 80 percent of Latino students. Fifteen percent of black students and 14 percent of Latino students attend “apartheid” schools in which whites make up less than 1 percent of the population. For Latino students, the trend toward segregation is increasing dramatically, and resegregation for black students remains high with the greatest increases occurring in the South.<sup>14</sup>

Additionally, black and Latino students often experience “double segregation” that includes race and poverty. For example, 64 percent of the classmates of the average black student reside in low-income households. Compare that level with 37 percent for the average white student.

Multiracial marriages are increasing, as are multiracial births. Frey indicated these shifts are an “unmistakable trend toward a softening of racial boundaries that should lead to new thinking about racial populations and race-related issues.”<sup>15</sup> In 1960, multiracial marriages were just 0.4 percent of all marriages, and in 2010 they increased to 8.4 percent. From 2008-2010, multiracial marriages represented 15.2 percent of all new marriages. Even with the increases in the percentage of multiracial marriages, the overwhelming majority of marriages in the U.S. today are monoracial.

Six in ten multiracial marriages are white-Hispanic or white-Asian. Blacks marry outside of their race at a lower rate than other minorities, though among younger blacks, there has been an increase in white-black marriages. Recent Hispanic and Asian immigrants tend to marry same-race partners. As millennials begin marrying, they are likely to continue the trend toward more multiracial marriages with 60 percent of them saying multiracial marriages are a change for the better.<sup>16</sup>

Churches across America remain highly segregated. One predominant race makes up 86 percent of churches, and two-thirds of the people attending them “say their church has done enough to become racially diverse.”<sup>17</sup> Ed Stetzer, executive director of LifeWay Research, explained the situation well, saying, “In a world where our culture is increasingly diverse, and many pastors are talking about diversity, it appears most people are happy where they are—and with whom they are.”<sup>18</sup> As we will see, McGavran would not have been surprised with the ethnic make up of American churches or with our desire to maintain the status quo.

## McGAVRAN'S HOMOGENEOUS UNIT PRINCIPLE

McGavran discussed the HUP in various writings and presentations. This article will focus on his thoughts about the HUP, primarily as he expressed them in these works: *The Bridges of God* (1955, rev. 1981), *How Churches Grow: The New Frontier of Mission* (1959, republished 1966), "Homogeneous Populations and Church Growth" (1965), *Ethnic Realities: Lessons from India* (1970), and *Understanding Church Growth* (1970, rev. 1980).<sup>19</sup> McGavran also addressed homogeneous units in personal correspondence. One of the more illuminating exchanges occurred between McGavran and Victor E. W. Hayward, a former Associate General Secretary for Relationships with Christian Councils of the World Council of Churches, who was at the time the Research Secretary for a China Study project. Hayward engaged McGavran in a pointed series of letters between 1971 and 1973 concerning McGavran's article, "Without Crossing Barriers," which appeared in the May 1971 issue of *Church Growth Bulletin*.<sup>20</sup>

In 1972, McGavran noted that the term "homogeneous unit" began being used about 1959, and it had "grown more and more useful."<sup>21</sup> He did not use "homogeneous unit" in the 1955 edition of *Bridges of God*, but it did appear in the 1981 edition, namely in the chapter "Marvelous Mosaic of Humankind."<sup>22</sup> The principle, however, is unquestionably present in the 1955 edition. Speaking of the growth of the early church being exclusively within Judaism, he wrote, "It shows that peoples become Christian fastest when least change of race or clan is involved."<sup>23</sup>

During the following years, he expressed the HUP concept in various phrases, illustrations, and analogies. One rationale for the principle, which has drawn sharp criticism, is his often-quoted phrase, "Men like to become Christian without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers."<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, McGavran showed that the HUP is a dynamic principle with fluidity in its application:

The technical term, *homogeneous unit*, is elastic. On occasion it indicates one tribe living in one specific territory and speaking its own particular language, as for example the Tzeltal tribe of Indians in Mexico. On occasion, however, it describes a much larger and less limited population. For example, urban middle-class Japanese could be considered a homogeneous unit, especially in

contrast to rural Japanese, living in hamlets and cultivating rice. Indians in the Fiji Islands—as compared with Melanesian Fijians—are a homogeneous unit; but in India itself the homogenous unit would be, not Indians, but one caste of Indians in one language area.<sup>25</sup>

Elsewhere, McGavran stated that a *homogeneous unit* is simply a section of society in which all the members have some characteristic in common.”<sup>26</sup> An example from a “prominent Anglican” provided him one of a countless number of examples by which he sought to validate the HUP: “In England the Church has lost the working class. If a person of the working classes is truly converted, he seldom joins the Anglican church. That to him is a Church of the upper classes.”<sup>27</sup>

The context in which any model or principle arises always plays a role in its development. India, Hinduism, and the caste system were the context in which McGavran first began expressing thoughts that would become the HUP. Judeo-Christian values and worldviews had not shaped Indian views of humanity and government. Evangelism and church planting often began in communities where there was little or no Christian presence. Racism and segregation were normative in the culture, something McGavran called “entrenched evils.”<sup>28</sup> He concluded that most Indians understood that to become a Christian meant more than an inner spiritual encounter with Jesus Christ. It meant abandoning the caste of one’s birth. In essence, it meant abandoning one’s family and community, and McGavran felt strongly the gospel did not require such dislocation, at least not in the beginning stages of Christian maturation.<sup>29</sup>

While vigorous debate has surfaced some deficiencies in McGavran’s exegesis of Scripture, he sought to demonstrate that the HUP aligned with the Bible’s teachings and examples. In *Bridges of God*, he addressed the question, “How do peoples become Christian?” and confirmed his view of the authority of the Bible when he wrote,

Here is a question to which not speculation but knowledge must urgently be applied. The question is how, in a manner true to the Bible, can a Christward movement be established in some class, caste, tribe or other segment of society which will, over a period of years, so bring groups of its related families to Christian faith that the whole people is Christianized in a few decades?<sup>30</sup>

McGavran identified the biblical basis for the HUP with reference to three elements: people movements in the New Testament, monoethnic house churches as part of a multiethnic city church in the New Testament, and the phrase *panta ta ethne* (all peoples). In *Bridges of God*, he devoted the third chapter to discussing “Peoples and the New Testament Church,” in which he concluded, “The New Testament records how large segments of one people, the Jews, became Christian and how from that new Christian society Christward movements in other peoples began.”<sup>31</sup> Later, he asserted that better biblical support could be found for evangelizing whole tribes than for evangelizing individuals.<sup>32</sup>

A multi-congregation model expanded the application of the HUP, and McGavran believed this expression of the HUP was exemplified in the practice of New Testament churches. He saw this model of homogeneity as normative in multiethnic communities of the New Testament. Furthermore, McGavran believed membership in a monoethnic house church, which was at the same time part of a multiethnic city church, “*abundantly fulfills all that the Bible requires*.”<sup>33</sup> McGavran explained, “A given group of Christians belonged to only one of these house churches while *at the same time*, those very Christians were members of the Church of Christ in Corinth—or Ephesus or Antioch.”<sup>34</sup>

Biblical texts such as Matthew 28:19 and Revelation 7:9 played a significant role in McGavran’s presentation of the HUP. He argued that Matthew 28:19 represented a command to disciple all the peoples of the earth, not merely the nations.<sup>35</sup> Though such an understanding of these texts was uncommon in 1955, this view became the hermeneutical lens through which McGavran understood the New Testament. Jesus’ commission to his disciples in Matthew 28:19 to make disciples of *panta ta ethne* was the central foundation for all that McGavran understood about how the church grows, and he believed its force was felt from the beginning of the church’s mission to its fulfillment. McGavran noted, in the opening scenes of the book of Acts, that Christians start with this mandate for discipling the peoples

on Pentecost and they proceed on to where the Church assembles before the throne—in which the linguistic lines and ethnic units and cultures are still distinct enough for John to write, ‘After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no man could number, from every ethnos, from all tribes, and peoples,

and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes... Rev. 7:9.<sup>36</sup>

McGavran outlined eight social structures that shape segments of society: (1) The unique self-image, (2) marriage customs, (3) elite or power structure, (4) land rights, (5) sex mores, (6) people consciousness, (7) where people live, and (8) language.<sup>37</sup> These structures create social boundaries and affect the spread of the gospel within and across segments of the population. He believed that by understanding their influence on a given segment, “we know better how churches are likely to increase and ramify through it.”<sup>38</sup> These structures reveal McGavran’s sociological understanding of homogeneous units and the obstacles and accelerants he believed would influence the spread of the gospel and the growth of the church.

McGavran’s views on racism, Christian brotherhood, and non-homogeneous communities offer additional insight into his thoughts about the HUP. First, McGavran was not a racist; though, as will be shown later, some critics condemned the HUP as an affirmation of racism. He lived more than thirty years in India, treating Indians “in every way as brothers and sisters.”<sup>39</sup> He and his wife lived in Indianapolis for a period and were the only white members of the all black Second Christian Church of Indianapolis.<sup>40</sup> He was concerned about civil rights, and in reference to a 1963 letter from a denomination in India to its sister denomination in America advising them to take up the cause of civil rights to secure “full moral and civil rights for all American citizens,” McGavran made his position clear:

One must, of course, cordially endorse these sentiments. The principle I am setting forth, which plays such a large part in the growth of the Church, should not be understood as condoning white race pride. Nothing I have said justifies injustice and intolerance, or the strong enforcing segregation against the weak. My own considered opinion is that, in the United States, the refusal of any congregation to admit blacks as members is sin.<sup>41</sup>

McGavran even planned to march at Selma in 1965 until demands of the emerging Church Growth Movement prevented him from doing so.<sup>42</sup> And where churches existed in multiethnic communities, McGavran insisted that they “make special efforts to avoid the curse of racism.”<sup>43</sup>

Is a homogeneous or “one-people” church possible without it being racist or practicing discrimination? McGavran believed it was. “Segregation,” he wrote, “is a sin because it is an exclusion enforced by one group on another.”<sup>44</sup> Churches that comprise “one-people” without being racist result from a group’s language or custom preferences and not from “a desire to exclude ‘inferiors’—quite the contrary.”<sup>45</sup>

Second, McGavran promoted the HUP in full view of Christian brotherhood. He challenged the belief that social action alone could bring about brotherhood among people of different races, classes, languages, and cultures, though he affirmed “marches and protests and social action for brotherhood.”<sup>46</sup> He maintained that conversion and the indwelling of Christ were the only means of producing true brotherhood.<sup>47</sup> The Bible informed McGavran’s view of brotherhood, and he stated, “The biblical teaching is plain that in Christ two peoples become one. Christian Jews and Gentiles become one new people of God, parts of the One Body of Christ.”<sup>48</sup> McGavran believed that contrary to the HUP hindering brotherhood, it “may be the best way to promote it,” all the while “breaking down the horrid barriers of racism.”<sup>49</sup>

Third, McGavran recognized some people and communities are non-homogeneous. Speaking of urban environments, he observed, “In ‘melting pots’ or highly individualistic societies, no one cares who marries whom, and therefore these societies are universally those of low people consciousness. One thinks immediately of middle-class mobile society in North America.”<sup>50</sup> These melting pots are not merely a theorized idea. McGavran recognized that in some metropolitan centers “homogeneous units *are* disintegrating, many cross-class marriages *are* taking place, and migrants from various parts of the country *are* becoming one new people.”<sup>51</sup> These non-homogeneous peoples and communities are a “true melting pot,” and in them churches comprised of different races, classes, and cultures are experiencing rapid growth by conversion. In this context, he recommended that churches worship in a standard language and emphasize “the unifying brotherhood.”<sup>52</sup>

## EVALUATING THE HOMOGENEOUS UNIT PRINCIPLE

No shortage of critics of the HUP exists. Mark DeYmaz, pastor of the Mosaic Church of Central Arkansas and cofounder of the Mosaic Global Network, wrote in *Building a Healthy Multi-Ethnic Church*, “And let me make one thing



perfectly clear from the start: pursuit of the multi-ethnic local church is, in my view, not optional. It is biblically mandated for all who would aspire to lead local congregations of faith.”<sup>53</sup> DeYmaz commented even more pointedly when he addressed the HUP, stating, “In fact, it is my opinion that the homogeneous-unit principle should no longer inform church planting and development, as I believe it will become an increasing hindrance to both the advance of the Gospel and the growth of the church in the twenty-first century—certainly in the United States, if not the rest of the world as well.”<sup>54</sup>

Another recent challenge came from New Testament scholar Eckhard J. Schnabel, who found no support in the Bible for homogeneous units. In *Paul the Missionary: Realities, Strategies and Methods*, he dedicated several pages to the HUP, arguing,

Paul did not establish separate local congregations for Gentile slaves and for Gentile freedmen, or separate congregations for the members of the social elite and for the vast majority of the poor.... Paul established local assemblies of followers of Jesus irrespective of their ethnic, cultural or social identity, insisting on the unity of the local expression of the people of God.<sup>55</sup>

Later, Schnabel added, “Neither Paul’s theology nor his missionary practice provides even the slightest grounds for justifying the apartheid of people in a local congregation.”<sup>56</sup>

C. Rene Padilla offered a biblical and theological evaluation of the HUP in “The Unity of the Church and the Homogeneous Unit Principle.” The paper was an expanded version of the paper he presented at the 1977 Lausanne Consultation at Fuller Theological Seminary, which focused on the HUP.<sup>57</sup> At the time, Padilla lived in Argentina and served as associate editor of *Editorial Caribe* and pastor of the La Lucila Baptist Church. He was active in the Lausanne Movement and was one of eleven participants in the 1977 Lausanne Consultation.<sup>58</sup>

Padilla’s principal challenge to the HUP was that “[t]hroughout the New Testament the oneness of the people of God as a oneness that transcends all outward distinctions is taken for granted.”<sup>59</sup> He explained that people are never presented in the Bible as being in isolation. Therefore, the church is projected in the New Testament as the “solidarity that has been created in Jesus Christ and that stands in contrast with the older humanity represented by Adam.”<sup>60</sup> The last Adam, Christ, restores God’s original design for humanity.

The effect of a person becoming a new creation in Christ is that he or she is introduced into a reconciled relationship with God, as well as with all believers. Padilla explained, "Whether a person likes it or not, the same act that reconciles one to God *simultaneously* introduces the person into a community where people find their identity in Jesus Christ rather than in their race, culture, social class, or sex, and are consequently reconciled to one another."<sup>61</sup>

Padilla argued further that this solidarity of believers across race, class, and sex is a fundamental element of the gospel, not a result of progressive sanctification or as McGavran described it, perfecting.<sup>62</sup> Life in Christ does not exist without simultaneous participation in the unity of the Body of Christ. He challenged the HUP by concluding that in Christ there is but one homogeneous unit, and the restoration of God's purpose in humanity is made visible in the church.<sup>63</sup>

Padilla strengthened his argument by surveying the New Testament, providing a cursory examination of Jesus' example, the Jerusalem church, the church in Syrian Antioch, the early Gentile churches and the "circumcision party," the Gentile mission, the church in Corinth, and the church in Rome. He observed that "[a]gain and again the emphasis falls on the fact that believers have been incorporated into Jesus Christ, as result of which all the differences deriving from their respective homogeneous units are now relativized to such a degree that in the context of the Christian community they can be viewed as nonexistent."<sup>64</sup> He also reasoned that this unity made the gospel especially attractive.<sup>65</sup>

Padilla completed his evaluation of the HUP with five conclusions and asserted that if he was correct, no biblical foundation existed for employing the HUP.<sup>66</sup>

(1) In the early church the gospel was proclaimed to all people, whether Jews or Gentiles, slaves or free, rich or poor, without partiality; (2) the breaking down of barriers that separate people in the world was regarded as an *essential aspect of the gospel*, not merely as a result of it; (3) the church not only grew, but it grew across cultural barriers; (4) the New Testament clearly shows that the apostles, while rejecting 'assimilationist racism,' never contemplated the possibility of forming homogeneous unit churches that would then express their unity in terms of interchurch relations; and (5) there may have been times when the

believers were accused of traitorously abandoning their own culture in order to join another culture, but there is no indication that the apostles approved of adjustments made in order to avoid that charge.<sup>67</sup>

By the time Padilla presented his rebuff of the HUP, twenty years had passed since *Bridges of God* was published, and in that time the Church Growth Movement had launched and produced a number of popular works and research dissertations, many of which incorporated the HUP. Padilla believed that the HUP had failed, and the reason it had failed was that it began as a sociological observation and only *a posteriori* was there an attempt to secure a biblical foundation. “What can be expected,” he lamented, “of a missiology that exhibits dozens of books and dissertations dealing with the Church Growth approach, but not one major work on the theology of missions.”<sup>68</sup>

A few additional comments are needed to complete this evaluation. As mentioned earlier, McGavran and Victor Hayward exchanged a series of spirited letters from 1971 to 1973 over the validity of the HUP; Hayward later served as one of the eleven participants in the Lausanne Consultation of 1977. He was strident in his opposition to the HUP, and after the two-year debate, both men agreed for their letters to be published and both men provided valuable summary statements.

In Hayward’s letter of August 16, 1971, he conceded the argument that it was acceptable for people to be evangelized and to worship separately according to language, while arguing that “the *crucial* application of the Gospel to the Christian community was precisely the crossing of a racial barrier, and the demonstration (which was not what either Jews or Gentiles liked) that in Christ, Jew and Gentile were made one.”<sup>69</sup>

McGavran responded in a letter on September 15, 1971, stating, “The matter is complex.”<sup>70</sup> To demonstrate, he offered a series of situations and questions, three of which are listed here:

1. Pasadena has 60,000 blacks and 180,000 whites. We agree that it is wrong to bar any man of any race or color who wishes to worship with or visit any church. *Question:* Is it sinful, inadvisable, or desirable in starting a new church in Pasadena to plan for it to be in a black (or white) neighborhood, and therefore, dominantly black or white?

2. In the Kond Hills, the Church is composed of Konds and Panos, who are acutely conscious of being different castes which never intermarry or interdine.

*Question:* (i) Is it sinful, inadvisable, or desirable to start dominantly Kond or dominantly Pano congregations? (ii) Must each would-be convert before baptism agree to intercommune, interdine, or intermarry with Christians of the other caste? Yes. No.

3. In Nairobi multi-tribe congregations are common among the English-speaking elite. Among the semi-literate tribes, one-tribe congregations are common.

*Question:* Are multi-tribe congregations essentially more Christian than one-tribe congregations?<sup>71</sup>

Both men confirmed many points of agreement in their debate; yet Hayward concluded they remained apart on the validity of the HUP. McGavran seized on one response in Hayward's summary to show that they were in fact arguing for the same position: "In Mr. Hayward's Summary Statement, one sentence bears precisely on this issue. It reads: 'Men can become Christian without the actual local experience of crossing such barriers: but they deny Christ if they refuse to cross such barriers when crossing or not crossing becomes an issue.'"<sup>72</sup> Noting the first clause of Hayward's text, McGavran declared victory. Likewise, Hayward's qualification in the second clause that intended to protect brotherhood in Christ presented no challenge to McGavran. He stated that from the beginning he had insisted that the HUP "need not impair brotherhood—indeed, [it] may be the best way to promote it."<sup>73</sup>

Hayward is not alone among the critics of the HUP who have challenged it on biblical grounds, only to concede some measure of validity in its practice. Padilla was unrelenting in his critique of the Church Growth Movement, especially the HUP, saying the Movement had failed "to take biblical theology seriously."<sup>74</sup> He, however, affirmed the complexity of this matter and used the words of Leslie Newbigin to concede that limited use of the HUP was necessary. "We must admit, Padilla wrote, "that at times 'The witness of separate congregations in the same geographical area on the basis of language and culture may have to be accepted as a necessary, but provisional, measure for the sake of the fulfillment of Christ's mission' (Newbigin 1977: 124)."<sup>75</sup>

DeYmaz has not so much conceded a limited, temporary role for the HUP as he has approached it from a nuanced perspective that led him to declare,

“For the purpose of evangelism and discipleship, then, we can conclude that the HUP is biblical.”<sup>76</sup> He distinguished evangelism and discipleship from church planting and development, and opened the door wide for the HUP as long as it does not operate in the arena of church planting and development.

This dichotomy is interesting, and one that even DeYmaz struggled to preserve in the multiethnic church he started. He rejected the model in which churches are largely homogeneous and reflect Christian unity by sharing resources and demonstrating love for and partnership with one another while remaining separate congregations. He noted, “From the outset, then, we saw this model as problematic and determined to do things differently at Mosaic Church of Central Arkansas, the church that I founded and still pastor albeit after a somewhat rocky start.”<sup>77</sup>

DeYmaz described his initial model of biblical brotherhood and multiethnicity as a “fail.”<sup>78</sup> Initially, Spanish-only-speaking attendees participated in corporate worship services for singing, prayer, and announcements—all conducted in English. They were then dismissed to another room where a Spanish-speaking leader presented the message “in their own language.”<sup>79</sup> DeYmaz’s transparency was raw and powerful when he described the optics of watching their Spanish-speaking brothers and sisters walk out of the service to a segregated room.<sup>80</sup>

DeYmaz’s second model of multiethnic integration ran for five years and focused on providing simultaneous translation in the worship services for the message and providing subtitles in Spanish for songs. Fearing they would compromise their convictions to be a multiethnic church and wanting to avoid any expression of segregation, the church would not allow language-based small groups.

This model provided the clearest and best effort to guard church planting and development from the HUP, but two major obstacles led to its failure. First, DeYmaz admitted that it was “a viable path for assimilation only for those first-generation internationals (whom we sometimes refer to as 1.0s) who were enthusiastically devoted to more immediate integration.”<sup>81</sup> The result was that only Hispanics and Latinos pursuing integration into North American culture were “willing to embrace a good bit of personal discomfort to be part of the church.”<sup>82</sup> Second, DeYmaz encountered a recurring conversation with those who chose to attempt assimilation, only to leave after a few visits. They often described their reason for leaving in these words,

“We love the people and the heart of Mosaic... but it is just too difficult to worship in English.”<sup>83</sup>

The third model was merely a slight adaptation of the second model, and the church used it for two years. This model differed from the second by the inclusion of “language-specific small groups” that met at the church.<sup>84</sup>

In April 2008, DeYmaz and the church began using a fourth model, which continues to be implemented. With it, the corporate worship services are conducted in English with simultaneous translation available via head phones for various language groups. Ethnic members serve the church in various roles, and some serve in leadership roles, including the staff team and governing board of elders. Concurrently, various ethno-linguistic groups conduct a “both/and approach to 1.0 evangelism, discipleship, and leadership development.”<sup>85</sup> They do so by what DeYmaz described as “HUP-driven ministries emanating from within a local church that target these varying people groups for the purpose of evangelism.”<sup>86</sup> These HUP-driven ministries of the church include any number of efforts such as “an evangelistically-focused worship service, English as a second language (ESL) classes, or any number of other programs *done in a style and language that is the one most familiar to the target group.*”<sup>87</sup>

While clarifying that he had no intention of creating an “ethnic-specific church,” DeYmaz acknowledged they had “adopted the HUP as an evangelistic tool for ethnic-specific outreach” and to “establish an initial level of comfort for internationals who are coming to Christ through our witness and into the church who are not yet fluent in the language or culture of the United States.”<sup>88</sup> The wall DeYmaz erected between encouraging use of the HUP in evangelism and discipleship and denouncing its use in church planting and development has been reduced to a speed bump, if not eliminated all together.

## CONCLUSION

The intersection between making disciples of *panta ta ethne* and oneness in Christ as “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession” is the flashpoint of the debate surrounding the Homogeneous Unit Principle.<sup>89</sup> They are dance partners in evangelism and discipleship as well as church planting and development. Both are firmly established in God’s Word, and both have practical application in complex cultural contexts

where “entrenched evils” exit.<sup>90</sup> Neither contradicts the other, and both are necessary to fulfill the Great Commission and Great Commandment. I will conclude with five responses to the question, “What value does McGavran’s Homogeneous Unit Principle have for pastors and church planters today?”

**1. The HUP rejects color blindness.** As surely as highways, rail lines, and rivers divide communities, race, language, culture, and gender are dividing forces among us. Frey, Stetzer, and others paint a vivid picture that portrays the U.S. as a melting pot and simultaneously as a mosaic of peoples, communities, and churches that maintain a strong sense of people consciousness. The painful and emotional experiences of the people in Ferguson, Missouri remind us that segregation and its ills still exist in America. They tell us that the racial makeup of police departments, communities, and churches often reflect more of *panta ta ethne* than of solidarity across racial, social, and linguistic barriers.

McGavran’s HUP did not create these barriers. Instead, the HUP helps identify them in our communities and our churches, especially where they hinder the spread of the gospel and the growth of the church. The HUP helps us see a country or city as a honeycomb of different peoples, and the most obvious example in North America is that of first-generation immigrants whose “foreign” language and culture hinder them from hearing the gospel from majority-culture Christians.

**2. The HUP encourages effective models of evangelism and church planting for the sake of the gospel.** No person serious about the gospel chooses ineffective models of making disciples. Even so, some models are less effective than others. DeYmaz provided an insightful example of moving from a less effective model to a more effective model, and McGavran would have applauded this progression. He taught that the HUP was useful in “many situations,” and he advised, “Apply with common sense is the rule.”<sup>91</sup>

Manual Ortiz, professor of ministry and urban missions at Westminster Theological Seminary and author of *One New People: Models for Developing a Multiethnic Church*, wrote, “Church models are used extensively... to demonstrate how principles are fleshed out in a practical sense.”<sup>92</sup> The “elastic” nature of the HUP encourages a variety of models to effectively and biblically make disciples of segments of society ranging from those with

clearly defined boundaries to those in individualized, melting-pot societies where boundaries are less distinguishable.

**3. *The HUP makes evangelizing a segment, city, or country the goal rather than starting a particular church.*** It is common today to talk of starting a multiethnic church, a cowboy church, or some other type of church. McGavran envisioned the HUP as an aid to evangelizing an entire country through its various segments. Even when he spoke of a given homogeneous unit, he proposed that the HUP was an aid to evangelize the entire segment out to its edges and beyond as a step toward evangelizing the entire country or city. The difference is profound. Many hear McGavran speaking about the growth of a local church, when in fact he was most often speaking about the growth of the church through planting many churches.

Rather than insisting that the idea of multiethnic or homogeneous churches become a universal principle or mandate, the mandate should be understood as a call to evangelize all the people and peoples in our cities and country and to plant churches among them. Some segments, especially those divided by language, will require either separate, more homogeneous churches or hybrid, multiethnic churches like that which DeYmaz is attempting. In all churches, a biblical oneness in Christ within these congregations and between them must be taught, practiced, and cherished.

**4. *The HUP prioritizes the gospel through evangelism and church planting.*** While McGavran developed the HUP within the context of India, Hinduism, and the caste system, he promoted it in the context of the World Council of Churches, which was moving away from evangelism and church planting as “the essential task of missions.”<sup>93</sup> The HUP stood on the foundation that the “essential task of missions” was making disciples of Jesus and no amount of good deeds and social justice could replace the role of the gospel. For McGavran, the gospel was the means to a better life, and the HUP demonstrates his hyper-focus on growing the church through conversions.

Social justice and the proclamation of the gospel are not incompatible. In fact, McGavran saw good deeds and a concern for social justice as integral to Christianity. He practiced them himself. Through the HUP, however, he established the proclamation of the gospel that leads to new disciples and new churches as the “essential task of missions.” Much is said today



about missional living, and it has great value as a call to live out the gospel in our communities. The HUP's emphasis on gospel proclamation as the means of evangelizing non-Christian peoples is a timely reminder, if not a warning. Missional living will remain a valid expression of kingdom living as long as it remains vocal about the gospel. If the gospel becomes muted or secondary, and if it no longer leads to the conversion of non-Christian peoples, missional living will have abandoned the "essential task of missions."

**5. The HUP affirms that the Scriptures must be our first guide for evangelism and church planting.** Over the years, McGavran refined numerous elements of the HUP, and toward the end of his life, he seldom mentioned the term. As a principle, however, he maintained its validity, making it part of a series of lectures he presented at Westminster Theological Seminary in 1986. C. Peter Wagner dropped it from his vocabulary in later years, even after having written his dissertation at the University of Southern California as an apologetic for it.<sup>94</sup> Likewise, Ralph D. Winter later softened his people group missions strategy, launched in 1974, which he based heavily on the HUP.<sup>95</sup>

These changes followed decades of debate and dialogue centered on the Scriptures as the guiding force for the message as well as the methods of evangelism and church planting. There has been nearly universal affirmation that the HUP's understanding of the human sinful condition apart from Christ is helpful. The debate, however, raged over the models of evangelism and church planting the HUP recommended, especially where they collided with the Bible's teaching and examples of the oneness in Christ shared by all Christians. Though McGavran never conceded that the HUP violated the Bible's teachings about Christian solidarity, he consistently submitted the HUP to the Scriptures as the guiding authority for the message and methods of making disciples. The point of debate was over the understanding and application of the Scriptures, especially when applying them in complex multiethnic environments. The authority of the Scriptures was never questioned.

The challenge of making disciples of *panta ta ethne* and being the Body of Christ—living in Christian solidarity across language, race, culture, and sex—will remain in tension until the return of Christ. McGavran's voice was as a missionary focused on evangelizing an entire country or city. He was not a trained theologian or biblical scholar. Though supportive of the Civil Rights Movement, he spoke as a missionary strategist and not as a

social activist. The HUP continues to speak accurately about cultures and churches around the world, even in the “melting pot” of North America. As a descriptive principle, its value is timeless. As a prescriptive principle, its value must be qualified.

McGavran has helped us remember that that which we debate in the seminary must also be lived in the community. He has caused us to think and speak more biblically and carefully about *panta ta ethne* and our oneness in Christ. He has sparked discussions that have led us to use more biblical and refined methods and models of evangelism and church planting. And while passions still run high for and against the HUP, his legacy is that of an even greater passion, a passion that we might win more people, more cities, and more nations for Christ.

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- <sup>1</sup> Donald A. McGavran, *The Bridges of God* (London: World Dominion Press, 1955).
  - <sup>2</sup> Gary L. McIntosh, “Why Church Growth Can’t Be Ignored,” in *Evaluating the Church Growth Movement: 5 Views*, ed. Gary McIntosh (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 7. See also as examples of global missions influence The Pasadena Consultation: Homogeneous Unit Principle,” The Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, 1978, accessed January 12, 2014, <http://www.lausanne.org/content/lop/lop-1>; and Ralph D. Winter, “Unreached Peoples: The Development of the Concept,” in *Reaching the Unreached: The Old-New Challenge*, ed. Harvie M. Conn (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1984), 25.
  - <sup>3</sup> C. Peter Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow: Seven Vital Signs of a Healthy Church*, rev. ed. (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1984), 128.
  - <sup>4</sup> “Fact Sheet,” DeKalb County School District, January 12, 2015, <http://www.dekalb.k12.ga.us/www/documents/history/index/dekalb-faq-032613.pdf>.
  - <sup>5</sup> Mark Gottdiener, Ray Hutchison, and Michael T. Ryan, *The New Urban Sociology*, 5th ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2015), 187.
  - <sup>6</sup> Paul Taylor, *The Next America: Boomers, Millennials, and The Looming Generational Showdown* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2014), 71; see also William H. Frey, *Diversity Explosion: How New Racial Demographics Are Remaking America* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institute Press, 2015), 2-4.
  - <sup>7</sup> Frey, *Diversity Explosion*, 3.
  - <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 16-17.
  - <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 173-74, 176.
  - <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.
  - <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 178, 183.
  - <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 184-85.
  - <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 186-87.
  - <sup>14</sup> Gary Orfield, John Kucsera, Genevieve Siegel-Hawley, “Executive Summary: E Pluribus... Separation: Deepening Double Segregation for More Students” (Los Angeles, CA: The Civil Rights Project, September 19, 2012), accessed January 26, 2015, [http://civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/research/k-12-education/integration-and-diversity/mlk-national/e-pluribus...separation-deepening-double-segregation-for-more-students/orfield\\_ePluribus\\_executive\\_2012.pdf](http://civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/research/k-12-education/integration-and-diversity/mlk-national/e-pluribus...separation-deepening-double-segregation-for-more-students/orfield_ePluribus_executive_2012.pdf).
  - <sup>15</sup> Frey, *Diversity*, 191.
  - <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 193-203.
  - <sup>17</sup> Bob Smietana, “Sunday Morning Segregation: Most Worshipers Feel Their Church Has Enough Diversity,” *Christianity Today*, January 15, 2015, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/gleanings/2015/january/>

- sunday-morning-segregation-most-worshippers-church-diversity.html.
- <sup>18</sup> Quoted in Smietana, "Sunday Morning Segregation."
- <sup>19</sup> McGavran, *Bridges of God*; Donald A. McGavran, *How Churches Grow* (London: World Dominion Press), 1959; Donald A. McGavran, "Homogeneous Populations and Church Growth," in *Church Growth and Christian Mission*, eds. Donald A. McGavran, et al. (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 69-86; Donald A. McGavran, *Ethnic Realities and the Church: Lessons from India* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1979); Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970 and rev. 1980); and Donald A. McGavran and Victor E. W. Hayward, "Without Crossing Barriers? One in Christ vs. Discipling Diverse Cultures," *Missiology* 2, no. 2 (April 1974): 203-24. Hayward later served as one of the eleven participants in the Lausanne Consultation that met from May 31 to June 2, 1977, at Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, CA, to discuss the HUP.
- <sup>20</sup> McGavran and Hayward, "Without Crossing Barriers? One in Christ," 203-24.
- <sup>21</sup> McGavran, *Bridges*, 161. See also Donald A. McGavran, *How Churches Grow* (New York: Free Press, 1966), 35-37.
- <sup>22</sup> McGavran, *Bridges*, 157-71.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.
- <sup>24</sup> McGavran, *Church Growth*, 223. This citation and all that follow for *Church Growth* are taken from the 1980 revised edition.
- <sup>25</sup> McGavran, "Homogeneous Populations," 69-70. Emphasis McGavran's.
- <sup>26</sup> McGavran, *Church Growth*, 95. Emphasis McGavran's.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 222.
- <sup>28</sup> Donald A. McGavran, "Loose the churches: Let them go! An essential issue in Indian evangelism." *Missiology* 1, no. 2 (1973): 81-94. See also Donald A. McGavran, "The Hottest Race Issue in the World," *Transformation: An International Journal of Holistic Mission Studies* 2 no. 2 (April/June 1985): 15.
- <sup>29</sup> McGavran, "Hottest Race Issue," 17.
- <sup>30</sup> McGavran, *Bridges*, 7.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.
- <sup>33</sup> McGavran and Hayward, "Without Crossing Barriers? One in Christ," 218-19. Emphasis McGavran's.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 218. This model should not be confused with the "Homogeneous Unit Church" McGavran described elsewhere. That model "may be defined as 'that cluster of congregations of one denomination which is growing in a given homogeneous unit.'" See McGavran, *Church Growth*, 97. Emphasis McGavran's.
- <sup>35</sup> McGavran, *Bridges*, 13.
- <sup>36</sup> McGavran and Hayward, "Without Crossing Barriers? One in Christ," 220. McGavran also acknowledged that in individualized urban areas a missions strategy along people group lines was not always needed. By doing so, he affirmed, at least in practice, what New Testament studies have proven—that *ethnos* does at times mean *peoples groups* and at other times it simply means *Gentiles*. For a helpful discussion of *ethnos* in the New Testament, see "Unreached People Groups: The Unique and Primary Goal of Missions," Desiring God, John Piper, last modified January 1, 1991, accessed January 29, 2015, <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/unreached-peoples>.
- <sup>37</sup> McGavran, *Church Growth*, 207-22.
- <sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.
- <sup>39</sup> Gary L. McIntosh, "The Life and Ministry of Donald A. McGavran: A Short Overview." Paper presented at the American Society for Church Growth Annual Meeting November 2005, accessed January 26, 2015, <http://churchgrowthnetwork.com/free-resources/2010/05/25/the-life-and-ministry-of-donald-a-mcgavran/>.
- <sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>41</sup> McGavran, *Church Growth*, 238-39.
- <sup>42</sup> Hayward and McGavran, "Without Crossing Barriers? One in Christ," 216.
- <sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 224.
- <sup>44</sup> McGavran, *Church Growth*, 241.
- <sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>46</sup> Hayward and McGavran, "Without Crossing Barriers? One in Christ," 212.
- <sup>47</sup> McGavran, *Church Growth*, 239.
- <sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 224.
- <sup>49</sup> Hayward and McGavran, "Without Crossing Barriers? One in Christ," 213, 222.
- <sup>50</sup> McGavran, *Church Growth*, 214.

- <sup>51</sup> Ibid., 244. Emphasis McGavran's.
- <sup>52</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>53</sup> Mark DeYmaz, *Building a Healthy Multi-Ethnic Church: Mandate, Commitments, and Practices of a Diverse Congregation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007), xxix.
- <sup>54</sup> Ibid., 62-63.
- <sup>55</sup> Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary: Realities, Strategies and Methods* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2008), 409-10.
- <sup>56</sup> Ibid., 412.
- <sup>57</sup> Rene C. Padilla "The Unity of the Church and the Homogeneous Unit Principle," in *Exploring Church Growth*, ed. Wilbert R. Shenk (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 285-303.
- <sup>58</sup> "LOP 1: The Pasadena Consultation."
- <sup>59</sup> Padilla, "The Unity of the Church," 285.
- <sup>60</sup> Ibid., 285.
- <sup>61</sup> Ibid., 287. Emphasis Padilla's.
- <sup>62</sup> Ibid., 286.
- <sup>63</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>64</sup> Ibid., 296; see 288-296 for Padilla's survey of the NT.
- <sup>65</sup> Ibid., 299.
- <sup>66</sup> Padilla, "The Unity of the Church," 301.
- <sup>67</sup> Ibid., 300-301.
- <sup>68</sup> Ibid., 301.
- <sup>69</sup> Hayward and McGavran, "Without Crossing Barriers? One in Christ," 204. Emphasis Hayward's.
- <sup>70</sup> Ibid., 209.
- <sup>71</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>72</sup> Ibid., 222.
- <sup>73</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>74</sup> Ibid., 301.
- <sup>75</sup> Ibid., 301; Leslie Newbigin, "What Is 'A Local Church Truly United'?" *The Ecumenical Review* 29, no. 2 (April 1977), 124.
- <sup>76</sup> Mark DeYmaz, *The Homogeneous Unit Principle: Accept or Reject?* (Little Rock, AR: Mosaic Global Network, 2011), 19, accessed December 22, 2014, PDF ebook.
- <sup>77</sup> DeYmaz, *Homogeneous Unit*, 21.
- <sup>78</sup> Ibid., 24.
- <sup>79</sup> Ibid., 22.
- <sup>80</sup> Ibid. 24.
- <sup>81</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>82</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>83</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>84</sup> Ibid., 26.
- <sup>85</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>86</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>87</sup> Ibid. Emphasis added.
- <sup>88</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>89</sup> 1 Pet 2:9 (ESV)
- <sup>90</sup> McGavran, "Hottest Race Issue," 17.
- <sup>91</sup> McGavran, *Church Growth*, 243.
- <sup>92</sup> Manuel Ortiz, *One New People: Models for Developing a Multiethnic Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 17. Currently, Ortiz is professor emeritus of Ministry and Urban Mission at Westminster Theological Seminary.
- <sup>93</sup> Donald A. McGavran, "My Pilgrimage in Mission," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 10 no. 2 (1986): 53-54.
- <sup>94</sup> Thom S. Rainer, *The Book of Church Growth: History, Theology, and Principles* (Nashville: Broadman, 1993), 259.
- <sup>95</sup> Ralph D. Winter and Bruce A. Koch, "Finishing the Task: The Unreached Peoples Challenge," in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*, ed. Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne (Pasadena: William Carey, 2009), 533, 337.



# Reconsidering Receptivity in The Age of People Groups

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*Over the past 50 years, people group thinking has changed the way evangelicals think about missions and the Great Commission task and has become the overwhelming basis for mission strategy and allocation of mission resources. In light of this trend, this article argues for a reconsideration of Donald A. McGavran's principle of receptivity. Mission sending agencies should reevaluate receptivity as a complementary, not competing, criterion for prioritizing mission strategy and resource allocation and a means of responding to the activity of God.*

## INTRODUCTION

Over the past 50 years, people group thinking has changed the way evangelicals think about missions and the Great Commission task. The mandate to take the gospel to all the people groups of the world (*panta ta ethne*) is now the primary way of thinking about what it means to be obedient to the mission call. People group thinking arose out of the Church Growth Movement and the vision of its founder, Donald McGavran. When McGavran first spoke of people movements and the call to reap a harvest among the peoples, tribes, and castes of the world, his ideas were revolutionary. Now,

more than sixty years after the publication of *Bridges of God*, people group thinking has become the primary paradigm for thinking about missions and the basis for nearly all mission strategy and resource allocation. Somewhere along the way, however, McGavran's theology of harvest and the receptivity principle that derived from it have been all but lost.

As mission sending agencies continue to think through how they formulate strategy and distribute personnel and resources, it is time to reconsider McGavran's receptivity principle. Mission agencies should reevaluate receptivity as a complementary, not competing, criteria for prioritizing mission strategy and resource allocation and a means of responding to the activity of God.

### **McGAVRAN'S RECEPTIVITY PRINCIPLE**

The principle of focusing mission efforts on receptivity arose out of McGavran's conviction that God wills church growth and is actively at work in the world. Prioritizing receptive people was the strategic outworking of what McGavran called "harvest theology." In a world in which people are receptive to the gospel message and many are coming to faith, McGavran argued, we must not only employ a theology of search, but a theology of harvest.<sup>1</sup> Thus, the ultimate goal of missions is not search (that is, going everywhere and preaching the gospel) but harvesting ripe fields through a "vast and purposeful finding."<sup>2</sup> The immediate consequence of a harvest theology, as McGavran stated the matter, was the need to focus mission efforts and resources on receptive peoples—those peoples who were responding to the gospel message. McGavran sought to prioritize those fields in which groups of people were "actually accepting Jesus as Lord, being baptized and formed into congregations."<sup>3</sup> Receptive peoples were those in which people were coming to Christ in significant numbers and the church was growing rapidly.<sup>4</sup>

McGavran argued that receptive peoples, rather than non-receptive ones, should receive the greater part of personnel and mission funds. As McGavran reasoned, "Gospel-accepters have a higher priority than Gospel-rejecters."<sup>5</sup> This priority did not mean an outright abandonment of resistant populations in favor of receptive ones. Rather, God's people should continue to pray for and work in non-responsive areas with hope that they will one day be responsive.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, McGavran contended that the believing community must not neglect the full bringing in of the harvest in receptive areas.

McGavran saw this prioritizing of receptive fields as the proper response to the movement of God. In the present era of missions, McGavran reasoned, God has made large numbers of people responsive to the gospel message. From McGavran's perspective, entire people groups were now receptive to the gospel message like never before. Even among so-called resistant groups, God had made pockets of people receptive. The receptivity principle called for a mission strategy that prioritizes those groups who are presently receptive to the gospel message. Resistant fields must still be worked, but lightly. Priority in both funding and personnel should be on those groups who are right now showing responsiveness to the message in order to "win the winnable while they are winnable."<sup>7</sup>

McGavran introduced the concept of receptivity in *Bridges of God* and *Understanding Church Growth*.<sup>8</sup> When mission leaders met at the International Congress on World Evangelization at Lausanne, McGavran once again promoted his harvest theology. In his address to the congress, McGavran highlighted the unprecedented receptivity in the world and argued passionately for a priority of mission resources toward receptive people.<sup>9</sup> At the same congress, his colleague, Ralph Winter, offered another monumental address.

## THE RISE OF PEOPLE GROUP THINKING

While others had spoken of people groups in the past, most mission historians trace the rise of people group thinking to Ralph Winter's address at the Lausanne congress.<sup>10</sup> While mission work had seen the gospel take root in all the geo-political nations of the world, Winter challenged the delegates to recognize "the existence of separate *peoples* within *countries*" who were separated not by geography but by language and culture.<sup>11</sup> In his address, Winter challenged those at Lausanne to rid themselves of "people blindness" and reorganize to reach the "hidden peoples" of the world with the gospel.<sup>12</sup> The impact of this address is hard to overstate. McGavran noted, at the time, that the address marked "the end of an age in missions" and that "nothing said at Lausanne had more meaning for the expansion of Christianity in the thirty years ahead."<sup>13</sup> His statement proved to be true.

The address led the broader missions community to begin to shift its focus from geographical regions to reaching the "hidden peoples" or "people groups" of the world. This concept soon dominated the missions movement.



A 1982 consultation in Chicago brought further clarification of terms and provided a working definition of a “people group” as

... a significantly large sociological grouping of individuals who perceive themselves to have a common affinity for one another. From the viewpoint of evangelization this is the largest possible group within which the gospel can spread without encountering barriers of understanding or acceptance.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to the change in thinking about people groups, the delegates distinguished between “reached” and “unreached” groups, defining an “unreached” group as

... a people group among which there is no indigenous community of believing Christians with adequate numbers and resources to evangelize this people group without outside (cross-cultural) assistance.<sup>15</sup>

As this further designation of “unreached” peoples began to take hold, fewer and fewer strategies included the concept of receptivity. The need to reach the unreached peoples became the stated goal of nearly every mission agency.

A significant component of this shift, which made people group thinking dominant, was the overwhelming sense that the church could now finish the task of missions and thus fulfill the Great Commission. Winter noted, after Lausanne, the change in terminology from evangelism to evangelization along with the terms’ different emphases: “. . . the word evangelism being a never-ending activity, and evangelization being intended to be a project to be completed. Here, in embryo, was the concept of closure.”<sup>16</sup> As mission organizations began thinking in terms of evangelization and “finishing the task” of missions, people group thinking grew and the concept of reaching unreached peoples became a focal point for mission strategy. The Joshua project and the International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention began in earnest to identify unreached people groups and to formulate a strategy to reach them. The AD2000 movement strived for “A Church for Every People and the Gospel for Every Person by the Year 2000,” while Southern Baptists similarly embraced “Bold Mission Thrust” and its challenge to share the gospel with every person on earth by A.D. 2000. As the shift to people group thinking progressed, mission agencies shifted their strategies

and structures accordingly. The SBC's International Mission Board, for example, introduced the roles of non-resident missionary, and later, strategy coordinator and gave these people the task of creating strategies for reaching groups where traditional missionary methods had not been effective.<sup>17</sup>

Along with this change in strategy came a new measure for what constituted an "unreached" group. A people group is considered unreached "when the number of Evangelical Christians is less than 2% of its population."<sup>18</sup> While no corresponding consensus has emerged on what constitutes a "reached" group, the 2% definition came to prominence as a way of determining which groups remained "unreached," and these unreached groups became the focus of mission strategy. With this measurement in place, mission agencies had a way to prioritize places of service. Mission resources began to be aimed toward reaching those groups that did not meet the 2% threshold.

A further narrowing of focus has developed in recent years, which in many cases has caused another shift in priorities. Among the thousands of unreached groups in which the gospel had not yet taken hold was a smaller number of "unengaged" groups. While the term "unreached" spoke of the number of Christians present in a people group, the term "unengaged" spoke of the lack of presence of an active strategy to reach them. An unengaged group was understood as one in which "there is no church planting strategy consistent with Evangelical faith and practice under way."<sup>19</sup> Because reaching an unreached group begins by first engaging a people and establishing a "beachhead" for mission work, many agencies are thus changing their priorities, again, with a sense of urgency "to mobilize the resources needed to get workers into all the peoples who remain unengaged, peoples with no one working to establish a Church-Planting Movement in their midst."<sup>20</sup>

The world continues to change and, as urbanization and globalization continue to have effect, the shape of people groups continues to change with it. The increased migration patterns and number of refugees have recently given rise to a focus on the "diaspora" peoples living outside their countries of origin.<sup>21</sup> Each of these new designations helps to clarify the picture of the peoples of the world and the places where the task of taking the gospel to the nations is least fulfilled. People group thinking continues to be the dominant trend among mission agencies and practitioners and continues to shape mission strategy.

Overall, the shift to a people group mentality has been positive. People group thinking has brought to the evangelical community an increased awareness of

our need to be obedient to the Great Commission and to proclaim the gospel to “every nation and tribe and language and people” (Rev 7:9). Reaching the unreached people groups of the world has become a proven rallying point for mission support and has generated an excitement about finishing the task. But the shift has not been without casualties. In the urgent rush to reach the unreached, we have seen some overcorrections in strategy that put mission allocations out of balance – overcorrections that have reduced our overall evangelistic effectiveness. In efforts to reach the remaining unreached and unengaged groups, missions groups have sometimes too hastily retreated from receptive fields. We have thus underfunded needed work in those areas where the gospel seed has been planted but the harvesting work is incomplete, leaving the indigenous Christians unequipped to complete the evangelistic task.

### **A RECONSIDERATION OF RECEPTIVITY**

People group thinking, as it has evolved, has resulted in competing factors around which mission strategy and resource allocation are determined. As people group thinking has grown, the concept of receptivity has been effectively lost. Mission agencies continue to focus on finishing the task of missions, and in doing so they highlight the need to reach the unreached and unengaged people groups with the gospel of Christ. The idea of prioritizing those peoples who are receptive to the gospel, however, has been effectively trumped by the perceived need to reach the unreached. McGavran’s receptivity principle still appears from time to time in missions textbooks and training materials, but the broad focus of the mission agencies, in both their public promotion of mission work and in their overall disbursement of mission funds, falls squarely on the goal of reaching the unreached and unengaged people groups of the world.

***Receptivity: A Complementary, Not a Competing Strategy.*** As a component in mission strategy, receptivity has been lost, in part, because it has been seen as a competing strategy to search strategies. The shift in priority occurred because agencies saw the “need” to reach unreached peoples as being greater than the need to harvest ripe fields. Thus, as people group thinking has gained prominence in mission circles, receptivity thinking has diminished. That which started out as complementary foci, emerging from

the same church growth movement and championed by its leaders, came to be seen as competing overarching strategies.<sup>22</sup>

This shift in thinking and practice arose, in part, because the majority of the world's unreached peoples seems to be in those areas most unreceptive to the gospel. Many of the remaining unengaged and unreached peoples are in areas that are closed to missionaries (i.e., the 10/40 window, World A) and among populations that are resistant to the gospel. Thus, the perception is that in order to focus on the unengaged unreached peoples of the world, we must *defocus* on those peoples who are receptive. Thus, the old search vs. harvest dilemma, which McGavran first introduced, has resurfaced, and search is winning the day.<sup>23</sup> Further, as "finishing the task" became thought of in terms of reaching unreached groups and the concept of unreached was numerically defined, receptivity lost its place in the priority of resource allocation.

***Complementary themes in the Church Growth Movement.*** That which McGavran and Winter first proposed at Lausanne, however, were not competing ideas at all. Both McGavran and Winter called for a focus on frontier peoples with no accompanying exclusion of harvest fields. McGavran and Winter were both concerned with reaching the billions of lost found among hidden peoples, who had yet to hear the gospel message. McGavran's call for a focus on receptive peoples was not a call away from frontier missions, but a call toward it. While Winter focused on the remaining task and the continued need for cross-cultural missions, McGavran focused on what God was doing among the unreached peoples of the world and calling others to join in God's work. Winter spoke of the scope and shape of the task, while McGavran spoke of the strategy to complete it. Both were advocating frontier missions with the aim of reaching the remaining unreached peoples with the gospel.

In fact, whenever McGavran spoke of receptivity, he spoke almost exclusively of frontier peoples. McGavran's priority for receptive peoples distinguished not between reached and unreached, but between search and harvest.<sup>24</sup> His harvest theology was nearly always applied to frontier missions. Even after Lausanne, McGavran continued to speak of receptivity in regard to frontier missions, calling agencies to distinguish between "seed sowing frontier missions" and "harvesting frontier missions" in their allocation of resources.<sup>25</sup> Taken together, McGavran and Winter called for both a people group strategy *and* a priority toward receptive people. Even today, McGavran's call for prioritizing

receptive fields is thoroughly consistent with people group thinking. A reconsideration of receptivity does not require a pendulum swing away from people group thinking; rather, such a reconsideration allows for receptivity to be an additional and important criterion in allocating mission resources. Receptivity thinking is a complementary theme to that of people groups, which calls us to pursue frontier missions and to do so effectively.

***Complementary themes in Scripture.*** Neither do we find that receptivity and people group focus are competing themes in the New Testament. Rather, we find that both the arguments for receptivity and for people group focus find their bases in Scripture. A call to reconsider receptivity does not diminish the biblical call to make disciples among unreached groups or the urgency of planting the seed of the gospel among unengaged groups. Who can deny the imperative to take the gospel to all the peoples of the world? Surely, obedience to the Great Commission requires that our aim be to make disciples of *panta ta ethne*, all the peoples (Matt 28:19). We rightly strategize to see the blessing of Abraham extend to “all the families of the earth” (Gen 12:3). We properly strive toward the heavenly vision of one people of God (Eph 2:12-22) comprised of those for whom Jesus died from “every tribe and language and people and nation” (Rev 5:9). We correctly follow the example of the first cross-cultural missionary, the apostle Paul, who aimed to preach the gospel where it had not already been named (Rom 15:20). The gospel imperative demands that we proclaim the gospel to all nations (Mark 13:10). Further, the fact that so many people groups remain unreached and unengaged highlights the importance of our current people-group focus. The biblical mandate does not allow us to back down at all from the goal of reaching every people group with the gospel of Christ and to do quickly. As Robin Hadaway recently noted, “We are to go to the last frontier, to the edge, to the unreached, the unengaged and uncontacted people of the world.”<sup>26</sup>

But, Hadaway reminds us, “Jesus spoke also of the harvest.”<sup>27</sup> We find the receptivity principle firmly imbedded in Scripture. On sending his disciples out to preach the gospel, Jesus spoke of a plentiful harvest with a shortage of laborers to reach it (Matt 9:37-38; Luke 10:2; cf. John 4:35).<sup>28</sup> The same Jesus who sent his disciples to all the towns and villages of Israel (Matt 10:6; Luke 10:1) also told them to shake the dust off their feet when the message was rejected (Matt 10:14; Luke 10:11; cf. Acts 13:51). God was drawing people to himself and making

their hearts receptive to the gospel (John 6:44). When he commissioned his disciples, they were sent out not to merely preach the gospel without regard to response, but to “make disciples” of the nations (Matt 28:19).

Further, we see in the practice of the Apostles that the priority of reaching the unreached was balanced with the need to focus on the receptive. The Apostles spent twelve years establishing the church in Jerusalem and Judea before taking the gospel to the uttermost parts of the world. At no time does one see the Apostles leaving a receptive people to focus on a non-receptive people.<sup>29</sup> Paul was not only concerned about preaching in places where the gospel had not been named (Rom 15:20), but he stayed long enough in each place for the church to be established (Acts 18:11; 19:10; 20:31). Paul prayed for open doors for the gospel (Col 4:3) and took advantage of those opportunities when people were receptive to his message (1 Cor 16:9; cf. Acts 14:27).<sup>30</sup> And, time and again, Paul turned from the Jews, who rejected the gospel message, to the Gentiles who were receptive to it (Acts 13:46; 18:6; 19:9; 28:28).

All these factors provide a biblical basis for the “receptivity” principle that McGavran championed. Further, McGavran was struck by the keen awareness that “receptivity does not arise by accident. Men become open to the Gospel, not by any blind interplay of brute forces, but by God’s sovereign will.”<sup>31</sup> While McGavran focused on unreached peoples, he maintained a priority toward harvesting those people whom God had made receptive. He viewed this priority as a stewardship of the grace of God.<sup>32</sup> If a field was ready for harvest it was because God had made it ready. If people were responsive to the gospel message it was because God had made them responsive. Is that reality not still true today? The question must be asked, “Do we really think that God’s command to make disciples of all the peoples is contrary to his divine work of preparing hearts for the gospel?” And if both these matters are to be observed, should we not prioritize *both* the unreached *and* the receptive?

## **RECONSIDERING RECEPTIVITY REQUIRES A CHANGE IN THINKING AND PRACTICE**

If receptivity and people group thinking are indeed complementary priorities, we must then consider how we should approach and adjust these categories. The reconsideration of receptivity cannot mean that we deemphasize

unreached peoples. On the contrary, an urgency remains to engage unengaged groups with the gospel and to spend a greater share of resources on unreached groups than we do presently.<sup>33</sup>

***In reconsidering receptivity, we must first engage the unengaged.*** A reconsideration of receptivity cannot trump the need to reach unreached peoples. We must send missionaries with the purpose of reaching the unreached. We must also prioritize those unreached fields that show receptivity to the gospel. These obligations are not contradictory. In fact, some of the change in emphasis away from receptive peoples results from the mistaken notion that “receptive” means “reached.” But such a notion is far from McGavran’s original thinking. Receptivity was a term applied almost exclusively to frontier missions (i.e., unreached peoples). A receptive field in McGavran’s thinking was an unreached people in which significant numbers of people are responding to the gospel message. Receptivity is a frontier missions idea. As the good news is announced to unreached peoples, some will be more receptive than others. Receptivity calls us to prioritize those fields in which, when the gospel is proclaimed, people are responding in repentance and faith.

This reasoning means that we cannot deemphasize the necessity of engaging the unengaged. A consideration of receptivity only takes place *after* the gospel has been proclaimed. Still, receptivity informs an answer to the question of which unengaged groups receive priority. Even before a comprehensive church planting strategy is in place to reach a people, initial evangelistic work will already be taking place. A reconsideration of receptivity will not ignore the frontier, but will prioritize those unengaged groups where the initial proclamation of the gospel is seeing fruit or holds the most promise. To those unengaged groups who have no gospel witness at all, receptivity is not even a factor. *Receptivity cannot be measured or determined among groups where the gospel has not been named.* Thus, McGavran’s admonition to occupy resistant fields lightly<sup>34</sup> is meaningless when a people group has not had enough exposure to the gospel to resist it. McGavran’s criteria of determining receptivity assumes evangelistic engagement and cannot be measured without it. He would agree that we must quickly take the gospel to the remaining peoples of the world who have no access to it. Then, as the gospel goes out to the frontier peoples, we prioritize sending personnel



and funds to those places where we see a receptivity to the message, where the harvest is ripe.

To consider receptivity, then, one must consider not only the number of adherents or the presence of a strategy to reach a people in the future, but also the effectiveness of those efforts in the present. A reconsideration of receptivity means that, built into our mission strategy, we prioritize work among unreached peoples where we are seeing fruit. Seed sowing continues wherever a people remains unreached.<sup>35</sup> But where we see open doors of opportunity for the gospel and people responding to it, that field should then become a priority for mission funding until the church is firmly planted among the people or it ceases to be receptive.

***In reconsidering receptivity, we need new and renewed definitions.*** One problem that has affected thinking about both people groups and receptivity is the lack of precise definitions and terms used to describe different categories of need. To reconsider receptivity, one must first reconsider what receptivity means. Many missions practitioners reject McGavran's proposal to prioritize receptive peoples, in part, because they have ascribed new meaning to the term that McGavran never intended. This new meaning understands the term "receptive" to define any type of cross-cultural work among people where a substantial Christian movement already exists or where the primary work of mission is not evangelization but discipleship. Yet, McGavran applied the term "receptive" to frontier missions, where the primary aim was bringing people to faith in Christ and enfolded them into the church.

A receptive population, in McGavran's view, is not a population that is already reached, but an unreached group in the process of being reached. In McGavran's use, a consideration of receptivity asks...

Are groups of persons becoming Christians? As Jesus Christ is proclaimed to this population and his obedient servants witness to him, do individuals, families, and chains of families actually come to faith in him? Are churches being formed?<sup>36</sup>

If the answer to these questions is yes, then we must "adjust methods, institutions, and personnel" to win these receptive peoples to the Lord.<sup>37</sup> To refer to reached peoples as "receptive" signals a misunderstanding of McGavran.

Not only has the term "receptive" been misunderstood, but the meaning



of the terminology “people group” itself has in many places become diluted. One of the common misconceptions about people group thinking results from the tendency to label just about any strata of society a “people group.” So, S. Kent Parks explains, “young people, the disabled, prostitutes, or taxi drivers in certain cities (which are actually segments or a strata of society) [are] defined as a ‘people group.’”<sup>38</sup> Thus, while churches and missionaries legitimately seek to contextualize their approaches, these strata, sub-groups and sub-cultures do not constitute “people groups” in the missiological sense and certainly not in the sense McGavran intended. People group terminology should not be used for any and every group. A group may in fact be unreached, but we confuse our methodological and strategic thinking if we call these various strata “people groups.” A reconsideration of receptivity means that we maintain thinking in terms of people groups and preserving the term for “the largest possible group within which the gospel can spread without encountering barriers of understanding or acceptance.”<sup>39</sup>

Perhaps the greatest confusion lies in what it means for a people group to be “reached” or “unreached.” The common practice of mission agencies had been to use a threshold of 2% of the population being evangelical Christians as a means of identifying unreached groups. This approach, however, has come under fire in recent years. In particular, some missiologists questioned whether the 2% mark is a sufficient guide for determining mission strategy and allocation of resources. David Sills argued, for example, that the 2% threshold is an arbitrary and insufficient measurement for determining the greatest missions need.<sup>40</sup> Rather than designating the “least” evangelized peoples, the 2% threshold contributed to “a missions philosophy that determines strategy, deploys missionaries, and invests missions resources based on arbitrarily determined levels of ‘reachedness.’”<sup>41</sup> Sills argues for working in “harvest fields,” noting that “There is no arbitrary percentage point to determine when missionary work is over in a particular area or people group.”<sup>42</sup> Robin Hadaway built upon Sills’ argument to refute the common notion that 2% is a sufficient number of Christians among a people group for those believers to reach their own people. Hadaway argued for a reconsideration of the 2% threshold to provide a more reasonable “basis for both the proportional deployment of personnel and when a country or people group is able to reach itself.”<sup>43</sup> Thus, while the 2% threshold might be helpful in identifying the *least* reached groups and measuring our progress

in reaching them, the number does not equal “reached” in any real sense. Rather, the real benefit of assigning a number seems to be that a numerical value helps to identify those groups who are the *most* unreached. Using the 2% threshold thus reduces the number of groups identified as unreached and makes the overall task of reaching them seem more manageable.

The 2% threshold was problematic, furthermore, because it left other questions unanswered. To employ the 2% threshold to define “unreached,” while failing to specify the point at which a people is “reached,” is problematic. To that end, the Joshua project has recently updated its definitions and added new categories to help clarify the world’s need. The new categories, including “minimally reached” and “partially reached” help paint a clearer picture of the evangelistic need, what it means for a group to be reached, and indicate those engaged groups that are the least reached.<sup>44</sup> Still, the definitions are primarily based on percentages and number of adherents without regard to receptivity. No categories indicate whether or not a people is receptive to the gospel – whether the gospel is taking root and people are coming to faith in large numbers when the gospel goes forth.

Thus, even with these new progress categories, there remains a strong missional preference toward “unreached” groups. Along with those peoples who are least reached, we must prioritize the receptive peoples who lie in these middle categories. Otherwise, we tend to leave ripe fields unharvested, the very failure McGavran warned against. Need-based strategizing is not necessarily a bad approach, but it can prove to be an insufficient approach. Mission strategists and senders must realize that receptive peoples who remain unreached constitute a missions “need” that should receive priority in funding even after they have reached the 2% threshold. A balanced strategy will prioritize receptive peoples in these middle categories as well.

***In reconsidering receptivity, we need a linear approach to missions.*** These new categories help, in part, to see the big picture in terms of the progress of Christianity and the remaining need of reaching the world for Christ. Still, mission sending agencies tend to operate under a silo approach to missions in which the different stages of evangelization have become separate and distinct priorities and as such, in competition for mission resources. To be sure, McGavran himself helped create this problem when he separated “discipling” from “perfecting,” dividing the Great Commission itself into

separate and competing priorities.<sup>45</sup> Whatever one's take on McGavran's "discipling" and "perfecting," the tendency, today, has been to distinguish God's call to preach the gospel to all nations from the call to make disciples and establish his church among them. We have prioritized reaching over teaching, the least reached over the unreached, and the unengaged over the unreached, all while using the Scriptures in an attempt to support our efforts. Yet, the Great Commission combines all these priorities into one command.

Our role as disciples is to preach a gospel that results in new Christ-followers who are then baptized into the church and are trained in the teachings of the Word of God. Obedience to the Great Commission requires a balance of these God-given directives. We cannot reduce our missions priority to engaging the remaining unengaged groups or starting church planting movements among the least reached peoples. Hadaway rightly calls for a "course correction in missions" so that the missions community broadens its understanding of missions "to include not only reaching the last frontier, but also reaping the receptive in the harvest fields and teaching and discipling the new converts from both."<sup>46</sup> We need a missions movement that balances these priorities so that we are fully following the Lord's mandate.

Perhaps, however, we need more than balance. To strive for balance means we do not allow one purpose to be out of proportion with other purposes. Still, a call for balance leaves these purposes as separate and competing priorities that must be managed. What we ought to strive for is holistic mission—not the kind of holism that believes that all Christian activity constitutes mission, but the kind that sees evangelization as a linear process that has a beginning and end with different priorities at each stage. We need a mission that seeks to establish Christ's church among all the world's peoples. We need a view of mission that incorporates the whole evangelistic task from start to finish. We need a mission that moves from the initial sowing of the gospel seed on to seeing the church firmly established and of sufficient numbers to reach its own people and join the global mission to those who have not yet heard. We need a holism that sees each priority as a part of the whole goal of evangelization. What we have treated as competing priorities are, rather, successive phases of the *same* priority. To prioritize only one step in the process is to miss the whole for its parts. We must return to seeing evangelization as a linear movement from initial engagement to fully "reached," with the result that a field is not abandoned while the work remains incomplete.

In such a linear view, receptivity is not a separate priority, but speaks to each stage of the process. Receptivity does not place one phase of work over another, but prioritizes fields where we see God at work over those where we do not.<sup>47</sup> We thus engage the unengaged with the aim of seeing peoples come to faith in Christ. As the gospel is proclaimed to least-reached and unreached peoples, including those unreached peoples above the 2% threshold, we focus our efforts on receptive peoples. We prioritize work among those groups in which people are coming to faith in Christ and being enfolded into his church. As ripe fields are harvested and the church is established, part of our goal will be to multiply evangelists and missionaries as God calls more laborers into his harvest. Strategies and personnel levels may change as the work progresses from one phase to the next. Such changes, however, will not be made because one phase of the work is seen as more important than another or has a greater priority, but because the personnel and resources needed to accomplish the mission at a particular stage is different from that of another.

***In reconsidering receptivity, we need a responsive approach to missions.***

A statistical approach to mission allocation evaluates need by number of adherents. Receptivity evaluates need in terms of the openness of a people to the gospel message and the present responsiveness to the gospel message. While the 2% evangelical threshold helps to reduce the number of priority groups to a manageable size, an unfortunate drawback is that it too often leads to the abandonment of fields where the work is not complete. In an era in which many people groups are resistant to the gospel, receptivity provides an additional guideline for mission priority. It too has the potential of making the number of priority groups more manageable. In this case, however, one reduces that number not by percentage of adherents, but by focusing resources where people are responding to the gospel message in significant numbers. Rather than merely assigning resources to statistical need, a regard for receptivity responds to the sovereign work of God as he moves in the hearts of people. The gospel must go to all peoples, but where the harvest is ripe and we see peoples receptive to the gospel message, we rightly respond by allocating sufficient resources and personnel to reap that harvest.

Further, while statistics remain fairly constant, receptivity does not. McGavran noted that receptivity “waxes and wanes” and that people groups

fluctuate in their responsiveness to the gospel. “Whole segments of mankind resist the gospel for periods—often very long periods—and then ripen to the Good News.”<sup>48</sup> To reconsider receptivity will require us to become more dynamic and flexible in our approach as we respond to areas where the proclamation of the gospel begins to bear fruit and significant numbers of people are coming to faith in Christ. Based primarily on the number of adherents, a people group approach might channel resources to those peoples for whom the need is perceived to be the greatest. However, receptivity requires a continuous evaluation of where we see God at work. Because receptivity is not a constant, we must develop mission structures that enable us to be ready to respond when peoples become receptive, “winning the winnable while they are winnable.”<sup>49</sup> Including receptivity in our strategy decisions will require us to position ourselves to be ready to respond to the move of the Spirit of God on peoples. Where the fields are ripe for harvest, we must mobilize our mission forces to reap them. We must have a dynamic strategy that is ready when closed doors open. We must have plans in place ready to mobilize a missionary force when God makes now resistant peoples receptive.

## CONCLUSION

Ultimately, a reconsideration of receptivity will allow us to obey all of the Great Commission and at the same time be responsive to the work of the Holy Spirit. A people group focus rightly helps us to be obedient to the *command* of God. Receptivity helps us to respond to the *movement* of God.

God has spoken to these multitudes. The Holy Spirit has turned them receptive. They hear the voice of the Great Shepherd and seek to follow him. Christ’s church in all six continents must look to her Master and follow his lead in proclaiming the Good News of salvation and incorporating believers in multiplying thousands of Christian cells, churches of Christ, congregations of the redeemed.<sup>50</sup>

God calls us to his harvest work. We must work until he comes. Until that day, much work remains and where we see God at work, we must join him.

- 1 Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1970), 34.
- 2 Ibid., 46.
- 3 Donald A. McGavran, "The People Movement Point of View," in *Church Growth and Group Conversion*, by Donald A. McGavran and George G. Hunter, III., 3rd ed. (Lucknow, U.P., India: Lucknow Publishing House, 1956), 5.
- 4 Donald A. McGavran, *How Churches Grow: The New Frontiers of Mission* (London: World Dominion Press, 1959), 3; Donald A. McGavran, "The Church Growth Viewpoint," *Church Growth Bulletin* 1, no. 4 (March 1965): 7.
- 5 Donald A. McGavran, "Why Neglect Gospel-Ready Masses?" *Christianity Today*, 29 April 1966, 18.
- 6 Donald A. McGavran, *How to Grow a Church* (Glendale, CA: Regal, Books Division, G/L Publications, 1973), 56; Idem, "The Dimensions of World Evangelization," in *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, International Congress on World Evangelization, Lausanne, Switzerland, ed. J. D. Douglas (Minneapolis: World Wide Publications, 1975), 102.
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- 23 McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 34-40.
- 24 If anything, McGavran's prioritizing of "discipling" over "perfecting" emphasized the need to prioritize unreached peoples over reached ones.
- 25 Donald A. McGavran, "'Frontier Missions' Vs. International 'Domestic Missions,'" *Mission Frontiers* 4, no. 6 (Aug/Sept 1982): 5.
- 26 Hadaway, "A Course Correction in Missions," 25.
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- 28 What sense does it make to pray for more laborers in the harvest while at the same time employing strategies that decrease the number of harvesters in order to do more seed sowing?
- 29 McGavran, *How Churches Grow*, 65.
- 30 McGavran notes, "St. Paul went where great growth was possible. Since great growth is now possible for us also, should we not follow this basic Pauline practice?" Donald A. McGavran, "New Methods for a New Age in Missions," *International Review of Mission* 44 (1955): 400.
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- 34 McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 230.
- 35 McGavran notes, "Abandonment is not called for.... No one should conclude that if receptivity is low, the church should withdraw mission. Correct policy is to occupy fields of low receptivity lightly. They will turn receptive someday." Ibid., 229-30.
- 36 Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 3d ed. Revised and edited by C. Peter Wagner (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1990), 187.
- 37 Ibid., 192.
- 38 S. Kent Parks, "What Happened to People Group Thinking?" The Joshua Project, accessed December 15, 2014, <http://www.joshuaproject.net/assets/media/assets/articles/what-happened-to-people-group-thinking.pdf>.
- 39 Dayton, "Reaching Unreached Peoples," 32-33. Of course, that may mean that, in a growing complex world, that ethnolinguistic grouping may not be the least common denominator, but that is a subject for another essay.
- 40 M. David Sills, *Reaching and Teaching: A Call to Great Commission Obedience* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2010), 107-11.
- 41 Ibid., 108.
- 42 Ibid., 127.
- 43 Hadaway, "A Course Correction in Missions," 24.
- 44 "Lists: All Progress Levels," The Joshua Project, accessed July 19, 2016, [https://joshuaproject.net/global\\_list/progress](https://joshuaproject.net/global_list/progress).
- 45 McGavran coined the terms "discipling" and "perfecting" to describe what he saw as the separate priorities of making disciples and teaching them to obey all things in the Great Commission. See McGavran, *Bridges of God*, 13-16.
- 46 Hadaway, "A Course Correction in Missions," 28.
- 47 McGavran remarks, "Since the Gospel is to be preached to all creatures, no Christian will doubt that both the receptive and the resistant should hear it. And since Gospel acceptors have an inherently higher priority than Gospel rejecters, no one should doubt that whenever it comes to a choice between reaping the ripe fields or seeding others, the former is commanded by God." McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 3d ed., 207.
- 48 McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 216.
- 49 McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 3rd. ed., 207.
- 50 McGavran, "Dimensions of World Evangelization," 102.

# Redefining Global Lostness

**KEVIN BAGGETT AND RANDY ARNETT**

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*The authors challenge the validity of the geo-political, ethnolinguistic (GEL) lists upon which much evangelical missiology and strategy rest. They demonstrate that the Scriptures allow, but do not mandate, a GEL paradigm. Furthermore, they argue that the digital set categories used by GEL lists give an inaccurate representation of the world's peoples. Finally, they propose the addition of analogical categories that allow a more complete representation of the dynamic, complex relationships of the world's people groups.*

## INTRODUCTION

In 1974, leaders from the world's most prominent evangelical organizations convened in Lausanne, Switzerland at the Congress of World Evangelism.<sup>1</sup> Timothy Tennent described the scene: "There were many in the church who were quite enthusiastic upon realizing that, for the first time in history, there were identifiable Christians located in every country in the world... If the Great Commission was conceptualized as essentially a 'geographic' challenge, then the job was virtually accomplished."<sup>2</sup>



For many in the church, country borders had determined the boundaries by which they understood global lostness. In 1974, a missionary or a church could be found in every nation. The world map showed what appeared to be the completion of the Great Commission. Tennent noted that “across the country most mainline churches, long the backbone of the Western missionary movement, were dramatically downsizing their mission force and many were calling for a complete moratorium on missions.”<sup>3</sup> The evangelical church had expended immeasurable time, money, personnel, and prayer to reach the goal of engaging every nation with the gospel. With a Christian in every country, it appeared the church had achieved the goal.

Ralph Winter stepped to the podium. Rather than celebrate the accomplishments of the church, Winter redefined global lostness and challenged the church to advance in the still uncompleted task of the Great Commission. He diagnosed the evangelical church with “people-blindness.” His words echoed across the evangelical world: “I’m afraid that all our exultation about the fact that every country of the world has been penetrated has allowed many to suppose that every culture has by now been penetrated.”<sup>4</sup> He went on to describe countries that contained, at the same time, highly evangelized and completely unevangelized peoples. Rather than seeing a reached world with followers of Christ in each country, the leaders at Lausanne now saw a map with approximately 16,000 people groups, many with no access to the gospel.<sup>5</sup> Lausanne’s website describes the groundbreaking significance of Winter’s presentation: “This new paradigm would come to impact virtually every evangelical mission society, seminary, and mission-sending church in the world.”<sup>6</sup>

Now, four decades later, “people blindness” is no longer a malady of evangelicals, or is it? Much like Winter, we raise questions about the currently accepted means of defining global lostness. We argue that today’s target of “people groups” is deficient as was “nations” in 1974. We highlight flaws in the basic mechanism by which evangelicals define global lostness and assess progress toward world evangelization. We critically assess the ethnolinguistic people group concept and its accompanying implementation in the form of people group lists.

We appreciate Winter and others who advocate the ethnolinguistic people group focus. The church owes a great debt to them for opening our eyes to lostness. Their work challenged evangelicals to greater missions involvement

and engagement of lostness. Lists of ethnolinguistic people groups have given missions agencies and churches clear targets for their disciple-making and church planting efforts. At the same time, this forty-year-old paradigm needs revision to represent better the world's lostness.

This article explores challenges that face the geo-political, ethnolinguistic (GEL) paradigm when used as the dominant means of defining global lostness. First, we summarize the history of the ethnolinguistic focus. Second, we show that the biblical material allows, but does not mandate, a GEL paradigm for assessing and engaging global lostness. Third, we contend that the bounded set categories used by GEL lists give an inaccurate portrayal of all the world's people. Fourth, we propose the addition of other categories, which allow a more complete representation of the dynamic, complex relationships of the world's peoples.

In brief, we believe the understanding of *panta ta ethne* as ethnolinguistic people groups is acceptable biblically, but the term should not be limited exclusively to mean ethnolinguistic people groups. We offer an adjustment that is biblically and missiologically sound. This adjustment will improve our understanding of lostness and create a basis for future strategies of engagement.

## HISTORY OF THE ETHNOLINGUISTIC FOCUS

Following the Lausanne conference, Winter proceeded to create the U.S. Center for World Mission, which focused on creating a new list of the world's "lostness." Rather than using the established list of countries, the Center established a new set of criteria based on people groups. The newly compiled list was eventually called the Joshua Project.<sup>7</sup>

Other missions agencies also created lists. The International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention (IMB) hired David Barrett, an Anglican missionary, to compile its list.<sup>8</sup> This list became the basis for the Registry of Peoples (ROP).<sup>9</sup> Wycliffe Bible Translators produced a list known as *Ethnologue*.<sup>10</sup> Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary also created a list known as the World Christian Database.<sup>11</sup> These organizations redefined the state of global lostness and in turn changed the church's understanding of lostness.

Winter's redefinition of lostness and the subsequent work by missions agencies brought substantial change to global missiology and strategy. The traditional spatial, geo-political (G) category remained, but an ethnolinguistic

(EL) category was added. The people group lists that evolved included three elements: country, characteristics associated with ethnicity, and a preference for shared language. In this way, for example, the various geo-political groupings of Latin America remained in place and the Quechua of Latin America appeared multiple times because they reside in multiple countries and speak a variation of Quechua.

As the lists took form, the strategic implications received increasing attention. To begin, missions agencies established their respective working definitions of *people groups*, and realigned their organizational objectives towards reaching these “nations.” The new objective focused on evangelism and church planting among all unreached people groups. Next, evangelicals launched a massive mobilization effort. Missions agencies refocused, and new agencies formed. In this mobilization endeavor, evangelicals embraced the connection between the nations and the increasingly popular GEL lists.

Finally, agencies developed new measurement tools for gauging progress and deploying missionaries. Missions agencies needed both a way to assess the level of evangelization of a people group, and a trigger for redeployment to other unreached groups. Thus, indicators took form, such as number of churches, church members, and baptisms.

As a result of this new understanding of lostness, churches focused on people groups rather than nation states. By the year 2000, the definition of people groups was limited, almost solely, to ethnolinguistic categories. In fact, ethnolinguistics became so prominent that Winter’s contribution was later described as introducing the concept of ethno-linguistic people groups.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, Winter divided most of the groups along ethno-linguistic lines. Yet, and this point must be emphasized, he clearly allowed for peoples to be grouped according to other criteria, such as social class. He explained,

Thus far we have only referred to language differences, but for the purpose of defining evangelistic strategy, any kind of obstacle, any kind of communication barrier affecting evangelism is significant. In Japan, for example, practically everybody speaks Japanese, and there aren’t radically different dialects of Japanese comparable to the different dialects of Chinese. But there are social differences which make it very difficult for people from one group to win others of a different social class. In Japan, as in India, social differences [such as castes] often turn out to be more important in evangelism than language differences.<sup>13</sup>

The transition from peoples, as defined by Winter in Lausanne, to ethnolinguistic people groupings proceeded with little opposition within the research community. Patrick Johnstone, who produced the hugely influential *Operation World*, stands as one of the chief proponents of the GEL criteria.<sup>14</sup> In a 2007 article, Johnstone explained and defended the ethnolinguistic people group lists.<sup>15</sup> The article is notable for three reasons.

First, Johnstone presumed that the ethnolinguistic criterion is the appropriate delimiter of *people group* and the proper goal of the Great Commission. He began the article, “The Great Commission is unequivocal: we are to disciple all the ethnic groups in the world!”<sup>16</sup> Second, he implied that the ethnolinguistic category is the singular understanding of Scripture. He supported his position by pointing to biblical evidence for the origin of ethnolinguistic lists:

The first ethnic listing in the world appears in Genesis 10! The second is inferred on the day of Pentecost, when there was an extraordinary occurrence: all the disciples praised God in different languages of the time, many being listed. What was the Holy Spirit wanting to say? He was showing that ethnicity and language are both God-created and vital to God’s global plan. This Pentecost event was a challenge to the Church: use of local heart languages to communicate the Gospel!<sup>17</sup>

Third, Johnstone underscored the important role the people group lists have for gauging the progress towards fulfilling the Great Commission. He saw the lists as the definitive means for identifying the targets for discipleship and evangelism:

For several decades we have had a good listing of the languages of the world, but not a comparable listing of all the ethnic groups and their spiritual state. We need such a listing if we are to make sure that all people groups are disciplined. What an astounding delay of 1,980 years! *Now that such a listing is available, what a privilege and responsibility for our generation* [emphasis added]. We have no excuse for delay! We must do our part to see that every tribe, language, people and nation is represented before the Lamb’s throne.<sup>18</sup>

Johnstone asserted that the ethnolinguistic lists provide, for the first time in history, the means to identify every tribe, language, people, and nation.

He equated his list of GEL people groups with Scripture's designations.

Many evangelicals, like Johnstone, now see the world through an EL people group list. In evangelical circles today, the goal of missions typically revolves around reaching these ethnolinguistically-defined people groups. Without question, most evangelicals link the lists with the meaning of *ethnē*. Mobilizers routinely associate these lists with "the nations" described in Matthew 28:19 and "every tribe, language, people and nation" referred to in Revelation 7:9. We speak of discipling the nations and, in the same breath, cite the number of peoples on a GEL list. We exhort evangelicals to go to these 11,487 people groups.<sup>19</sup> The exhortation rests on an underlying assumption that the GEL list is identical to the "tribes, families, clans and peoples" and "nations" of Scripture.

The results of the shift in perspective have been astounding. Massive mobilization catalyzed the outpouring of immeasurable passion and sacrifice. In the years since Winter's presentation, billions of dollars have been invested and countless people have dared to engage the unreached. Missionaries—long-term and short-term—have given themselves to reaching the people groups of the world in order to complete the Great Commission. Indeed, the number of unengaged ethnolinguistic groups has plummeted in the past forty years. The day is coming when all GEL peoples will be engaged with the gospel.

### THE BIBLICAL BASIS FOR GEL LISTS

Missions mobilizers often cite New Testament passages as the basis for taking the gospel to the world. Perhaps, no passage is cited more often than the Great Commission. Indeed, it endures as the stack pole of global missions. Jesus' command to disciple *the nations* (*panta ta ethnē*) stands as the standard and rally point of today's missions enterprise.

How do we understand this command? Who are *the nations*? When we look at the Great Commission and Matthew's use of *nations*, we have three interpretive tasks. First, we need to understand Matthew's intent in his use of *all nations*. Second, we must examine how the people who heard the message understood Jesus' command. Third, we need to understand Matthew 28:19 in light of the rest of Scripture.

**Matthew's Intent in His Use of "all nations."** In brief, Matthew intended his audience to make disciples of all peoples, that is, everyone everywhere. At one time, the primary debate surrounding the use of *panta ta ethnē* in the Great Commission generally revolved around whether Matthew intended to include or exclude the Jewish people from all the other nations. Today, the debate is mostly resolved: the followers of Christ are to make disciples of everyone everywhere. *Nations* implies all humanity. Thus, the goal of the Great Commission should be to make disciples of all people rather than all ethnolinguistic people groups.

It is difficult to find a commentary that argues from Scripture that *panta ta ethnē* exclusively means ethnolinguistic people groups. This is especially true when one considers that the same vocabulary is used in Acts 2:5 and would seem to imply that *panta ta ethnē* heard the gospel in their own languages, as reported in the subsequent verses, and thus the Great Commission has been completed. Obviously, few evangelical theologians and missiologists would argue that the Great Commission has been completed.

**The Audience's Understanding of Jesus' Command.** Furthermore, the audience would have understood *the nations* as inclusive of all humanity. John Broadus and others argue convincingly that the intended audience would have understood Matthew 28:19 as the fulfillment of the temporary and limited Jewish mission in Matthew 10:5 and the dawn of a new age, which included the Gentiles in God's salvific plan. The intended audience would have understood that they were to "go into every way of the Gentiles, disciple all nations."<sup>20</sup> Leon Morris elaborated,

They are to make disciples of all the nations, which points to a worldwide scope for their mission. It took the church a little time to realize the significance of this, and in the early chapters of Acts we find the believers concentrating on proclaiming their message to the Jews. But, there seems never to have been any question of admitting Gentiles, the only problem being on what conditions.<sup>21</sup>

Craig Blomberg agreed with his fellow theologians when he wrote, "The two main options for interpreting *ethnē* are Gentiles (non-Jews) and peoples (somewhat equivalent to ethnic groups)... Matthew's most recent uses of *ethnē* (24:9, 14; 25:32) seem to include Jews and Gentiles alike as the

recipients of evangelism and judgment.”<sup>22</sup> David L. Turner emphasized the universal mission as well:

Some scholars translate “all the Gentiles” and exclude Jews from the Christian mission, but this is doubtful. Granted, the priority here is the Gentiles, but the mission to them is a supplement to the mission to Israel, not a substitute for it. An ongoing mission to Israel is assumed by Matthew 10:23. It is clear from the book of Acts that the apostolic church continued the mission to the Jews.<sup>23</sup>

John Nolland also focused on the general universal call to make disciples of all people:

Matthew has used the phrase *panta ta ethnē* three times already. Its use in 24:14, with its ‘testimony to all the nations,’ is most closely related to that here but as a setting for the universal discipling task its use with universal hatred of disciples in 24:9 and with universal judgment in 25:32 are also pertinent; Matthew has already created a whole-world perspective in his Gospel prior to the present culminating mission charge. Though the claim is made from time to time, 28:19 does not turn from the Jews to the Gentiles; rather, it widens the scope from that of 10:5, which is in view. Matthew uses *ethnē* alone when referring to the Gentiles, but when he speaks of all the *ethnē*, he no longer uses *ethnē* to distinguish Gentiles from Jews but rather to refer to the whole of humanity.<sup>24</sup>

These New Testament scholars conclude that the Great Commission is the universal call to make disciples of all peoples everywhere. In so doing, they do not identify the *ethnē*. More importantly, they do not equate *ethnē* to ethnolinguistic people groups. The absence of this connection must not be dismissed. The glaring point is that few NT scholars make the connection that missiologists take for granted. Moreover, and contrary to what Johnstone might suggest, the early disciples do not seem intent on making a list of all nations or peoples as a means of identifying people for evangelism.

**Matthew 28:19 in Light of the Rest of Scripture.** Matthew 28:19 cannot be read in isolation. Throughout Scripture, we see God’s desire to glorify himself among the nations. In Genesis 12:2-3, God promised to bless Abram and make him a nation that will bless all the *families* of the earth.<sup>25</sup> The

Septuagint translation, by Logos LXX, translates *families* (φυλαί) as “race or tribe, an extended family or clan.”<sup>26</sup>

Evangelical scholars consistently place the idea of *panta ta ethnē* in the context of all humanity. R. C. Sproul explained that the audience would have understood the Great Commission in light of Genesis 12:1-3.

[The Gospel of Matthew] comes full circle. Matthew began by presenting a genealogy of Jesus, but unlike Luke, who traced Jesus’ ancestry all the way back to Adam (Luke 3:23-38), Matthew traces it back to Abraham (1:1-17). As we have seen, Matthew was writing to Jews, and he was very concerned about Jesus’ ancestry and genealogical credentials, for these were important matters for the Jews. Thus, it was perfectly natural for him to trace Jesus’ ancestry back to Abraham, the father of the Jewish nation, whom God called out of a pagan land and with whom he made a covenant, which was fulfilled at last in the coming of Christ. Consider again the great promise that God made to Abraham: ... “all the families of the earth shall be blessed” Genesis 12:1-3.<sup>27</sup>

John Broadus noted the gospel is to go to all nations,

not merely the contiguous, or the kindred nations, not merely the most cultivated, but all the nations. Discipleship to Christ is possible to all. Necessary to all. Our Lord has already predicted that the good news shall be preached in the whole world (Matthew 26:13), and that when he finally comes for judgment ‘before him shall be gathered all the nations’ (Matthew 25:23). So in the latest commission, given just before the ascension, “and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name unto all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem” (Luke 24:47), and if Mark 16:9-20 be accepted as genuine, the commission there given reads, “Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to the whole creation.”<sup>28</sup>

What did Jesus’ audience understand on the day of his ascension? David Garland believes they heard the universal offer of salvation.

The allusion to Daniel 7:14 in Matthew 28:18 clarifies another theme in the Gospel, the universal offer of salvation. In Daniel 7:14, dominion, glory, and kingdom are given to the son of man “that all people, nations, and languages



should serve him.” The scope of Jesus’ authority now extends beyond Israel (10:5-6), and he breaks down the geographical and racial barriers to command a universal mission to the nations centered on baptism in his name and the teaching of his commandments.<sup>29</sup>

Grant Osborne concurred with Garland’s view: “[Matthew 28:19] looks back to and universalizes the commissioning service of chapter 10. There Jesus told his followers what the mission constitutes and centered on the Jewish mission. Now he expands in salvation history, the universal mission.”<sup>30</sup>

The full breadth of Scripture concerning the Great Commission testifies of a definition of peoples that is more all encompassing than the limited, primarily ethnolinguistic people group definition. Ed Stetzer summarized these biblical findings in light of the disciples’ understanding of the Great Commission:

The sheer scope of the assignment is embodied in the two little words: all nations. This phrase is translated from Greek *panta ta ethnē*. It is often the subject of significant discussion. When many people hear *ethnē*, or “nations,” they think of countries. But when Jesus spoke those words, there were no countries, as we understand them today. The nation-state is an invention of the modern era. In Jesus’ day, there were groups of people, and there were empires. So, Jesus spoke of peoples – all peoples. When Jesus said “to all nations,” He did not mean exactly what missiologists like me want to read into the text—as if He was speaking of the eleven-thousand ethnolinguistic people groups in the world today. However, he meant to identify more than simply the non-Jews or Gentiles. He spoke to a Jewish people who knew that God created the nations at Babel (Genesis 11:9), called the nations “up to Jerusalem” (Isaiah 2), displayed the tongues of the nations at Pentecost (Acts 2), and will be worshiped by men and women from every tongue, tribe, and nation forever (Revelation 7). In other words, when Jesus spoke of going to the nations, the hearers of his day knew the immensity of this remarkable task. The idea of “the nations” was not new to them—though Jesus was changing how the people of God engaged them.<sup>31</sup>

Osborne, in line with Stetzer, clarified the Great Commission’s role in changing the way the disciples engaged the world:

Missions for Israel to the nations was to be centripetal... The centrifugal mission,

taking the message to the nations, would be a universal mission, and it constitutes “the final word of the exalted Jesus to the disciples in Matthew. “Go” is the operative act, as now God’s people are no longer to stay in Jerusalem and be a kind of “show ‘n tell” for the nations but they are actively to go and take the message to the nations. Matthew’s emphasis on the universal mission is consummated here, with “all nations” meaning Jewish and Gentile mission.<sup>32</sup>

In conclusion, when Jesus spoke on the side of the hill that day, those in the audience understood that they were to leave there and make disciples of everyone, everywhere, rather than make disciples among every ethnic group. For example, they would not have ignored making disciples throughout the entire Roman Empire simply because they had made disciples of Romans in Rome. Ethnic groups provided a guide for gospel advancement, but they were not the ultimate goal of gospel advancement.

***Panta ta Ethnē and Ethnolinguistic Groups as Missiological Constructs.***

The exegesis and interpretation by well-known scholars lead us to conclude that the GEL lists have a biblical basis. Yet, that biblical basis comes with a caveat, namely that the GEL lists are permitted, but not required by Scripture. *People, nations, tribes* and *tongues* are not equivalent to GEL groups. The GEL lists provide one way of measuring progress towards the Great Commission.

As early as 1982, the question of the link between *panta ta ethnē* and ethnolinguistic people groups arose. In that year, Winter and other leading evangelical missiologists met in Chicago and defined a people group as “a significantly large grouping of individuals who perceive themselves to have a common affinity for one another because of their shared language, religion, ethnicity, residence, occupation, class or caste, situation, etc., or combinations of these.”<sup>33</sup>

An additional challenge appeared two years later, in 1984, when D. A. Carson expressed reservations about the missions strategies built on the phrase *panta ta ethnē*. He wrote,

Adherents of the “church growth movement” have attempted to justify their entire “people movement” principle on the basis of this phrase *panta ta ethnē*, used here and elsewhere, arguing that *ethnos* properly means “tribe” or “people.” The latter point is readily conceded, but the conclusion is linguistically illegitimate. Plural

collectives may have all embracing force, whether in Greek or English. Doubtless God may convert people by using a “people movement;” but to deduce such a principle from this text requires a “city movement” principle based on Acts 8:40, where the same construction occurs with the noun “cities.” In neither case may missiologists legitimately establish the normativeness of their theories.<sup>34</sup>

Carson concluded his evaluation of the use of *panta ta ethnē* based missions strategy: “The aim of Jesus’ disciples, therefore, is to make disciples of all men everywhere, without distinction.”<sup>35</sup> More recently, Andreas Kostenberger and Peter O’Brien favored Carson’s assessment.<sup>36</sup>

In 2012, Luis Bush produced a landmark study on the sense of *ethnē* in the context of castes.<sup>37</sup> Bush’s research distinguished the three synonyms for ἔθνος: γλῶσσα (*glossa*) ethno-linguistic, λαός (*laos*) ethno-political, and φυλή (*phylē*) national unity of common descent. He explained that ἔθνος relates to “ethno-cultural peoples as distinct from ethno-linguistic peoples, which would be closer to the term γλῶσσα.” He wrote, “ἔθνος (*ethnos*) is the most general and therefore the weakest of these terms, having simply an ethnographical sense and denoting the natural cohesion of a people in general.” Bush emphasized that, in Matthew 28:19, the use of *ethnē* rather than *laos* suggests that elements other than race and language can define a people, such as caste, community, culture, and religion. Accordingly, he believes that the meaning of *ethnē* in Matthew 28 means “a large group of people based on various cultural, physical, or geographical ties.” He concluded, “In examining the four synonyms used in the Bible related to peoples, it became apparent that the term ἔθνος (*ethnos*) relates to ethno-cultural peoples as distinct from ethno-linguistic peoples, γλῶσσα (*glossa*) or ethno-political peoples, λαός (*laos*) or φυλή (*phylē*) which refers to people as a national unity of common descent.”<sup>38</sup>

Bush noted that all four synonyms (ἔθνος, φυλή, λαός, and γλῶσσα) appear in Revelation 7:9. Accordingly, the assembly of believers is inclusive. It consists of ethno-cultural peoples, ethno-linguistic peoples, ethno-political peoples, and people of common descent. The assembly is composed of family groups, clans, sub-divisions of nations, and peoples.

The results of Bush’s study are far-reaching. Not only did he demonstrate that castes should be included in the understanding of *ethnē*, but he also conclusively argued that the meaning of *panta ta ethnē* in Matthew 28:19

should not be limited to ethnolinguistic people group definitions. Troy Bush contended,

*Panta ta ethnē* in Matthew 28:19 can certainly apply to “the largest group within which the gospel can spread as a church planting movement without encountering barriers of understanding or acceptance.” It must also apply to a group as small as a clan. While much emphasis is given to *ta ethnē*, we should remember the importance of *panta*. The Great Commission calls us to make disciples of the wide array of human groupings, including every clan, tribe, people, nation, and language.<sup>39</sup>

In short, the geo-political and ethnolinguistic paradigm is not the only possible way of seeing the world’s peoples.

## A PRACTICAL EVALUATION OF GEL CATEGORIES

By the early 2000s, the GEL understanding of *people group* had solidified, at least as far as IMB was concerned.

**Criteria and Categories of GEL.** The major architect of the IMB list, Orville Boyd Jenkins, used narrower criteria than those established in 1982 by the Chicago group. “A ‘people group,’” explained Jenkins, “is an ethnolinguistic group with a common self-identity that is shared by the various members. There are two parts to that word: *ethno*, and *linguistic*. Language is a primary and dominant identifying factor of a people group. But there are other factors that determine or are associated with ethnicity.”<sup>40</sup>

Jenkins continued, “Usually there is a common self-name and a sense of common identity of individuals identified with the group. A common history, customs, family and clan identities, as well as marriage rules and practices, age-grades and other obligation covenants, and inheritance patterns and rules are some of the common ethnic factors defining or distinguishing a people.”<sup>41</sup> In another document of the same period, Jenkins wrote, “In general the term ‘ethnic entity’ refers to the largest cohesive group of individuals considering themselves related for reasons that may include biological kinship, shared history, shared customs or other shared aspects of self-identity, and speaking one or more languages.”<sup>42</sup>

Notably, Jenkins identified five categories for designating a people group: *an autonomous identity, a shared history, a common culture, a shared descent, and a common language*. These categories stand as the working definition of *people group* and, by extension, *nations and tribes, families, clans and peoples*. They remain strongly imbedded in the people listings, even today, and provide the parameters for IMB strategy and missiology.<sup>43</sup>

Since 2000, a “barrier” descriptor occasionally appears alongside GEL. This barrier statement stipulates that, for strategy purposes, a people group is “the largest grouping of people among which there is no barrier to the gospel.” The descriptor has led to some minor modifications of the basic GEL list with the addition of castes or groupings of micro-peoples. Nevertheless, GEL establishes the parameters for identifying these barriers. Unarguably, the GEL understanding dominates the definition of people group.

**Flaws of GEL.** The ethnolinguistic category introduced a helpful perspective. Nonetheless, the GEL categories have not undergone rigorous examination to determine their validity in representing the world’s peoples. In fact, the GEL list faces important difficulties in its assumptions and structure.

From the beginning, the GEL lists assumed that a bounded, intrinsic set built along geo-political and ethnolinguistic lines provides a sufficient reflection of the world’s peoples.<sup>44</sup> This fundamental assumption may be challenged along four lines.

First, the taxonomy asserts equivalence between the GEL categories and *panta ta ethnē*. The faulty logic lies in the unequivocal and exclusive connection between *panta ta ethnē* and the GEL designation. In practice, *people groups* are defined exclusively by GEL categories. As noted previously, the Bible allows this connection, but does not prescribe it. Furthermore, the sense of *panta ta ethnē* as equivalent to the five categories (autonomy, history, culture, descent, language) has not been indisputably established. As John Piper put it, over twenty years ago, “What we have found, in fact, is that a precise definition [of a people group] is probably not possible to give on the basis of what God has chosen to reveal in Scripture.”<sup>45</sup>

Second, the use of imprecise terms such as “shared” and “common” result in equivocal and subjective groupings. At first sight, the criteria used in the Registry of Peoples appear reasonable, but, upon further examination, the criteria break down as inexact. For example, one must determine the set of

symbols, morals, values, rules, practices, norms, historical events, etc. that must be shared. The subjective selection results in a subjective prioritization of “common” characteristics. In an age of globalization, the arbitrary selection of “common” and “shared” elements yield dramatically different groupings.

Consequently, many people group boundaries are highly subjective. The following real example illustrates the problem. People A is a large people group. They dominate smaller groups B and C, who live among the A and were, at one time, clearly distinct. Today, B and C readily identify themselves as A. After persistent and deep probing, they identify with the older and smaller B or C. On the one hand, B and C have many of the descent-based attributes that place them in their historic B and C groups. On the other hand, B and C have many characteristics of the dominant A group and identify openly with A. In this example, the application of the five categories contributes to the ambiguity. No wonder, then, that the categories used to define GEL are being challenged as the basis for defining ethnic identity.<sup>46</sup> As it stands, the current GEL system is oftentimes conjectural, tentative, and unreliable in identifying people groups.

Third, the GEL lists have adopted an exclusive taxonomy of intrinsic, digital sets. By their singular focus on GEL categories, the GEL lists dismiss alternative paradigms, such as analogical and relational sets. Notably, Jenkins suggested the use of non-GEL categories and “dynamic combinations” in his construction of the ROP.<sup>47</sup> Unfortunately, the dynamic combination is rarely implemented in the IMB list except as population segments of a single parent group. This many-to-one relationship expressly denies the many-to-many relationship of analogical sets. In short, the taxonomy reduces the complexity of the world’s people to a few abstract categories.

Fourth, the GEL list rests on an assumption that ethnolinguistic identity is largely static and exogenous to individual or group volition. A fundamental assumption of the GEL list may be stated succinctly as “you are what you are.” The basis of this assumption lies in the idea of bestowed or static identity, i.e., one’s ethnolinguistic identity is bestowed at birth. The GEL list categorically rejects the idea of dynamic identity, i.e., the idea that one’s identity may shift due to exogenous or endogenous factors. Recent research challenges the GEL assumption. For example, Amin Maalouf supported the idea of dynamic change in his book, *In the Name of Identity*. He argued convincingly that cultural pressure causes shifts in

the categories of identity.<sup>48</sup> Chandra clarified further: “It is common to assume that because the attributes that define ethnic identity categories are fixed in the short term, the categories themselves are also fixed in the short term. Individuals can change between identity categories, often quite rapidly, by combining and recombining elements from their set of attributes differently.”<sup>49</sup> In reality, people draw from their bestowed identities and assume other primary identities, as needed. The GEL list has no means for expressing this dynamic process.

Beyond the flaws in assumptions, structural problems appear. The inadequacy of the GEL categories appears most clearly in urban settings. Recently, the IMB list was modified to allow an urban designation. On the surface, the addition of the *urban segment* satisfies the needs of the urban focused missionary. Yet, beneath the surface, the addition does nothing to solve the fundamental problem. The fallacy of urban segment lies in its parentage. An urban segment exists as a sub-category and must be tied to a GEL people group in a parent-child relationship; the urban segment always exists as a sub-group of some ethnolinguistic group. For example, Abidjan, Côte d’Ivoire (population 4.7 million) appears as an urban segment of the GEL group known as Baoulé (pop. 3.5 million) of which a majority reside outside Abidjan and whose ethnographic center lies over 200 kilometers northeast of the city. To view multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic Abidjan as a segment of the Baoulé severely distorts both the missiology and the strategy for reaching this city. Unarguably, the urban segment is a forced overlay on the GEL categories. At best, segments provide an awkward and inadequate workaround to the structural flaws of the GEL implementation.

The point is that the GEL categories skew the picture because they assume the world’s people exist as an intrinsic set of digital boundaries. Consequently, the GEL categories must, at times, force people into groupings that do not reflect the reality. In this way, lines are drawn, boundaries created, people coded, identities assigned, and strategies executed.

## A WAY FORWARD

The need for adjustments to the current GEL list arises not only from the flaws in the assumptions and structure, but also from the evolution of the world’s peoples. Since the 1970s, globalization has changed the world’s

landscape. In particular, many urban areas, for which a GEL designation might have been appropriate in 1974, have evolved into new populations that the static designations fail to accommodate. In many urban areas, the assimilation of multi-ethnic, multi-geo-political, multi-linguistic peoples has transformed the population into a cosmopolitan amalgamation. The GEL designations blur as new, often fuzzy and relational, groupings develop. Oftentimes, these urban people do not fit the GEL categories to which they have been assigned. People residing in a megacity often have more in common with their counterparts in other urban areas than they have with their GEL categories. Furthermore, people form groups within megacities that defy GEL categories. French sociologist Michel Maffesoli referred to these groups as “urban tribes” in his book *The Time of the Tribes: the Decline of Individualism in Mass Society*.<sup>50</sup> For Maffesoli, urban tribes are “small groups of people defined by shared interests and lifestyle preferences around which modern societies are organized.”<sup>51</sup> In his book, *Urban Tribes*, Ethan Watters described his own tribe of unmarried, 25 to 39 year olds, college-educated urbanites.<sup>52</sup> He explained,

I use the word “tribe” quite literally here: this is a tight group, with unspoken roles and hierarchies, whose members think of each other as “us” and the rest of the world as “them.” This bond is the clearest in times of trouble. After earthquakes (or the recent terrorist strikes), my instinct to huddle with and protect my group is no different from what I’d feel for my family.<sup>53</sup>

These tribes do not group along ethnic or linguistic lines, but along dynamic relational lines that change as people enter and exit the tribe.<sup>54</sup>

While the traditional gatekeepers seek to maintain the GEL distinctions, youth, migrants, and the upwardly mobile are less and less inclined to respect those distinctions. The five criteria (autonomous identify, shared history, common culture, shared descent, and common language) collapse in many urban areas. No wonder, then, that Donald McGavran diminishes the GEL categories in his definition of a people, in favor of marriage as the criterion for a people group.<sup>55</sup>

The ongoing assimilation and urban groupings require that we proactively adjust the lists to include additional dynamic categories. If not, the static GEL categories will contribute to weak strategy because of their failure to



represent fully the people reality. The issue we raise is not a mere academic debate about a people list. Neither is it a mere question of database structure. The issue is about missiology—kingdom advance, missionary effectiveness, church health, and God's mission.

***So, How Do We Move Forward?*** First, we support the retention of the GEL categories. While we appreciate the GEL list missiologically, we urge the disassociation of the list with the meaning of *panta ta ethnē*. The goal of the lists will be to identify all peoples and ensure that all peoples are engaged in the disciple-making process.

Second, we urge the adoption of a system that aligns with the realities of peoples. This system should incorporate other categories, primarily analogical, that permit the peoples themselves to dictate the character and nature of people groups. These supplementary categories will create additional granularity for identifying and reaching all the peoples of the world. Specifically, religion and socio-economic status should be included alongside the existing GEL categories. The socio-economic category may include elements such as orality, education, social class, age, and stage of life.

***What Does the Proposed System Look Like?*** By allowing analogical sets, we recognize that a given person may fit more than one of the people group designations established by GEL. These possibilities are especially important in cities, ethnoburbs, and transition regions, where the traditional categories fail to portray the people reality. By privileging alternative, currently unrecognized, people groups beyond GEL, we open new networks for kingdom advance.

In an analogical set, any given person will be viewed dynamically. In this analogical system, we recognize categories, particularly socio-economic categories, and allow them to exist as valid layers within the existing GEL categories. These categories would not be subsets (segments) of GEL, but groupings of equal standing. Thus, each category stands on its own merits and is not dependent upon another category. In this dynamic system, people are tagged rather than segmented. Let us offer three representative examples from people we know. Then, we will explain how we would group them.

Raymond was born into an ethnolinguistic group in southeastern Côte d'Ivoire and destined to be a tribal chief. Today, he is a professional living

in Abidjan and has refused his chieftain rights. In part, he does not want to live in the village, the ethnographic center of his birth descent group. Also, he does not want to preside over the African Traditional Religion ceremonies because he is a Baptist believer. He married Celestine, who is from an entirely different ethnolinguistic cluster. Neither one of them is Baoulé, which is the parent of the Abidjan urban segment. Neither one of them has much to do with their village families.

Patricia is a thirty-five year old female, who was born and raised in Cameroon in a Presbyterian family. She moved to Abidjan in 2001, where she associated with a Baptist church. Around 2010, she associated with a Neo-Pentecostal church. She is engaged to Abdoulaye, who was born in Côte d'Ivoire of Muslim parents from Burkina Faso and who currently works in Qatar. Abdoulaye identifies himself as a particular ethnic group from Burkina Faso, but he is more Ivoirian than Burkinabe, and only marginally Muslim. The couple will live in the U.K. because of a job transfer.

Shajira is an upper class professional, born and raised in the Caribbean. Shajira's father was a Syrian immigrant from a Muslim background. Her mother was the daughter of immigrants from Holland and Lebanon with atheist and orthodox beliefs. She attended an international American school in the capital city of her country, where she claims English became her heart language. She learned Arabic by listening to her mother try to communicate secretly with her grandmother. She speaks Spanish with the typical neighbor but also can communicate in German and French. After earning a bachelor's degree in New York City and a masters degree in London, she married a Catholic Argentine whom she met in Brazil and with whom she speaks Spanish. She decided to follow Christ through a relationship with an American after meeting in an Arabic cooking class in the megacity of Buenos Aires, where she began her Ph.D. studies. She can communicate effectively in five languages, but she prefers to read the Bible in English.

Imagine, then, fuzzy categories that would consist of variables, such as migration, cross-ethnicity, trans-national status, level of urbanization social class, economic class, sexuality, and religion. Rather than assign Raymond to a discrete GEL category in Cote d'Ivoire, we would allow him to be a member of several categories.

Raymond Identity Qualifiers	
Descent-based	Anyi
Linguistic	French, Anyin
Vocational	Professional: Lawyer
Socio-economic	Upper middle class
Geographical	Urban: Abidjan
National	African: Ivoirien
Religious	Baptist
Marital	Cross-ethnic

Patricia presents a more complicated and dynamic identity. Presently, she appears as follows, but most of the qualifiers will change as she marries and settles in London.

Patricia Identity Qualifiers	
Descent-based	Batanga
Linguistic	French, Batanga, English
Vocational	Transit Agent
Socio-economic	Global: Immigrant
Geographical	Urban: Abidjan
National	African: Cameroon
Religious	Neo-Pentecostal
Marital	Engaged Cross-ethnic

Patricia's fiancé, Abdoulaye, presents an equally complicated identity, which will change once he settles in London with his new wife.

Abdoulaye Identity Qualifiers	
Descent-based	Mossi
Linguistic	French, Moore, English
Vocational	Communications
Socio-economic	Global: Immigrant
Geographical	Urban: Doha
National	African: Burkina Faso
Religious	Muslim
Marital	Engaged Cross-ethnic

Shajira presents the most challenging of the three examples.

Shajira Identity Qualifiers	
Descent-based	Caribbean immigrant
Linguistic	English, Spanish, German, French, Arabic
Vocational	Student: Ph.D.
Socio-economic	Global: Upper class
Geographical	Urban: Buenos Aires
National	Argentina
Religious	Christian
Marital	Cross-ethnic; cross national

The resulting people list would include the qualifiers by which these individuals would relate. In this altered paradigm, we can “see” Patricia, Abdoulaye, Raymond, and Shajira in the same group with other trans-national, educated urbanites who intentionally or unintentionally separate from their traditional ethnolinguistic heritage. Therefore, for example, one dynamic people group is Urban with granularity of particular cities. Another dynamic people group is Global Immigrant with granularity that includes other categories such as national, religious, linguistic, and vocational. By tagging them with their different qualifiers, we can “see” them.

In the GEL categories, these individuals are marginal or even absent. When other categories are applied, these same people are no longer at the periphery, but appear at the core of the category. Because of globalization, we predict increased marginalization of peoples based on GEL categories, but increasing numbers of core people based on other strata categories.

## CONCLUSION

As we minister in an ever-changing world affected by globalization and urbanization, we must constantly re-examine our understanding of the world. By modifying current structures, we can adapt our understanding of global lostness in today’s world. Without discarding our present lists, we can eliminate another level of people blindness that Ralph Winter described 40 years ago.

In 2009, Winter offered two cautions about people group lists. First, he admonished missiologists not to take ethnolinguistic people group lists

too seriously.<sup>56</sup> Second, he warned evangelicals to avoid static systems of categorization. He wrote,

Another reason to be cautious when applying people group thinking is the reality that powerful forces such as urbanization, migration, assimilation, and globalization are changing the composition and identity of people groups all the time. The complexities of the world's peoples cannot be neatly reduced to distinct, non-overlapping, bounded sets of individuals with permanent impermeable boundaries. Members of any community have complex relationships and may have multiple identities and allegiances. Those identities and allegiances are subject to change over time.<sup>57</sup>

Winter's contribution and the subsequent GEL list have helped us to see people who need the gospel. In 1974, the church suffered from a myopic view of the world. People were hidden because the only lens—geo-political—masked them from view. Unfortunately, today's GEL lists also hide people. Just as in 1974, myopia can lead us off-handedly to discard alternative perspectives on the world's people groupings.

A new perspective that encompasses the analogical categories of the world's peoples will allow missiologists to see the pockets of people that the GEL categories marginalize and obscure. Through this lens, we can more adequately identify and engage the millions of peoples who do not fit the boxes we have created. While these millions are sometimes identifiable by the GEL categories, their primary identity often rests outside this designation. They are more likely to relate to others of their age group, their vocation, their socio-economic status, their religious preference, or their educational level. They are not mere segments of some arbitrary GEL group. They are cross-GEL, cross-ethnic, cross-linguistic. We can mark off as reached the GEL listing of which they are a part, but they will remain outside the focus of evangelistic engagement. For this reason, we must frequently re-examine our categories, which will create the granularity needed to identify and reach people.

If we continue as we are, in the not too distant future, missiologists will gather and celebrate that all the entries on the GEL lists have been checked off. Yet, tragically, millions of lost people will remain unengaged and hidden by the present classification system. So, we seek that person who, much like Ralph Winter, will step to the podium and contend for a more complete portrayal of global lostness, a portrayal that reveals the hidden, obscure, overlooked, marginalized,

unreached peoples in order to make disciples of every tribe, family, and people.

- <sup>1</sup> "Lausanne I: The International Congress on World Evangelization," Lausanne Movement, accessed January 17, 2015, <http://www.lausanne.org/gatherings/congress/lausanne-1974>.
- <sup>2</sup> Timothy C. Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions: A Trinitarian Missiology for the Twenty-first Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2010), 357.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>4</sup> Ralph Winter, "The Highest Priority: Cross-Cultural Evangelism," in *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, ed. J. D. Douglas (Minneapolis, MN: World Wide Publications, 1975), 221.
- <sup>5</sup> S. Douglas Birdsall, "Lausanne '74: Stewarding the Legacy," *Lausanne Global Analysis*, 3, no 4 (2014): <http://www.lausanne.org/content/lga/2014-07/lausanne-74>.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>7</sup> See "Our Story," Frontier Ventures, accessed January 17, 2015, <https://www.uscwm.org/our-story/birth-of-a-movement>; and "About," Joshua Project, accessed January 17, 2015, <http://joshuaproject.net/about>.
- <sup>8</sup> Gary Baldridge, *Keith Parks: Breaking Barriers and Opening Frontiers* (Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys, 1999), 3-5.
- <sup>9</sup> See "Registries," International Mission Board, accessed January 17, 2015, <https://extranet.imb.org/sites/HIS/registries/docs/Forms/AllItems.aspx>.
- <sup>10</sup> See "Main Page," Ethnologue, accessed January 17, 2015, <http://www.ethnologue.com>.
- <sup>11</sup> See "Main Page," World Christian Database, accessed January 17, 2015, <http://www.worldchristiandatabase.org/wcd/>.
- <sup>12</sup> "Lausanne'74," Lausanne Movement, accessed January 17, 2015, <http://www.lausanne.org/content/lga/2014-07/lausanne-74>.
- <sup>13</sup> Winter, "The Highest Priority," 215.
- <sup>14</sup> GMI was founded by Bob Waymire on the campus of Ralph Winter's U.S. Center for World Mission in 1983. See "Our History," Global Mapping International, accessed January 17, 2015, <http://www.gmi.org/about-us/our-history/>.
- <sup>15</sup> Patrick Johnstone, "Affinity Blocs and People Clusters: An Approach Toward Strategic Insight and Mission Partnership" *Mission Frontiers*, (2007): <http://www.missionfrontiers.org/issue/article/affinity-blocs-and-people-clusters>.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>19</sup> See "Main Page," People Groups, accessed January 17, 2015, <http://www.peoplegroups.org/>.
- <sup>20</sup> John Broadus, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, An American Commentary on the New Testament (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1886), loc 25525, Kindle.
- <sup>21</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 746.
- <sup>22</sup> Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, The New American Commentary, vol. 22 (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992), 431-432. Notably, Blomberg's explanatory comment of "somewhat equivalent" only creates correlation, not equivalency, between *ethnē* and *ethnic groups*.
- <sup>23</sup> David L. Turner, *Matthew*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 689.
- <sup>24</sup> John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 1265-66.
- <sup>25</sup> This Scripture and all others used in this article are from the English Standard Version of the Bible unless otherwise noted.
- <sup>26</sup> *Septuagint*, Logos Bible Software, version 4 (Bellingham, WA: Logos, 2011).
- <sup>27</sup> R. C. Sproul, *Matthew*, St. Andrew's Expositional Commentary (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), loc 12667.
- <sup>28</sup> Broadus, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, loc 25525.
- <sup>29</sup> David E. Garland, *Reading Matthew: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2012), loc. 4829.
- <sup>30</sup> Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew*, Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), loc. 20475.

- 31 Ed Stetzer, "All Nations and Church Planting," *Christianity Today*, March 26, 2014. <http://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2014/march/all-nations-and-church-planting.html?paging=off> (Accessed January 17, 2015).
- 32 Osborne, *Matthew*, loc. 20473.
- 33 Luis Bush, "The Meaning of Ethne in Matthew 28:19," *Mission Frontiers* (Sept-Oct 2013):35.
- 34 D. A. Carson, *Matthew*, in vol. 8 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein and J. D. Douglas (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984), 596-97.
- 35 Ibid.
- 36 Andreas Köstenberger and Peter T. O'Brien, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth: A Biblical Theology of Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2001), 104.
- 37 Bush, "The Meaning of Ethne in Matthew 28:19," 31-35.
- 38 Ibid.
- 39 Troy Bush, "The Great Commission and the Urban Context," in *The Great Commission Resurgence: Fulfilling God's Mandate in our Time*, ed. Chuck Lawless and Adam Greenway (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Academic, 2010), 318.
- 40 Orville Boyd Jenkins, "What is a People Group?" Paper distributed at Regional Research Coordinators Workshop, IMB, Richmond, VA, December 2002.
- 41 Ibid.
- 42 Orville Boyd Jenkins, "Identifying and Describing a People Group: Excerpted from the Registry of Peoples" (paper distributed at Regional Research Coordinators Workshop, 09 December 2002, IMB, Richmond, VA. In the author's possession.)
- 43 The same documents and definitions used in 2000-02 remain among the listed IMB resources for people group identity. See "What Is a People Group?" IMB, <http://public.imb.org/globalresearch/Pages/PeopleGroup.aspx> (Accessed March 23, 2015).
- 44 A *bounded*, or digital, set has well-defined, binary boundaries by which things either belong or not. In contrast, *fuzzy*, or analogical, sets have no sharp boundaries, but consist of steps between sets. *Intrinsic* sets form based on the nature of the members themselves. In contrast, *extrinsic* sets form based on their relationship to some reference point. See Michael L. Yoder, et al., "Understanding Christian Identity in Terms of Bounded and Centered Set Theory in the Writings of Paul G. Hiebert," *Trinity Journal* 30, no. 2 (September 1, 2009):177-88.
- 45 John Piper, *Let the Nations be Glad!* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1993), 212.
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- 48 Amin Maalouf, *In the Name of Identity: Violence and the Need to Belong* (New York, Penguin Books: 2003).
- 49 Chandra, "What is Ethnic Identity," 415-16.
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- 54 Ibid.
- 55 McGavran argues that people groups are formed along marriage lines irrelevant of ethnic lines. Donald A. McGavran, "The People Movement Point of View," in *Church Growth and Group Conversion*, 3rd ed., ed. J. W. Pickett (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1973), 5.
- 56 Ralph Winter and Bruce A. Koch, "Finishing the Task: The Unreached Peoples Challenge," in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*, ed. Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2009), 537.
- 57 Ibid.

# Caste and Church Growth: An Assessment of Donald McGavran's Church Growth Principles from An Indian Perspective

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*Donald McGavran's church growth principles have tremendously influenced the shape of missions in India today. Numerous responses to McGavran's church growth model have been advanced in missiological circles. Living in an India quite removed, in time, from the mid-twentieth century era of McGavran's ministry, the authors articulate a response to church growth principles from their perspective as Indians ministering in the contemporary Indian context.*



Our goal in this article is to evaluate McGavran's church growth principles from our own perspective as Indian Christians. We begin with an outline of Donald McGavran's view of church growth and caste while delineating the positive aspects of McGavran's model. Second, in order to set a critique of McGavran in context, we briefly describe the caste system in India. Third, we respond to McGavran's missiology, providing a critique of church growth principles in light of Scripture and our experience in contemporary India.

### **McGAVRAN, CHURCH GROWTH, AND CASTE**

**McGavran and church growth.** Donald McGavran's ideas concerning church growth largely grew out of his missionary experience with the caste system in India.<sup>1</sup> McGavran contended that Christian missions must primarily concern itself with evangelism and church planting. God has commanded the church to make disciples of all nations, and therefore the fulfilment of this task is "the supreme purpose which should guide the entire mission, establish its priorities, and coordinate all its activities."<sup>2</sup> In emphasizing "maximum reconciliation,"<sup>3</sup> McGavran believed that God intended his church to grow, with numerical growth being a primary indicator of the church's faithfulness to its task.<sup>4</sup>

Through his experience in India, McGavran rightly perceived that the caste system poses a huge obstacle to the evangelization of Hindus.<sup>5</sup> McGavran recognized that, for Hindus, converting to Christianity involved crossing caste boundaries, and converts were immediately ostracized by their communities. Thus, very few Hindus converted to Christianity. However, when people were evangelized in groups, staying within their caste and maintaining relationships within their communities, the numerical growth of the church was faster. McGavran's experiences led him to develop "the Homogenous Unit Principle (HUP)."<sup>6</sup>

McGavran argued that in societies where "people consciousness" was high, such as among castes in India, people "refuse Christ not for religious reasons, not because they love their sins, but precisely because they love their brethren."<sup>7</sup> Therefore, McGavran concluded, for the church to grow, "the main problem is how to present Christ so that men can truly follow him without traitorously leaving their kindred"<sup>8</sup> or, in other words, to "enable men and women to become Christians in groups while still remaining members of their tribe, caste, or people."<sup>9</sup> This meant that Indian converts to Christianity

should not be required to renounce their caste identity, but be allowed to maintain it alongside their newfound Christian faith.

Additionally, McGavran maintained that people preferred to become Christians “without crossing racial, linguistic or class barriers.”<sup>10</sup> Thus, in evangelizing the highly segmented Hindu populations, the best means to reach larger numbers would be to form “one-people churches” of single caste units.<sup>11</sup> In McGavran’s estimation, the choice facing the church in India is “either winning multitudes to Christ where converts join their own kind of people, or winning only a few individuals now and then.”<sup>12</sup> McGavran was careful to clarify that he was not advocating racial pride or segregation, but only the establishment of mono-ethnic churches<sup>13</sup> in which new believers can be matured and taught the theology of brotherhood.

McGavran’s missiology rests on the presupposition that God desires people to be added to his church and that such growth constitutes a demonstration of faithfulness on the part of his ministers. If significant evangelization of peoples and multiplication of churches is to take place in India, McGavran argued, the church must remove the cultural barriers to unbelievers by allowing them to join homogeneous communities of their own castes without having to renounce their caste identity.<sup>14</sup>

***McGavran’s understanding of the caste system.*** McGavran understood the caste system in India to have two distinct components: a “theological foundation” and “local manifestations.”<sup>15</sup> The theological foundations of caste consisted of the religious dogma that certain stronger castes are superior to the inferior weaker castes. McGavran averred that local manifestations of racism, whereby the strong oppress the weak, “while regrettable, must be recognized as of much less importance”<sup>16</sup> than the theological foundations of the caste system.

Thus, McGavran believed that for brotherhood and justice to prevail, the theological foundations of casteism must be demolished by the biblical doctrine of the creation of Adam in God’s image and the fact that all people are descendants of Adam and created in God’s image.<sup>17</sup> McGavran asserted that, without addressing the theological foundations, the local manifestations of caste prejudice would remain. Also, the Indian government’s concessions for people of lower castes would remain ineffective as long as the theological foundations of the caste system were left intact.<sup>18</sup>

Having provided a brief overview of McGavran’s missiology and

understanding of the caste system, we will offer our critique in light of Scripture and our experience in India. But first, we must note what we believe are the positive elements of McGavran's missiology.

***Positives in McGavran's theology.*** First, McGavran rightly emphasized the priority of evangelism and the multiplication of churches over social justice and benevolence ministries. He rightly understood that the Great Commission constitutes the very essence of the church's mission—the church is called and commanded to make disciples. McGavran was absolutely correct to emphasize that making disciples must be paramount in missions and that all other activities must serve this supreme end. Furthermore, we believe McGavran was right to prioritize a ministry of “proclamation” over a ministry of “presence” in missions.

Second, we also appreciate the fact that McGavran was no armchair academician. He was first and foremost a missionary, and his missiology was based on his experience and years of labor in the mission field. Because of McGavran's experience in India, he understood the caste system, with its theological underpinnings and ineradicable nature, as well as the ethnocentrism that it promotes. Furthermore, McGavran was accurate in his criticism of those in the West who claim that caste has ceased to exist in modern India, supposedly through the government's concessions for the ennoblement of the lower castes.

Finally, we admire McGavran's passion for the evangelism of lost people, his earnest desire to see churches planted and established, and his sincere zeal to see Jesus Christ exalted as Lord and Savior in the lives of Indian people. We do not doubt that McGavran has had a positive influence in setting correct priorities in missions with his singular devotion to evangelistically oriented missions and his commitment to the cause of the Great Commission. Despite our appreciation for McGavran and his legacy, however, we are convinced that the negative effects of McGavran's church growth principles outweigh the positive. We will presently argue why we believe this to be so. But in order to set the context for our critique, we must briefly outline the nature of the caste system itself.

## THE CASTE SYSTEM IN INDIA

In an illuminating article on the origins of the caste system, Ebenezer Sunder Raj shows that casteism in India finds its roots in four factors: (1) racial, (2)

occupational and economic, (3) migrational, and (4) religious.<sup>19</sup> Sunder Raj traces the earliest development of the caste system to the invasion of India by the Vedic Aryans. As the Aryans conquered the existing population, those not annihilated were enslaved and subjected to an ethnic gradation based on skin color—the beginnings of the caste system with all its attending evils.

The caste system was enshrined in the sacred Scriptures of Hinduism, so that it has been viewed for three millennia as a divinely sanctioned ordering of society. It is crucial to note that caste is not limited merely to ethnic identity, but is a *socio-religious* identity, with people of differing castes receiving different levels of dignity and worth in a society stratified by caste. Within the system, a person's caste identity inherently carries with it one's rank on the totem pole of relative human dignity. Furthermore, the caste system receives its impetus from the Hindu scriptures—the Vedas and the Bhagavad Gita—so that it is part and parcel of the Hindu worldview, and the two are fundamentally inseparable.

The caste system pervades Indian society in every sphere. In politics, business, and industry, the country is controlled by those of upper castes. One writer notes that even the national cricket team is comprised predominantly of upper caste Brahmin men.<sup>20</sup> The occupational aspect of caste means that certain occupations are reserved for people of certain castes. For instance, no person of a "respectable caste" will ever clean a toilet. Neighborhoods and apartment complexes are stratified according to caste, even in India's urban melting pots. Lower caste people are often employed as domestic servants by those of upper castes, but the houses of most upper caste people have separate bathrooms outside for domestic servants from lower castes.

The present day practice of caste is best illustrated through experiential description. Consider the personal experience of one of the contributors to this article, who grew up in a high caste (Brahmin) family in urban India:

I was born into a high-caste Hindu family and my parents raised me up in the Hindu religion. Although my parents never formally taught me anything about the caste system, from a very early age I got the impression that they thought themselves to be superior to others. As a child, I got this impression whenever I observed them making comments about people whom they did not like. For example, my mother would often call one of our neighbors "Anpad, Gawaar" (illiterate villager) whenever that neighbor had any disagreement with my mother.

My mother spoke this way because she could not tolerate an illiterate North Indian from a Rajasthani village (obviously from a lower caste) disagreeing with an educated high caste Brahmin such as herself. Similarly, my father, too, would often tell me not to associate with people of various communities because he felt that people belonging to these communities were cunning and deceptive. I am uncertain whether my father had any objective basis for believing these things, but, in retrospect, I believe that he made these comments because of his general caste-outlook. Thus, in these very early years, when I was growing up in New Delhi, though my parents did not formally teach me anything about the caste system, their general lifestyle and their ways of relating to others gave me a strong impression that “we” were better people than “they.” Later, when I moved to the South Indian city of Chennai to live with my grandparents in the same household, I observed them practicing casteism much more explicitly. My grandparents hired people of the lower castes as their servants. My grandmother would feed these servants out of goodwill, but would always serve them in plates and cups that were reserved for them. These plates and cups would never be used for anyone within my family. Sometimes, these servants would always be called upon to do jobs which none of my family members would be willing to do themselves—such as cleaning up the sewage system in our homes.

The foregoing testimony illustrates the kind of deep-seated ethnocentrism and prejudice nurtured by the caste system. Much like apartheid in South Africa, or the racism in America prior to the civil rights movement, the caste system engenders a mindset of superiority and racial hatred. The caste system, however, has not sufficiently aroused outcries against injustice and oppression, for casteism operates in an implicit and diabolical fashion. People of lower castes are viewed as lesser human beings by those of higher castes. Casteism is deeply ingrained in the consciousness of people, and the caste mindset extends across the generations even among people living in urban societies.

We also want to highlight the fact that we have seen the effects of the practice of caste system *within the church*.<sup>21</sup> In the work of ministry, we have encountered the perpetuation of caste within local Christian congregations, even in churches where brotherhood and oneness in Christ are supposedly taught. We have known professing Christians—even third and fourth generation believers—who have held on firmly to their caste identity and have

refused to have close association with fellow believers from another caste or have viewed them with suspicion. We have faced the heartbreak of seeing professing Christians go astray by preferring to marry unbelievers within caste lines rather than wed Christian believers across caste lines. Ethnocentric slurs, feelings of racial superiority, and a suspicious disposition towards those from other caste backgrounds are common problems, even among Christ's people in India. This description of the caste system should suffice to set the context for our response to McGavran's missiology.

### **A RESPONSE TO THE CHURCH GROWTH MODEL**

Based on our understanding of McGavran's church growth model, as it pertains to caste and as it is practiced in India today, we level our critique on five fronts: (1) Missiology characterized by church growth principles underestimates the diabolical nature of the caste system; (2) The church growth model fosters nominal Christianity and perpetuates a deeply entrenched ethnocentrism in the church of Jesus Christ; (3) McGavran's theology does not sufficiently reflect a biblical understanding of conversion, particularly of repentance; (4) McGavran's church growth principles have not adequately taken into account the New Testament call to embrace Christ at the expense of being excluded and ostracized by society; and finally, (5) Church growth missiology exalts pragmatic considerations over biblical faithfulness. Naturally, all five of these points are closely related, but we believe that isolating each of these issues allows for a more focused assessment.

***A failure to comprehend the diabolical nature of the caste system.*** Donald McGavran's ideas concerning caste are based on his understanding of the caste system as having two aspects: a "theological foundation" and "local manifestations."<sup>22</sup> He believed that the eradication of caste prejudice could only be achieved by demolishing its theological foundations—that is, by people turning to Christ, so that they reject racial inequality and come to accept one another as equal brothers and sisters. On this point, McGavran was correct. Only the gospel can bring equality and brotherhood. No amount of social labor for caste equality will ever succeed, for the caste system has deep theological roots in the Hindu worldview itself. McGavran also rightly wished to see caste pride and ethnocentrism eradicated from

the churches of the Lord Jesus Christ. However, McGavran's willingness to accommodate *caste identity* in the church indicates that he misunderstood and underestimated the diabolical nature of the caste system.

The caste system does not lend itself to a neat division between its theological and socio-ethnic components as McGavran conceived it. Caste comes in a package with the Hindu worldview as a whole, and the theological and socio-ethnic components are intertwined. Furthermore, caste identity is not simply an ethnic or racial category. Caste identity is a *socio-religious* identity. One's caste identity goes far beyond defining one's race, ethnicity, occupation, or even socioeconomic status. Rather, caste identity carries with it the notion of one's position in the caste hierarchy. A person's caste identity inherently defines a person in relative human worth to other people of differing castes. The caste system is bound up with the Hindu worldview and cannot be separated from it. It is not merely ethnocentric—it is anti-Christ.<sup>23</sup>

Therefore, we maintain that retaining caste identity is tantamount to retaining a part of one's Hindu worldview and amounts to a sort of syncretism.<sup>24</sup> The retention of elements of the Hindu worldview—such as caste identity—is *diametrically opposed* to the command: “Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Rom 12:1–2). Caste identity automatically places people on a pecking order of human dignity or worth. A redeemed people, who professes to believe that all human beings are made equally in God's image, must repudiate the use of categories that diminish or elevate a person's dignity and worth (Gen 1:26–27). The people of God, redeemed by the blood of Christ to be a “new creation” must not self-identify using categories that subvert their identity in Christ. To continue to identify oneself and others by caste within the church constitutes disobedience to the imperative to “regard no one according to the flesh” and underplays the new creation reality in Christ (2 Cor 5:16–17).

We are not the first Indians to voice these concerns. Graham Houghton notes that the Madras Native Church Council, in its inauguration in 1868, adopted a statement on caste that reflects precisely our contentions:

Believing the system of Hindoo [sic] Caste to be contrary to the spirit and requirements of the Gospel of Christ, injurious to the souls of those who adhere to it, and an impediment to the exercise of brotherly love among the members of Christ and to the spread of the Gospel in this country;... because it inculcates

the false idea of pollution on account of birth... because it confines a man and his family forever to the grade in which he was born, and prevents his rising to a higher class of society, whatever may be his character and merits... and because it recognizes a combination of individuals assuming authority and power to hinder those who follow out the dictates of conscience, and who wish to enjoy liberty in matters of marriage, food, and social intercourse;... I do on those grounds condemn and renounce the system of Caste, and admit it to be the duty of every Christian man heartily to renounce it; and I will, with God's help, discourage it both by my words and example; and I will uphold and assist all those who exercise their Christian liberty in opposition to the system of Caste.<sup>25</sup>

Houghton also indicates, in 1879, the Bangalore Missionary Conference declared that "Hindu caste, both in theory and practice, is not a mere civil distinction, but emphatically a religious institution," and is "diametrically opposed to the Christian doctrine of human nature and the brotherhood of all Christians."<sup>26</sup> The Conference went on to declare that "it is the duty of all missionaries and Churches to require its entire renunciation, with all its outward manifestations, by all those who desire to enter the Church of Christ."<sup>27</sup> These statements capture our concerns.

In stark contrast to McGavran, earlier missionaries, such as William Carey and his associates, clearly perceived the diabolical nature of casteism. Carey believed that "the holding of caste was incompatible with faith in Christ. He refused to baptize anyone who continued to maintain caste distinctions. The renunciation of caste was also a means to test the sincerity of new converts."<sup>28</sup> Carey even prayed that Hindus would be willing to "lose caste for the sake of the Gospel," and described caste as "one of the Strangest Chains with which the Devil ever bound the Children of Men."<sup>29</sup> Carey's associate, John Marshman, wrote that they "resolved to make no concession to the demands of caste.... The Serampore missionaries considered it a sacred duty to extinguish every vestige of caste in the Christian community, and more especially in the Christian church; and at the first celebration of the Lord's supper after the baptism of Krishnu-prisad it was arranged that the brahmin should receive the cup after it had passed the lips of the soodra Krishnu."<sup>30</sup> When Carey described the conversion of Hindus in his letters, he set forth rejection of caste as a primary marker of true conversion. Writing of a high caste Hindu, Carey observed that he "heard the Word of God, went back



to inform his family, immediately returned, and *tho [sic] of the Writer caste which is high—rejected Caste*, gave a most satisfactory account of the work of God on his Soul to the Church, was received and Baptised the first Lord's Day in Jan. and walks as becomes the Gospel."<sup>31</sup>

Thus, together with Indian Christian theologians as well as foreign missionaries of the past, we assert that a failure to recognize the pernicious nature of caste distorts the biblical gospel and severely undermines the church's witness. Although McGavran hoped for the eradication of ethnocentric pride, he inadvertently subverted his own hopes for brotherhood by accommodating the retention of caste identity. McGavran's methodology of accommodating the caste system in evangelism and church planting actually perpetuates this evil system and entrenches it in the churches of the Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>32</sup>

***The plague of Christian nominalism and the perpetuation of ethnocentric pride.*** McGavran's church growth principles have given rise to Christian nominalism and an entrenched ethnocentrism within churches across India. McGavran vigorously advocated conversions within groups and claimed that people should be brought into clusters of like-minded congregations where they "speak the same language, eat the same kind of food at church suppers, dress the same way, hold similar longings and aspirations and feel comfortable in each other's presence."<sup>33</sup> He maintained that ethnocentric pride and sinful antagonisms diminish when such segments of people are "Christianized."<sup>34</sup> In fact, reality has not been kind to McGavran's hopes. Christians who have maintained their caste identity are often marked by ethnocentrism, ethnic prejudice, and racial superiority of the worst kinds. McGavran's homogenous unit model actually serves to reinforce sinful prejudices already present within segmented populations.

"Group conversions" typically foster the spread of nominal Christianity, in which obedience to Scriptural commands is disregarded. This assertion is grounded by the condition of the church in regions that McGavran cited as evidence of success, as well as by our own painful experiences in the work of pastoral ministry in India.<sup>35</sup> For instance, in direct violation of 2 Corinthians 6:14–18, people prefer marriage to unbelievers from the same ethnic and caste group over marriage to believers of other ethnic groups. At times, when two believers love each other and desire to marry across caste or racial lines, ethnocentric prejudice raises its ugly head as their professing Christian families

refuse such inter-marriage, even to the point of persecuting their own kindred. We believe these demonstrations of ethnocentric pride and caste discrimination reveal the hearts of people who profess Christ but do not know him.

In support of his church growth principles, McGavran frequently adduced examples of great mono-ethnic “people movements” to Christ, particularly among tribes in the northeastern states of India.<sup>36</sup> In reality, however, the supposed “Christianization” of these regions has been largely the spread of a nominal Christianity. For instance, McGavran cites one such state, Mizoram, as evidence of the success of church growth principles: “90 percent of the Mizos have become Presbyterians and Baptists.”<sup>37</sup> Yet, today, Mizoram, despite its small size, leads the list of Indian states where most illegal drug trafficking occurs.<sup>38</sup> Together with other neighboring (and supposedly “Christianized”) northeastern states, Mizoram rates among the highest in India in HIV positive cases—the result of rampant immorality and intravenous drug use.<sup>39</sup> Evidently, the great gospel advance, which McGavran claims, has not really brought about ethical living in the culture. Even more tragically, inter-ethnic hostility between Christians of differing castes and tribes still occurs, even among those populations which have been Christian for generations.<sup>40</sup> This case study does not, in and of itself, make the case for all of India, but the authors see the patterns in Mizoram and other places in India.

Whether or not today's India (decades after McGavran wrote) is a pure reflection of McGavran's approach is debatable. However, it is not debatable that McGavran's great hope for gospel and ethical advance in certain northeastern states has not been realized, and that his project of “Christianization” among mono-ethnic units has not really resulted in transformation or brotherhood. Though McGavran himself wanted to avoid nominal Christianity, his methodologies have resulted in the increase of nominalism.

Where it is found, the scourge of nominal Christianity brings reproach on the name of Christ. Ken R. Gnanakan, an Indian theologian, alluded to this problem in his response to McGavran several years ago: “In our zeal to report back numbers to our prayer partners, we have left congregations to continue to follow their Hindu thinking, and apart from a change in name and place of worship there is little difference between the so-called Christians and their Hindu neighbors.”<sup>41</sup>

Therefore, we believe that McGavran's church growth principles, as they have been understood and employed in India, have had a negative effect on

the churches. The church has grown wide, but not deep. In our view, these false conversions are the result of McGavran's readiness to accommodate "mixed motives" in the work of evangelism. And we further contend that all these problems stem from a lack of clarity on the doctrine of conversion and repentance. It is to this issue that we now turn.

***Deficient View of Conversion and Repentance.*** We contend that McGavran's theology of church growth presents a deficient understanding of conversion that falls short of the biblical teaching. McGavran was adamant that "linguistic, racial, and class barriers" be removed in order to win more converts to Christianity.<sup>42</sup> This approach seeks to establish churches composed of homogeneous populations of only one caste, in order to remove the obstacle of crossing caste boundaries for unbelievers. McGavran asserted that Christian converts from Hinduism must maintain their caste identity so as not to alienate their family members. McGavran also promoted the "Christianization" or evangelization of entire caste segments, with the conversion of entire groups of homogeneous populations being a key element of church growth principles. Furthermore, McGavran always emphasized the conversion of groups of people in "receptive societies," that is, those who were most predisposed to convert to Christianity.<sup>43</sup> He recognized that several conversions took place with mixed motives, with many "converts" coming because they perceived in Christianity the opportunity to become better off and rise up in society, but he was willing to allow for "mixed motives," with the hope that such people could be shepherded into greater faithfulness.<sup>44</sup> McGavran also identified two distinct steps in the Christianization of a population, separating the initial processes of evangelism / discipling from the later processes of nurture / perfection.<sup>45</sup>

McGavran's understanding of "Christianization" falls short of the biblical doctrine of conversion on several counts. First, McGavran does not adequately emphasize "conversion" as the supernatural *work of God*, by which the Holy Spirit sovereignly regenerates people who are spiritually dead in their sins and brings them to new life in Christ, through the preaching of the gospel (John 3:1–8; 6:44–45; Acts 26:18; Eph 2:1–6). In McGavran's church growth model, the accent is instead placed on conversion being the *result of effective evangelistic methods* among receptive populations. McGavran recognized that a problem with such "conversions" is that people could be

“receptive” and convert to Christianity for all the wrong reasons—to find a way up in society, or because they believe that they might receive some benefits, healing, or money. McGavran himself acknowledged the problem of numerous “reversions” as a result of his methods.<sup>46</sup> Yet McGavran was willing to accommodate people coming to Christ even with unspiritual motives, believing that adequate shepherding would result in the accomplishment of “Christian attainments.”<sup>47</sup>

We are not convinced of McGavran's accommodation of “mixed motives,” for such an approach tends to foster nominal Christianity. Moreover, McGavran does not sufficiently address the sincere repentance that should accompany all true conversion, instead measuring conversion by means of “Christian attainments.”<sup>48</sup> Some of these “Christian attainments”—such as turning away from idolatry and freedom from fear of evil spirits—do aid in discerning genuine conversion. The accomplishment of “Christian attainments,” however, does not sufficiently address the formation of Christian identity and worldview that is integral to genuine conversion. Furthermore, the accommodation of “mixed motives” results in Hindus casting aspersions on Christians as enforcing conversion on the uneducated masses.

Second, McGavran's notion that a crossing of caste boundaries poses a “barrier” to conversion is mistaken. Rather, the crossing of caste boundaries by believers is a display of the glorious and manifold wisdom of God, who has broken down dividing walls in Christ (Eph 3:10). In fact, God could use inter-caste communities to shame and humble unbelievers of their ethnocentric pride and bring them to true repentance. We have seen God work in precisely such ways to bring people to the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.

Finally, McGavran's two-stage process of “discipling” and “nurturing/perfecting” allows that people can become Christians without immediately renouncing their caste identity and ethnocentric mindset. This understanding is seriously flawed, for it does not account for the biblical command to repent. As David Smith observes, “the Bible will simply not allow us to divorce the call to conversion from the call to absolute submission to Christ as Lord. To be ‘in Christ’ is to be ‘a new creation;’ it is to enter a new realm in which we now ‘regard no one from a worldly point of view’ (2 Cor 5:16–17). This new, transformed attitude does not belong to a post-conversion ‘nurturing’ stage; it is integral to all genuine conversion.”<sup>49</sup> Applying this to India, we maintain that the mindset of ethnocentric pride is inextricably woven together with

caste identity and cannot be separated from it. Such a mindset is utterly sinful. Any credible profession of faith in Jesus must be accompanied by a repentance from sinful patterns of thinking and a repudiation of caste identity. To say that the church should allow people to convert to Christ while maintaining their caste identity at their conversion is tantamount to saying churches in America should allow a Ku Klux Klan member to convert to Christ and continue to self-identify as Klansman.

In our experience, when Hindus have a genuine conversion experience and come to know Jesus as Savior and Lord, they repudiate the caste system with all its ethnocentric pride, and they joyfully renounce their caste identity. One of our contributors, whose high caste upbringing was described in the preceding section, offers his own testimony about being delivered from the pride of caste.

Upon my conversion to Christ, I developed a great aversion to the caste system. Under the influence of the caste system, I had developed a very parochial mindset. I could only think of my family and my community (the Brahmin community), and relating to people outside my community was never easy and never natural. But when the Lord saved me and brought me into his family, he gave me a love for the diversity within the church. For the first time in my life, I was able to relate with people from different linguistic and ethnic groups. My deep appreciation for my union in Christ with these brothers and sisters from different language and ethnic groups rendered the thought of observing caste system in the church completely distasteful.

Another sister in Christ, who was formerly a member of a backward caste Hindu in a rural context in South India and baptized by one of us, had the following testimony:

When I was converted, I experienced Christ's sacrificial love, and realized that I was called to show this same love to others. I recognized that I must love others as myself. This new love I had experienced in Christ was not compatible with caste. I wanted to treat others as Jesus treats me. The caste system obviously did not fit with this desire. So renouncing my caste was not a problem for me.

These statements reflect *genuine conversion*, accompanied by *heartfelt repentance*, which must be the goal for every believer. They portray a mindset

that is radically new and transformed in conversion, a mindset that must be evidenced by believers. We recognize that sanctification is progressive in nature, and believers must continually strive to grow in overcoming the sin of ethnocentrism. However, when we proclaim the gospel and call people to repentance, we must call them to repent and turn away from the entire Hindu worldview as a package—and this includes the caste system, for it is part and parcel of the Hindu religion. The rejection of ethnocentrism cannot be relegated to a later stage of “nurturing” or “perfecting,” nor should the retention of caste identity be permitted within the church. Rather, these crucial areas of sin must be addressed at the very outset of the Christian life.

But what of the alienation that such people experience from their communities? Would not a rejection of one's caste identity entail being excluded and ostracized from one's relatives and community, thus hindering the progress of the gospel and slowing the growth of the church? McGavran would assert that people are best able to reach their communities by remaining within their caste and thereby not “traitorously leaving their kindred.”<sup>50</sup> This question brings us to our next point of concern.

***A failure to recognize that embracing Christ results in exclusion.*** A key element of McGavran's thought is the assertion that a way had to be found “to present Christ so that men can truly follow Him without traitorously leaving their kindred... to enable men and women to become Christians in groups while still remaining members of their tribe, caste, or people.”<sup>51</sup> McGavran asserted that the resistance of people of other religions to the Christian faith arises not from “theological considerations,” but because of the “fear that ‘becoming a Christian’ will separate me from my people.”<sup>52</sup> McGavran viewed this fear as a “social” obstacle rather than a “theological” one, and believed that if the obstacle is removed, greater numbers of people would become Christian. McGavran believed that “methods of propagating the Gospel which enable men to accept Christ without renouncing their peoples are blessed of God to the growth of His Church.”<sup>53</sup>

In contrast, the biblical evidence shows that the call to discipleship is a call to suffering, a call to the possibility of being ostracized and excluded by one's own kindred. For instance, Jesus declared that those who follow him would be hated by all for his name's sake, and that a person would find enemies among those of his own household, but one must embrace and follow

Jesus at the cost of all these (Matt 10:34–39). Indeed, the New Testament teaches that persecution and exclusion is *expected* for followers of Christ (Matt 10:34–38; Mark 8:31–38; John 15:18–25; 16:33; 2 Tim 3:12; 1 Pet 2:4–11; Heb 13:12–13). Believers must be willing to accept exclusion from their kindred and kind as they pledge allegiance to Christ and his kingdom.

These themes are conspicuously absent from McGavran's writings. While the New Testament authors do commend family relationships and responsibilities, they never concern themselves with the question of how people "can become Christian without leaving their kith and kin."<sup>54</sup> Rather, conversion to Christianity always involves a choice between allegiance to Christ and allegiance to others—this is the cost of discipleship. In church growth literature, it seems that the pragmatic desire for growth and multiplication suppresses the biblical expectation of being ostracized for the sake of Christ.

Furthermore, McGavran made a serious error when he claimed that the main problem people have is social rather than theological. McGavran believed that people do not understand their own religions, and thus their barrier to following Jesus is primarily social. That which McGavran did not sufficiently address is the fact that this social problem *is itself also theological*. The Bible makes it clear that the "social" problem arises from a fundamentally theological problem—human beings are in rebellion against the living God and have hardened their hearts against the truth (Rom 1:18–32). People are completely blinded by the "god of this world" so that they fail to see themselves as sinners, equally worthy of condemnation as those of any other ethnic group, and in desperate need of a Savior. The social problem of ethnocentrism flows out of sinful human depravity, which must be confronted in the call to repentance (Cf. Matt 3:9). The problem is not merely "social" but profoundly "theological," and any attempt to sidestep this social problem—like the use of the HUP in evangelism—also sidesteps the deeper theological issue that must be addressed.

***The elevation of pragmatic considerations over biblical faithfulness.***

McGavran placed great emphasis on church growth and *effective* multiplication of churches, even equating church growth with faithfulness.<sup>55</sup> For McGavran, the act of separating churches into homogeneous units was a pragmatic measure necessary to stimulate church growth, since people "prefer to join churches whose members look, talk, and act like themselves."<sup>56</sup> This



principle was extended not only to caste, but also to different economic classes, another factor by which Indian society is stratified. We submit that this model, which arises from pragmatic considerations, deviates from the biblical vision of the church. We are not opposed to growth—even rapid growth—but we are deeply dismayed when the biblical vision of the church is compromised. We raise our concerns on three fronts.

First, throughout the New Testament, the writers attack the sin of ethnocentrism and provide a mandate for believers from differing ethnic backgrounds to accept each other lovingly and to live together in harmony in local churches.<sup>57</sup> Paul is unwavering in his insistence that Jews and Gentiles have been reconciled to God through the blood of Jesus Christ, so that in Christ, “there is not Greek and Jew, circumcision and uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all” (Col 3:11 HCSB).<sup>58</sup> Christ has broken down the “dividing wall of hostility” and reconciled Jews and Gentiles to God “in one body through the cross” (Eph 2:14–16). Believers are part of God’s new creation; they were once all sinners in Adam, but are now the new humanity in Christ, and therefore must live together in harmony in local congregations.

For McGavran, the HUP is a pre-conversion issue. He was concerned that cultural and social issues not prevent non-believers from considering the gospel. But Jesus approaches matters differently. Jesus offends the ethnocentric pride of the Pharisees by associating with Gentiles, tax-collectors, and sinners. The Gospels teach that citizenship in the kingdom of God is obtained by faith in Christ rather than by ethnic or social identity.<sup>59</sup> The call to repentance in Scripture includes a call to repentance from ethnic and racial pride. As John Piper frames it, “[f]aith in Jesus trumps ethnicity.”<sup>60</sup> While the church growth model emphasizes seeking to win people by not offending their ethnocentric sensibilities, Jesus’ approach is radically different—Christ lays the axe to the root of ethnic pride.<sup>61</sup>

The apostle Paul also regularly reprimanded any who hesitated to have fellowship with those who were different than they. The issue is most clearly seen in Galatians 2, in Paul’s rebuke of Peter for his separation of himself from the Gentiles (Gal 2:11–16). Peter, along with other Jewish Christians in Galatia, was acting in fear of Jews who would be offended by the sharing of table fellowship with Gentiles. But Paul insists that this sort of withdrawal is an affront to the gospel itself (Gal 2:15–21). Here, the acceptance of Gentiles—those from a differing ethnic group—as fellow members of



God's family by sharing table fellowship, takes priority over the pragmatic desire to avoid offending others. But Paul's actions are the exact opposite of the church growth model. In McGavran's model, Peter's actions would be entirely justified.<sup>62</sup>

Second, an especially striking feature of the apostolic model of churches in Scripture is that the New Testament churches cut across racial, cultural, socioeconomic, and even linguistic lines.<sup>63</sup> The heterogeneity of the apostolic model flows from the pervasive and firm conviction of unity in Christ, who has reconciled believers to God and to one another (Gal 3:28; Col 3:11).<sup>64</sup> As the early church grew, the apostles faced several problems arising from the heterogeneous composition of nascent congregations, but did not seek to partition the church into homogeneous units. The evidence of Acts is that the initial church formed at Pentecost was comprised of Jewish Christians from wide-ranging cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Acts 2:5–11). In Acts 6:1–6, tensions arose between those from different cultural-linguistic groups, the Hellenistic Jews and the Hebrew Jews. The apostles did not separate them, but resolved the issues through appointment of men to serve among the groups. Other evidence in Acts supports the heterogeneous nature of the early church; for instance, consider the diversity of the leadership in the church in Antioch (cf. Acts 13:1), which included a former Pharisee (Paul), a former Gentile (Lucian), a former Levite (Barnabas), a member of the court of Herod (Manaeon), and a man of dark skin (Simeon, called Niger).

In Romans, Paul addresses a congregation that was undoubtedly composed of people from varying ethnicities, both Jews and Greeks (Rom 7:1; 11:13). Paul implores them to live together in love because of the gospel and to sacrifice their own preferences for the sake of others (Rom 13:8–10; 14:1–23). In 1 Corinthians, writing to a congregation with members from diverse backgrounds, Paul asserts their oneness in Christ and exhorts them to prefer one another and show sensitivity to the consciences of weaker brothers (1 Cor 10:23–33; 12:12–13). The conviction that believers are a new humanity in Christ drives Christian unity within the church, as believers love one another as Christ has loved them. Indeed, Paul proclaims that the manifold wisdom and glory of God is manifested through the unity of diverse people in the church (Eph 3:1–10).

The early church also radically cut across social and economic class lines. Paul subverted the social order of slavery by exhorting slaves and masters to

fellowship together as brothers in Christ in one congregation (1 Cor 7:17-24; Phlm 8-16). Faith in Christ obliterates social status as a boundary to fellowship. Likewise, James commands that there be no partiality or special treatment given to rich persons. James assumes that rich and poor people will fellowship together in unity, rather than being separated in homogeneous units along socioeconomic lines (Jas 2:1-9).

The apostolic model of multi-ethnic heterogeneous congregations is not limited to the New Testament, but is also supported by the evidence of early Christian history. As David Smith writes, "it was precisely the heterogeneous multi-ethnic nature of the church which made an impact on the divided Roman world and led to the growth of the Christian movement."<sup>65</sup> In light of the Scriptural evidence, McGavran's HUP seems a far cry from the apostolic model of the church. McGavran's HUP simply *reinforces the status quo of society*, whereas the Bible shows us that the *gospel breaks down and cuts across racial, social, economic, and cultural barriers in ways never before seen in history*.

Third, McGavran's justification for the HUP rests on a distorted reading of the New Testament. McGavran asserted that the "New Testament congregations were strikingly monoethnic."<sup>66</sup> McGavran maintained that under the influence of the Holy Spirit, the apostles moved forward along the lines of homogeneous units, reaching primarily Jews at first, in order to grow the church: "As long as Jews could become Christians within Judaism, the Church could and did grow amazingly among Jews... These, becoming Christians within the synagogue, could do so without racial and class barriers."<sup>67</sup> He argued that "the Early Church allowed the numbers baptized to determine the direction and intensity of its missions, in the case both of the Jews and of the Gentiles."<sup>68</sup>

In response, we submit that McGavran did not consider the salvation-historical progressive framework that undergirds the book of Acts.<sup>69</sup> The apostles were not guided by any kind of a "Homogeneous Unit Principle"—this is manifestly clear from the cultural and linguistic diversity among Jews on the Day of Pentecost, and the heterogeneous nature of the congregations planted after Gentiles were brought into the church. Rather, Luke portrays the advance of the church's mission along salvation-historical lines. Luke's point is that the gospel crosses insurmountable boundaries—including racial, social, and linguistic boundaries—as the people of God are reconstituted around the risen Christ. Thus, the church growth reading of Scripture is flawed, for it imposes its preconceived pragmatic framework on the text.

The apostolic model of the church leads us to conclude that it is unacceptable to partition churches along caste lines, for such division raises up dividing walls where God has torn them down and reinforces the status quo of the caste-stratified Indian society. A pragmatic desire for rapidly growing and multiplying churches should not lead us to compromise the unity that Christ has purchased with his blood. Segmenting churches by caste forces believers to view themselves in their former socio-religious identities. Rather, they must embrace the new identity they receive as citizens of the kingdom of heaven, members of God's own household in Christ: "... the same act that reconciles one to God simultaneously introduces the person into a community where people find their identity in Jesus Christ rather than in their race, culture, social class, or sex, and are consequently reconciled to one another."<sup>70</sup>

## CONCLUSION

In light of the above evaluation, we wish to offer three reflections and recommendations for Christian missions in India.

(1) We encourage those laboring to see Christ's church established in India to prioritize faithfulness over efficiency, quality over quantity, and growth in truth over growth in numbers.<sup>71</sup> We are not opposed to the growth of the church and the multiplication of disciples. One of us, in North India, has labored to see churches planted across the countryside. Indeed, we long to see a great revival sweep across India – we pray that masses of people are evangelized and that countless churches are established all across the nation. *But we do not wish to see manufactured numbers and "growth" that come from sacrificing truth on the altar of efficiency.* In the New Testament, the concern for numerical growth never drives the mission of the church – the mission of the church is driven by a concern for the glory of Christ (Rom 1:5). Conversion is the work of the Holy Spirit, who calls spiritually dead people out of darkness into the marvelous light of the Lord Jesus as the gospel is proclaimed with boldness and clarity. Therefore, we ask that numbers not be used as a yardstick to measure God's work, but rather that God's work be measured by the lives of people who "produce fruit consistent with repentance" (Matt 3:8). May our work be driven by Scripture rather than statistics and strategies.

(2) We ask that those laboring for gospel advance in India "not shrink from declaring... the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27 ESV).<sup>72</sup> This posture

calls for presenting the gospel with its call to *repentance* along with the call to believe on the Lord Jesus. In a pluralistic culture, where Jesus is seen as one god among many, it is easy to call people to “believe” or to “accept” Jesus. It is *not* easy to call them to repent from long-cherished wicked mindsets. But we must proclaim the whole gospel, including its call to suffer for Christ, to be ostracized and persecuted for his name. Would Jesus have done any less? (Matt 10:34–39) Furthermore, to proclaim the “whole counsel of God” means teaching people to embrace Christianity as an entire worldview and discipling believers to be transformed by the renewing of their minds, so that they reject previous categories of thought—such as casteism—and instead view themselves and the world through the lens of Scripture.

(3) We certainly are not opposed to the desire to reach multitudes of people groups for Christ. But we ask that gospel laborers bear in mind that nowhere in the New Testament are we commanded to segregate churches by people group. As we have seen, the evidence of Scripture points in exactly the opposite direction—people from differing tribes, tongues, and nations are brought into the one people of God to worship God together in fellowship and harmony. Just as the church in America continues labors for racial reconciliation, just as believers in America learn to recognize that in Christ there is no “Negro” or “Ku Klux Klansman,” so also, believers in India must be taught that in Christ there is no “Brahmin” or “Vaishya” or “Shudra” or “Dalit.” And, to the glory of God, this unity *will be reflected in the demographic compositions of our congregations* as a display of the manifold wisdom of God, who has reconciled us to himself through the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. May he receive the glory and honor of which he is worthy!

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<sup>1</sup> See Donald A. McGavran, *The Satnami Story: A Thrilling Drama of Religious Change* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1990) and McGavran, *Ethnic Realities and the Church: Lessons From India* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1979).

<sup>2</sup> Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), 51.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>4</sup> See *Ibid.*, 31-48. We are not making the allegation here that McGavran advocates growth under a false gospel, but simply that he advocates numerical growth as being the primary indicator of the church's faithfulness to its task.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 203-04; See McGavran, *Satnami Story*, 23-67.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 6-7. Cf. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 198-215; *idem*, *Ethnic Realities*, 93-119.

<sup>7</sup> McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 190.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

- 9 Ibid, 190-91.
- 10 Ibid., 198.
- 11 Ibid., 211.
- 12 Donald A. McGavran, "The Priority of Ethnicity," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 19 (1983): 19.
- 13 See McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 208-10.
- 14 An important observation is that the homogeneous unit principle was, in McGavran's mind, a matter related to unbelievers. That is, he sought to remove, as obstacles to unbelievers coming to the gospel, the various social barriers that existed in India. The homogeneous unit principle, as McGavran presented it, is not to be employed in such a way as to promote caste pride within the congregation.
- 15 Donald A. McGavran, "The Hottest Race Issue in the World," *Transformation* 2 (1985): 15.
- 16 Ibid., 16.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Ebenezer Sunder Raj, "The Origins of the Caste System," *Transformation* 2 (1985): 10-14.
- 20 Andrew Stevenson, "A Class Act? Opinions Differ," *Sydney Morning Herald*, January 5, 2008, <http://www.smh.com.au/news/cricket/a-class-act-opinions-differ/2008/01/04/1198950076545.html>.
- 21 For an excellent treatment of the history of caste and the Protestant church in India, see Graham Houghton, "Caste and the Protestant Church: A Historical Perspective," *Transformation* 2 (2005): 30-33. Houghton shows that many missionaries accommodated the caste system in the church, but there have always been other missionaries and Indian theologians who have considered this approach as a grave calamity.
- 22 McGavran, "Hottest Race Issue," 15.
- 23 Graham Houghton also points out that the Rev. John P. Jones of the Madura Mission, a widely acknowledged authority on Hinduism, in 1900, asserted that caste was "the very spirit of the anti-Christ" . . . it was antagonistic to the spirit of Christ and the Gospel at every point." Houghton, "Caste and the Protestant Church," 30.
- 24 Houghton rightly notes that Indian theologians pointed out this danger of syncretism as early as 1893: "missionaries, impatient for success and filled with a love of numbers and a desire to see new churches being organized, opened the floodgates to 'heathenism'... they were apt to mistake numerical growth for spiritual growth and to hold open the door too wide for entry to the church and thereby inadvertently allowing converts to bring caste with them." Ibid, 31.
- 25 Ibid., 32.
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 Ibid.
- 28 Timothy George, *Faithful Witness: The Life and Mission of William Carey* (Birmingham, AL: New Hope, 1991), 131.
- 29 Carey's Journal Entry for July 5, 1794. See *The Journal and Selected Letters of William Carey*, ed. Terry G. Carter (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2000).
- 30 John Clark Marshman, *The Life and Labours of Carey, Marshman & Ward: The Serampore Missionaries* (New York: U. D. Ward, 1867), 82.
- 31 Carey to Andrew Fuller, Jan. 21, 1802. See *Journal and Selected Letters of William Carey*, 155 (emphasis added). Carey and his associates abolished caste at every level by encouraging fellowship across caste lines, joint participation in communion, inter-marriage between castes, and most significantly, even shared participation in funeral activities (such as carrying of the coffin. Marshman puts it thus: "the abolition of caste among the converts... commenced with the extinction of all priority in the partaking of the Lord's supper; it was confirmed by the marriage of a Brahmin with the daughter of a soodra; and consummated by the conveyance of the body of a soodra to the grave by one of the purest brahminical blood." Marshman, *Life and Labours*, 86. For more on the theology and practice of Carey and the Serampore mission vis-à-vis caste, see Ibid., 64-86. See also S. Pearce Carey, *William Carey* 7th ed. (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1926): 232-39. Historian Timothy George rightly notes that "though the missionaries desired to win the lost to Christ, they steadfastly refused to lower the standard of Christian discipleship in order to puff up their numbers." George, *Faithful Witness*, 131. This mindset is radically different from the church growth movement's concern for numbers.
- 32 McGavran and church growth advocates would perhaps respond by arguing that "Jew" is also an ethnic and religious category that Jewish believers in Christ continued to retain after their conversion to Christianity. However, this objection does not take into account the fact that "Jew" as a category is profoundly different from "caste." The ethno-religious category of "Jew" is a divinely ordained and a salvation-historical

category. In Israel, God created a people through whom he promised to bless the world, and from whom Christ would come forth at the time of the fulfillment of God's promises (Gal 3:23-29). "Jew" is therefore a biblical-theological construct, whereas caste, as we have seen, is a construct of Hindu theology and worldview. McGavran himself recognized this distinction, but failed to see the implications of it. See McGavran, *Ethnic Realities*, 94. Furthermore, we have seen that the Scriptural evidence indicates that although Jewish Christians retained their Jewish identity, they were one in fellowship with Gentile believers within heterogeneous congregations.

- <sup>33</sup> McGavran, *Satnami Story*, 7.
- <sup>34</sup> We are not asserting that McGavran would say ethnocentric racism is acceptable. But what we want to say is that by *not addressing the issue directly*, McGavran has in fact, allowed it to persist.
- <sup>35</sup> We do not refer here to genuine revivals orchestrated by the sovereign Spirit of God to advance the church with a large number of people turning to Christ in repentance and faith. We are speaking of those movements that are the results of merely human efforts.
- <sup>36</sup> See McGavran, *Ethnic Realities and the Church*, 120-41; idem, "Priority of Ethnicity," 20.
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>38</sup> HT Data Team, "India on a 'High' with 7 Drug Related Suicides Every Day," Hindustan Times, November 05, 2014, <http://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-on-a-high-with-7-drugaddiction-related-suicides-every-day/article1-1282837.aspx>.
- <sup>39</sup> Department of AIDS Control: Ministry of Health and Family Welfare Government of India, "State Fact Sheets," <http://naco.gov.in/upload/2014%20mslms/State%20Fact%20Sheet%202013-14.pdf>.
- <sup>40</sup> An interesting case concerns Nagas and Kukis in Nagaland. S. R. Tohring notes that when Christianity initially spread to the region, converts to Christianity from all tribes "loved each other and lived happily as real members of a family... they regarded all Christians as their own members and relatives. Associations were not formed with geographical names or area and not in the name of tribes." S. R. Tohring, *Violence and Identity in North-East India: Naga-Kuki Conflict* (New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 2010), 76. However, Tohring also notes that the situation has changed today, mainly because of ethnic consciousness and the establishment of churches on the basis of tribal identity: "Today, polarization is increasing within Christian organizations, particularly amongst Baptists..." Ibid., 80. This polarization only goes to show that genuine conversion results in the desire to cut across tribe and caste lines in fellowship, but a strategy that fails to address caste pride, rather than eventually leading to brotherhood, promotes nominalism and an entrenched ethnocentrism. In those places where the HUP is employed and allowed to foster nominalism and an entrenched ethnocentrism, the people must be called to repentance and brought into line with the biblical injunctions to love.
- <sup>41</sup> Ken R. Gnanakan, "Caste and the Indian Church: A Response to Donald McGavran," *Transformation 2* (1985): 24.
- <sup>42</sup> McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 183-215.
- <sup>43</sup> McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 49. We are not arguing that McGavran discounted individual salvations. Yet, the emphasis in his writings is far more on "group conversion" than on individual salvation, an emphasis that has not been helpful in India.
- <sup>44</sup> McGavran, *Satnami Story*, 52-54.
- <sup>45</sup> Donald A. McGavran, *Bridges of God: A Study in the Strategy of Missions* (New York: Friendship Press, 1955), 13-15, 24. See also *Understanding Church Growth*, 210. David Smith, in an illuminating critique of McGavran's church growth principles, notes this is a fundamental tenet of McGavran's missiology. See David Smith, "The Church Growth Principles of Donald McGavran," *Transformation 2* (1985): 27.
- <sup>46</sup> McGavran, *Satnami Story*, 94, 161.
- <sup>47</sup> McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 150-54.
- <sup>48</sup> McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 152.
- <sup>49</sup> Smith, "The Church Growth Principles of Donald McGavran," 29.
- <sup>50</sup> McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 190.
- <sup>51</sup> Ibid., 190-91.
- <sup>52</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>53</sup> Ibid., 191.
- <sup>54</sup> McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 191.
- <sup>55</sup> Ibid., 15.
- <sup>56</sup> Ibid., 198.
- <sup>57</sup> A renewed emphasis on the New Testament's polemic against ethnocentrism has been one of the positive

contributions (despite other problems) of the so-called "New Perspective on Paul." See, for instance, N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, vol. 2 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 774-1038.

<sup>58</sup> Except when included in quotes from other sources, or otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are taken from *The Holman Christian Standard Bible*.

<sup>59</sup> See John Piper's excellent discussion in *Bloodlines*, 115-27.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>61</sup> Contrast the New Testament polemic against ethnic pride with McGavran, who wrote: "Since the human family, except in the individualistic West, is largely made up of such castes, clan and peoples, the Christianization of each nation involves the prior Christianization of its various peoples as peoples. Because of the intense battle against race prejudice, the concept of separate races of men is discredited in many circles. Missionaries often carry this antipathy to race into their work in tribes and castes who believe themselves to be separate races, marry within their people and have an intense racial consciousness. But to ignore the significance of race hinders Christianization. It makes an enemy of race consciousness, instead of an ally. It does no good to say that tribal peoples ought not to have race prejudice. They do have it and are proud of it. It can be understood and should be made an aid to Christianization." McGavran, *Bridges of God*, 11. McGavran's assertions here are *diametrically opposed* to that of Jesus and the apostles. McGavran does not condone race/caste prejudice; in fact, in his writing, he condemns the attitudes of arrogance and pride. Working within the parameters of human divisions, the church is planted, and the people are slowly taught that, with the gospel, there is to be no prejudice or prideful arrogance. However, for Jesus and the apostles, the ethnocentric mindset and social divisions must be repented of at the very outset of Christian life, rather than treating this mindset as an "aid to Christianization."

<sup>62</sup> In Romans, also, Paul attacks the root of ethnocentrism. Paul asserts universal human depravity and the power of the gospel for salvation in God's act of justification for both Jews and Gentiles in Christ (Rom 1-3). *All* have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and are justified by grace through faith in Christ (Rom 3:21-26). *All* become children of Abraham through believing in the God who justifies the ungodly (Rom 4). *All* stand condemned in Adam, and *all* in Christ are justified (Rom 5:12-21). Paul warns both Jews and Gentiles not to grow arrogant, but to recognize God's grace to both peoples (Rom 2:17-29; Rom 11:17-24).

<sup>63</sup> The Latin American theologian, C. René Padilla, has critiqued McGavran's homogeneous unity principle. We believe that Padilla's critique must be considered, and much of the discussion, here, is indebted to his insights. "The Unity of the Church and the Homogeneous Unit Principle," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 6 (1981): 23-30.

<sup>64</sup> See Smith, "The Church Growth Principles of Donald McGavran," 28.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 28. Cf. Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, rev ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2004).

<sup>66</sup> McGavran, "Priority of Ethnicity," 15.

<sup>67</sup> McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 202.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>69</sup> As Padilla astutely notes, "Luke's record, however, does not substantiate the thesis that the apostles deliberately promoted the formation of 'one-race congregations' and tolerated Jewish prejudices against the Gentiles for the sake of numerical church growth. In order to claim that it does, one needs to come to Scripture with the preconceived idea (1) that the apostles shared the modern theory that race prejudice 'can and should be made an aid to Christianization,' and (2) that the multiplication of the church invariably requires an adjustment to the homogeneous unit principle. Without this unwarranted assumption, one can hardly miss the point made by Acts that the extension of the gospel to the Gentiles was such a difficult step for the Jerusalem church that it took place only with the aid of visions and commands (8:26ff.; 10:1-16) or under the pressure of persecution (8:1ff.; 11:19-20). No suggestion is ever given that Jewish Christians preached the gospel to 'none except Jews' because of strategic considerations." Padilla, "Unity of the Church," 25 (emphasis original).

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>71</sup> McGavran likely would argue that these are unnecessary dichotomies, yet we believe they are useful in prioritizing appropriate goals of Christian ministry.

<sup>72</sup> *English Standard Version*.



# Donald Anderson McGavran: An Annotated Bibliography

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*Donald McGavran is considered by many to be the founder of the modern church growth movement. His homogenous unit principle is still discussed in most seminary courses addressing issues in church planting, missions, and ecclesiology. Despite his name recognition, most of his writings receive little attention, but McGavran's writings have much to say to the church today. When McGavran's writings are examined, his heart as a missionary reverberates throughout. One example is found in the closing of his book, *The Discipling of a Nation*, in which he stated, "We stand today at midday in missions. Much has been done; but by far the greatest part remains. Let us disciple whole nations while it is yet day. The night comes (171)." Similarly, in his book, *Church Growth: State of the Art*, Peter Wagner stated that McGavran's characteristic phrase throughout his ministry was, "We stand in the sunrise of missions (15)."*

*From his writings it is clear that McGavran believed that the great day of missions may very well still be before the church; with this vision in mind it is important to understand, discuss, and in some instances to heed the wisdom presented in the writings of Donald McGavran. The purpose of this annotated biography is to highlight a significant portion of McGavran's written works. His books will receive the most attention, but important articles are also highlighted. Secondary sources of significance are presented as well. Finally, dissertations are listed but they are not annotated.*



## PRIMARY SOURCES

### Books - Author

McGavran, Donald A. *The Bridges of God: A Study in the Strategy of Missions*. London: World Dominion Press, 1955.

Considered the publication that first brought significant attention to the writings of McGavran, the book is also credited as the work that launched the church growth movement by arguing that missions must transition from a mission station approach to a people movement approach. McGavran recognizes the difficulty of this change, but he passionately puts forth his arguments to convince the reader that the only way forward in missions is through people movements. At the time, he believed strongly that the church was beginning a new age in missions, and he concluded by observing, “The Great Century of Christian Missions may well be followed by a Greater Century of the Christian churches (158).”

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Clash Between Christianity and Cultures*. Washington: Canon Press, 1974.

In this unique book, McGavran discusses the exclusivity of Christ and the impact of the teaching on culture. In five chapters, McGavran outlines and defends the gospel against the pluralistic trends of the world. He frames the argument as a clash between cultures. The book closes with three proposals to attempt to resolve the clash: 1) Christians should take a high view of Scripture (51); 2) Christians should take a high view of culture (67); and 3) Christians should allow for differences of opinion (74). In these proposals McGavran puts forth a plan for Christians to remain present in a pluralist world without compromising the exclusive claims of the gospel.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Church Growth in Jamaica: A Preview of Things to Come in Many Lands*. Lucknow, India: Lucknow Publishing House, 1962.

One of the many case studies that McGavran published throughout his career, this book provides a detailed discussion of the church in Jamaica. The main

emphasis throughout the book is that the study of the church in Jamaica has value for missions throughout the world. The book walks the reader through the process used to study and evaluate church growth in a given region. McGavran's heart for this process is apparent when he concludes, "Mission must develop a pattern of church which is indefinitely reproducible among the masses by the masses, and at their level. It cannot wait to lift the masses to the level of the upper class churches. To wait would be wrong in the sight of God in that it would condemn millions to live and die without becoming disciples of Christ merely because they are poor (116)."

\_\_\_\_\_. *Effective Evangelism: A Theological Mandate*. Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1988.

McGavran addresses the need for theological education to train pastors for church growth. He emphasizes that theological institutions should accept the responsibility of training future ministry leaders for impact in the real world (ix). The book includes sections on the Scriptural command for church growth (ch. 2), the urgency of the task (ch. 3), and how to assure effective evangelism (ch. 5). The bulk of the book follows McGavran's personal journey in starting the Institute for Church Growth and the historical rise of the church growth movement.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Ethnic Realities and the Church: Lessons from India*. Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1979.

McGavran aims to assist the reader in understanding how a church is related to its members, denomination, and social structures of its culture. A church cannot be correctly defined or studied without taking its ethnic characteristics into account. Using India as a model for study, McGavran attempts to classify churches according to their ethnic compositions. While admitting that caste systems and social divisions are not ideal, McGavran insists the presence of such divisions will be the reality in a fallen world, and that the church should work to create people movements in the various ethnic groups of every society.

\_\_\_\_\_. *How Churches Grow: The New Frontiers of Mission*. London: World Dominion Press, 1959.

McGavran discusses various topics in church growth. Focused specifically on international missions, McGavran argues that the church should not carry on with missions as usual, but instead it should focus on the “responsive unchurched” with as many of its people and as much of its money as possible (5). He demonstrates that true church growth is only possible by the working of the Holy Spirit (55). He also discusses the fact that most of the present-day church was born out of people movements (81). In concluding the book, McGavran writes that missions giving must be focused on the specific task of reaching the unchurched (172).

\_\_\_\_\_. *How to Teach Religion in Mission Schools*. Jabalpur: Mission Press, 1928.

According to biographer Vern Middleton, this is McGavran’s first published book. His purpose in writing it was to challenge the apathy that he saw in the mission schools at the time. He writes, “We are molding the character of our pupils... educating not only the head but the heart and the soul of the child, in short implanting in the pupil the life of our Lord (2).” The book has gone through several reprints, and it has also been translated into eight different languages. Overall, the book seeks to challenge the mission schools of that time to change to a model of education that McGavran believed would provide a more fruitful spiritual emphasis.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Momentous Decisions in Missions Today*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1984.

After his retirement from full-time teaching, McGavran continued to call the church to evaluate the missionary enterprise. In this book he directs his energy to exhorting the church to take action for the future of missions. In four parts, McGavran discusses the many “momentous” challenges that were present in the changing international world at the time. Regarding the challenges and opportunities before the church, McGavran concludes that the best way to alleviate poverty, injustice, and oppression is to lead people to Christ. In relationship with Christ, people will be equipped to act in loving ways (221).

\_\_\_\_\_. *Multiplying Churches in the Philippines*. Manila: United Church of Christ in the Philippines, 1958.

Two separate surveys conducted by McGavran and Earle Cressy in the Philippines, in 1956 and 1957, provide the foundational material for this book. The first study was confined to a small area of the country, but it impressed Bishop Enrique Sobrepenna so much that he arranged to have McGavran return the following year to study the whole country. Consequently, in 1957, McGavran returned to study the church in the Philippines. The purpose of these studies was to promote a nationwide evangelism emphasis, albeit from two different religious perspectives. Although McGavran and Cressy worked closely together on the research, they published their findings in separate books—Cressy’s was titled *Strengthening the Urban Church*.<sup>1</sup>

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Satnami Story: A Thrilling Drama of Religious Change*. Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1990.

An autobiographical account of McGavran from his time as a church planter in India, this book gives life to many of the principles for which he argued in his earlier books. In the preface, Roger Hedlund writes, “McGavran cannot be fully understood apart from the experience of India (viii).” His time in India is marked by the struggle he had to communicate the gospel in a difficult and sometimes hostile setting. McGavran encourages the reader to proceed with caution because his story is just one example of thousands of stories of people seeking to follow Christ’s commands to reach all people (3).

\_\_\_\_\_. *Understanding Church Growth*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970.

One of the most influential books by McGavran, it is often regarded as his “magnum opus.” The first edition, published in 1970, concentrates on international church growth movements and is described by McGavran as a theological, theoretical, and practical guide for missions (5). It is made up of five parts, which outline McGavran’s main points. Part one provides the foundational section of the book. Following are the additional sections, which in turn describe how to see and measure church growth, discuss the causes of that growth, present the sociological foundations of church growth, highlight the controversial idea of the homogenous unit principle, and visit unique areas of church growth with specific examples from the mission field.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Understanding Church Growth*. Revised edition. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980.

Similar to the first edition, but McGavran states that this book was revised in order to apply the church growth principles more clearly to the American context. Additional changes include the expansion of the last chapter into a new section, which discusses the administration and leadership involved in church growth.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Understanding Church Growth*. 3rd edition. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990.

This final edition of *Understanding Church Growth* was revised and updated by Peter Wagner. Wagner claims that the voice throughout the book is still McGavran's (vii); however, much of the book has been changed. A notable change includes the addition of chapter eleven, which addresses divine healing and church growth. Additionally, the chapters on urban populations and indigenous church principles from the previous editions are deleted.

### **Books – Co-author, Editor**

Greenway, Roger S., John E. Kyle, and Donald A. McGavran with Timothy S. Penning. *Missions Now: This Generation*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1990.

McGavran passed away while this book was in the final stages of publication (7), yet he was able to contribute four of the twelve chapters. The topics covered are characteristic of McGavran's writing: God's will for the church, the mosaic of mankind, discipling ethnos, and the universal church. The authors seek to inspire the next generation of leaders for missions by combining their collective experiences and passions (8). Because of the combined church experience and apparent passion behind this book, it was given the Urbana 1990 Book of the Day award.

McGavran, Donald A. and Win Arn. *Back to Basics in Church Growth*. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1981.

Of primary concern is the question of how the church continues to serve Christ as Lord in an increasingly pluralistic society (7). Co-authored with Win Arn, another notable name in the church growth movement, the authors focused on the task of applying church growth principles in the United States, and in doing so, sought to present the essentials of the church growth movement. In six chapters the authors present the idea that only one way exists—through Christ—for a person to be saved and that sharing this message is the primary task of the church.

McGavran, Donald A. and Arthur F. Glasser, eds. *Contemporary Theologies of Mission*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1983.

Scripture mandates that Christians are to proclaim the gospel to all people. From this starting principle, the authors argue that the church must “theologize” the mandate in a way that would be motivational and meaningful to its people (7). McGavran and Glasser attempt to make missions meaningful and motivating for the church through the efforts of authors who discuss a range of subjects, including: conciliar theology, evangelical theology, and Roman Catholic theology of missions.

McGavran, Donald A., John Huegel, and Jack Taylor. *Church Growth in Mexico*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1963.

With the help of missionaries John Huegel and Jack Taylor, McGavran provides a case study that focuses on church growth in Mexico. The authors seek answers, throughout the entire population of Mexico, as to why some churches grow, and others stop growing (9). At the conclusion of the book McGavran admitted that the study provides more questions than answers (134). However, the book does present a detailed look at McGavran’s process of studying a church in a specific area and offers helpful conclusions about matters that lead a church to real growth (131ff).

McGavran, Donald A. and George G. Hunter. *Church Growth: Strategies That Work*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1980.

Outlines the basics of the church growth movement. The co-author, Dr. George Hunter, has been a leading spokesman for the church growth

movement in the United States. The authors highlight topics such as: discovering church growth, key strategies, motivating and training laity, and reaching people through church planting. The stated purpose is to help the American church overcome decline and start reaching more people with the gospel message (20).

McGavran, Donald A. and James H. Montgomery. *The Discipling of a Nation*. Santa Clara, CA: Global Church Growth Bulletin, 1980.

The authors seek to make the enormous task of reaching all the people groups of the world more manageable by focusing on individual nation-states. Co-author James Montgomery was McGavran's student while the Church Growth Institute was still located in Oregon. Montgomery states that the idea of this book came to him while traveling between islands in the Philippines. During his travels, he realized that the whole nation could be reached with the gospel through a more systematic approach to church planting and evangelism (13). While McGavran wrote only five of the chapters, his influence is apparent throughout.

McGavran, Donald A. and Win C. Arn. *How to Grow a Church*. Glendale, CA: G/L Publications, 1973.

Presented as an actual conversation between Win Arn and McGavran, *How to Grow a Church* provides another example of their principles of church growth. The book follows the regular pattern of many of McGavran's books—discussion of the possibilities for church growth, the history of church growth, measuring church growth, leadership for church growth, and characteristics for church growth. Though the content is not new for either author, the book is helpful because of the conversational approach taken.

McGavran, Donald A. and Wayne Weld. *Principles of Church Growth*. Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1971

Written as a manual for missionaries in Latin and South America, in many ways this is an adapted edition of *Understanding Church Growth* with the purpose of equipping the workers of that region to better understand principles

of church growth. The idea for this book originated in McGavran's other writings and his conferences. Dr. Wayne Weld took the initiative to compile the information, writing the book in both Spanish and English.

McGavran, Donald A. and Winfield C. Arn. *Ten Steps for Church Growth*. San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row Publishers, 1977.

Presents ten steps meant to be a starting point for overcoming the hurdles that prevent many churches from growing. The presentation is not intended to provide an exhaustive list, rather, a starting place for church growth. Church growth principles are seen as universal truths, that properly applied, contribute to growing a church and a denomination (15).

McGavran, Donald A. and Norman Riddle. *Zaire: Mid-Day in Missions*. Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1979.

McGavran's desire to help missionaries on the field is on full display. When asked to speak at a missionary conference in Zaire, McGavran accepted but also proposed that he be flown around the country to study the missions situation throughout the whole nation. Norman Riddle accompanied McGavran on this study, and together they published their findings presented at the conference.

### **Books – Editor**

McGavran, Donald A, ed. *Church Growth and Christian Mission*. New York: Harper and Row, 1965.

Published before *Understanding Church Growth* (1970), these chapters highlight some of the main themes later developed in *Understanding Church Growth*. Among key chapters, chapter five addresses the homogeneous unit principle and the mosaic qualities of global populations (71). Chapter nine describes the three types of church growth (biological, transfer, and conversion) and presents five kinds of missions prevalent in the world at the time of publication. McGavran concludes the book with eight reasons why church growth is a needed discipline and an explanation of what it aims to accomplish (234ff).



\_\_\_\_\_, ed. *The Conciliar-Evangelical Debate: The Crucial Documents, 1964-1976*. Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1977.

An updated edition of *Eye of the Storm* (see below), it was written five years after the original edition. McGavran states that this time period allowed the two sides of the debate to refine and clarify their positions. McGavran seeks to include scholars from a broader spectrum of the church than that represented in the first edition.

\_\_\_\_\_, ed. *Crucial Issues in Missions Tomorrow*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1972.

McGavran wrote the introduction, epilogue, and one chapter. His chapter focuses on a crisis of identity faced by several missions societies, a crisis precipitated by a lack of clarity regarding primary goals and purposes. McGavran presents features of the world at the time, which necessitated changes in missions, and the authors address these matters via three main sections that address theological, anthropological, and practical issues.

\_\_\_\_\_, ed. *Eye of the Storm: The Great Debate in Mission*. Waco, TX: Word Books, 1972.

Argues that an effective presentation of the gospel will lead to the growth of the church and the improvement of society and provides a discussion of the “ends and means” for accomplishing this goal. Examining fiercely debated issues, the authors seek to address basic questions such as “What is evangelism?” and complex issues such as “The Uppsala Controversy on Mission.” An excellent resource at the conclusion of the book is the regionally presented bibliography of church growth books.

### **Selection of Articles and Other Important Works**

McGavran, Donald A. “Barred Populations and Missionaries.” *International Review of Mission* 64 (January 1975): 56-61.

Addresses the challenge that many churches face in having populations of people, right around them, who are unable or unwilling to hear and accept

the gospel. McGavran identifies barriers that must be overcome and seeks answers for the church through missions and outreach and calls for “missionaries from all races and denominations” to intersect around the globe to reach out to all people.

\_\_\_\_\_. “The Dimensions of World Evangelization,” in *Let the Earth Hear His Voice: International Congress on World Evangelization – Lausanne, Switzerland*. Edited by J. D. Douglas. Minneapolis: World Wide Publications, 1975.

McGavran prepared this paper for the Lausanne Congress in 1974. He seeks to “outline the main dimensions of world evangelism and the major issues confronting it” and to make suggestions for effective strategy in a crucial moment for the history of missions. Divided into three parts – Divine Dimensions, Human Dimensions, and Methodological Dimensions – the paper is followed by the transcript of McGavran’s presentation of these ideas at the conference.

\_\_\_\_\_. “The God Who Finds and His Mission.” *International Review of Mission* 51 (July 1962): 303-16.

McGavran begins by asking the question of what can be more in line with God’s intent than the multiplying of his church? He argues that God desires the church to grow by the church searching for, and reaching, new people. A corresponding danger is that of the church losing its way and failing to do its best in reaching new people.

\_\_\_\_\_. “Great Debate in Missions.” *Calvin Theological Journal* 5, no. 2 (November 1970): 163-79.

First delivered as a lecture at Calvin Theological Seminary in 1970, McGavran seeks to address the relationship of gospel proclamation and social action in missions. While acknowledging, “The demands for justice and humanitarian action are an unquestioned part of the picture,” he desires to reinforce the importance of proclaiming of the gospel.

\_\_\_\_\_. "The Hottest Race Issue in the World." *Transformation* 2, no. 2 (April/June 1985): 15-24.

Highlights the severe racism present in the caste system of and argues that millions were stuck in poverty, landlessness, with no hope of the situation ever changing. McGavran offers his evaluation and solutions for the situation. The article is important because it highlights McGavran's social concern for oppressed peoples.

\_\_\_\_\_. "The Institute of Church Growth." *International Review of Mission* 50, no. 200 (October 1961): 430-34.

A short article, in which McGavran presents the need for and importance of The Institute of Church Growth. At the time of publication, the Institute was still located at Northwest Christian College in Eugene, Oregon. The two functions of the Institute discussed in this article are *research* and *teaching*. McGavran closed the article by expressing his hope that the Institute would equip God's people to carry the gospel to the whole world.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Missionary Confession of Faith." *Calvin Theological Journal* 7, no. 2 (November 1972): 133-45.

McGavran interacts with the Presbyterian Confession of 1967. McGavran, who had come out of a Disciples of Christ background, states that he had remained out of the denominational discussions while the document was being formed. Having waited until after the confession was completed, he then provides his insights into the strengths and weaknesses of the document.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Missiology Faces the Lion." *Missiology* 17, no. 3 (July 1989): 335-41.

While this article appeared toward the end of McGavran's life, in it he argues many of the same points made in the 1950s through books like *The Bridges of God*. Humanitarian missions are likened to lions, which devour the more important mission of "discipling the whole of humanity (335)." The article includes four responses to McGavran and his interactions with each.

\_\_\_\_\_. "My Pilgrimage in Mission." *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 20, no. 2 (April 1986): 53-54, 56-58.

McGavran uses this article to reflect upon his changing concepts of missions throughout his ministry career. He concludes that his views of missions and church growth never really changed; instead, they were sharpened and strengthened through years of thinking and practicing. An important article because of his self-reflection.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Still Building the 'Bridges of God:' An Interview with Donald McGavran." *Global Church Growth* 21, nos. 4-5 (September-December 1984): 390-95.

*Global Church Growth* interviewed McGavran on its twentieth anniversary as a journal. Questions addressed matters from his definition of church growth to his dreams for the church growth movement. Interestingly, McGavran states that the beginning of the movement was twenty years before *Bridges of God*, during his time as a missionary to India involved in administration.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Ten Emphases in the Church Growth Movement." In *Unto the Uttermost*. Edited by Doug Priest Jr., 248-59. Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1984.

Ten emphases are highlighted, which were central to McGavran's thoughts on church growth, research, and improved missions. He also seeks to answer many of the critics of the church growth movement. The article mirrors his book, *Ten Steps for Church Growth*, but in a very condensed form.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Wrong Strategy: The Real Crisis in Missions." *International Review of Mission* 54, no. 216 (October 1965): 451-61.

One question – "What is correct strategy in the Christian mission?" – is the main focus. McGavran puts forth five major flaws he saw with the missions strategy of the 1950s and provides what he believes to be appropriate strategies.

Hayward, Victor and Donald McGavran. "Without Crossing Barriers? One in Christ vs. Discipling Diverse Cultures." *Missiology* 2, no. 2 (April 1974): 203-24.

A published debate between Hayward and McGavran, which took place in letter form. Hayward was previously the Associate General Secretary for Relationships with the Christian Councils of the World Council of Churches. An important article that provides a glimpse into the manner in which McGavran interacted with those who disagreed with him and his principles.

### ***Church Growth Bulletin – Editor***

McGavran, Donald A., ed. *Church Growth Bulletin: Volumes I – V*. Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1969.

A single volume that contains the complete set of the periodical, *Church Growth Bulletin*, from September 1964 to July 1969. Released bi-monthly, McGavran oversaw the editing and writing of articles in most volumes. The journal presents a wide range of articles pertaining to church growth theory and practice. Most importantly, this collection contains an index highlighting important topics throughout these issues.

\_\_\_\_\_, ed. *Church Growth Bulletin: Second Consolidated Volume – September 1969 to July 1975*. Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1977.

A continuation of the earlier volume, this volume includes the bi-monthly journal from September 1969 to July 1975. McGavran remained editor of the periodical throughout this entire time. Like the first volume, this work contains a helpful index for searching the issues by topic.

\_\_\_\_\_, ed. *Church Growth Bulletin: Third Consolidated Volume – September 1975 to November 1979*. Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1982.

The third volume of McGavran's work as editor of the *Church Growth Bulletin*, it contains the issues from September 1975 to November 1979 and, also, a subject index in the back. McGavran remained the editor of the journal until 1981.

## SECONDARY SOURCES

### Books

Middleton, Vern. *Donald McGavran: His Early Life and Ministry – An Apostolic Vision for Reaching the Nations – A Biography*. Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2011.

The only major biography on McGavran to date, this book covers McGavran's life until 1965. Vern Middleton uses his experience as a missionary and church planter and his personal relationship with McGavran to take the reader through the formational years of McGavran's ministry. This biography ends at the point at which the wider church was first starting to take notice of McGavran's writings in the area of church growth. By covering his early years as a missionary the work provides the life experiences that were foundational to the principles McGavran developed later in his life.

Tippett, A. R., ed. *God, Man, and Church Growth: A Festschrift in Honor of Donald Anderson McGavran*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1973.

Editor Alan Tippett writes about McGavran, "Much of his life, ministry, and literary work has been concerned with bringing alienated man back to God by way of a process of church growth (xi)." In honor of this goal, twenty-six authors, from various points of McGavran's life, worked together to highlight his life and ministry. The six part book focuses on topics such as McGavran as a person; God's purpose and man's responsibility in church growth; God's work in human structures and history; and finally, research techniques for the work of God.

Wagner, C. Peter, Win Arn, and Elmer Towns, eds. *Church Growth: State of the Art*. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1986.

This volume provides a collection of many of the important names in the church growth movement. The first chapter offers a tribute to McGavran. The editors credit McGavran as being the father of the church growth movement. Wagner's statement that McGavran's best achievement was the founding of the Institute refers to the Institute of Church Growth, started in Eugene,

Oregon and which later moved to Fuller Seminary. The book as a whole is a tribute to McGavran's life and ministry.

Winter, Ralph. *Four Men, Three Eras*. Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1996.

This short book provides a brief glimpse into four major figures in the history of missions: William Carey, Hudson Taylor, Cameron Townsend, and Donald McGavran. Among other topics, *Four Men* focuses on unreached people groups and the manner in which these men impacted movements to locate and reach them. Winter's inclusion of McGavran places him in elite company in recent missions history.

## Articles

Bolger, Ryan K. "Practice movements in global information culture: looking back to McGavran and finding a way forward." *Missiology* 35, no. 2 (April 2007): 181-93.

Author Ryan Bolger seeks to bring McGavran's ideas into the current missions setting by interacting with the book *Bridges of God*. Bolger equates the two approaches, which McGavran discussed in *Bridges* – mission stations and people movements, as representations of modernity and postmodernity respectively. He concludes the article by discussing a third system, global information culture, which he admits came after McGavran's life and ministry (182).

Gill, Donald H. "Apostle of Church Growth: Disciples of Donald McGavran Roam the World in Search of Facts." *World Vision*, 12, no. 7 (September 1968): 10-11, 35.

This brief article begins by profiling a typical missionary who seeks to implement McGavran's principles into his or her ministry. Along with the succinct overview of McGavran's ministry and ideas Gill provides an analysis and glimpse into the ministry of McGavran early in his academic career.

Glasser, Arthur F. "Church Growth at Fuller." *Missiology* 14, no. 4 (October 1986): 401-20.

Provides an insider perspective on the historical and theological aspects of the church growth movement while presenting the strengths and weaknesses of the movement. Concludes with a list of various thoughts from Glasser on church growth.

Hunter, George G., III. "The Legacy of Donald A. McGavran." *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 16, no. 4 (October 1992): 158-60, 162.

Provides a short biographic sketch of McGavran and argues for the significance of his impact through the church growth movement. Hunter works to address the inaccurate representation of McGavran as simply an "evangelical with a preference for numbers, slogans, and church planting (159)." Hunter argues, instead, that McGavran's writings had a significant impact in numerous areas of study.

Winter, Ralph D. "An Insider's View of McGavran." *Mission Frontiers* 12 (June-October 1990): 6-9.

"An Insider's View" provides a close look at the church growth movement. Winter worked closely with McGavran for many years and delivers a unique perspective on the movement and McGavran himself. Interestingly, Winter points the reader to *Ethnic Reality and the Church* as the capstone of all of McGavran's work as a writer. The article also includes a section on the urbanization of the world and addresses the manner in which the church growth movement should respond.

Zunkel, Wayne C. "Church Growth: 'Not Another Evangelist Fad.'" *Brethren Life and Thought* 25, no. 4 (August 1980): 223-36.

Author Wayne Zunkel approaches McGavran's writings on church growth from the Brethren perspective. The article highlights the main emphases of the movement and argues for its usefulness for all Christians, regardless of denominational background.

### **Dissertations and Theses**

Bates, Matthew David, Jr. "Growing the Church, Resisting the Powers,



Reforming the World: A Theological Analysis of Three Options for Ecclesial Faithfulness in North American Protestantism (Donald A. McGavran, John Howard Yoder, Walter Rauschenbusch)." Ph.D. diss., Union Theological Seminary and Presbyterian School of Christian Education, 2005.

Benkert, Todd Alan. "A Biblical Analysis of Donald A. McGavran's Harvest Theology Principle." Ph.D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2008.

Buice, Shawn Leroy. "A Critical Examination of the Use of Selected New Testament Passages in the Writings of Donald A. McGavran and C. Peter Wagner." Ph.D. diss., Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, 1996.

Burkhalter, William Nolan. "A Comparative Analysis of the Missiologies of Roland Allen and Donald Anderson McGavran." Ph.D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1984.

Crabtree, John Albert, Jr. "The Divergence of Donald McGavran's Church Growth Movement in North America, 1955-2000." Ph.D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2004.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Donald A. McGavran's Theology of Evangelism and Church Growth as a Basis for Theological Education." Th.M. thesis, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1997.

Glahn, Robert Gale. "A Biblical Analysis of Donald A. McGavran's Church Growth Principles." Ph.D. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1980.

McClung, Lloyd Grant, Jr. "The Church Growth/Church Planting Study Guide: A Two-Phase Reading and Self-Study Course." Ph.D. diss., School of World Mission, Fuller Theological Seminary, 1985.

McIntosh, Gary Lynn. "The Impact of Donald A. McGavran's Church Growth Missiology on Selected Denominations in the United States of America." Ph.D. diss., School of Intercultural Studies, Fuller Theological Seminary, 2005.

Melancon, Patrick Julian. "An Examination of Selected Theological Topics

in the Thought of Donald A. McGavran (Church Growth).” Ph.D. diss., Mid-American Baptist Theological Seminary, 1997.

Middleton, Vernon James. “The Development of a Missiologist: The Life and Thought of Donald Anderson McGavran, 1897-1965.” Ph.D. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1989.

Smith, James C. “Without Crossing Barriers: The Homogeneous Unit Concept in the Writings of Donald Anderson McGavran.” Ph.D. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1976.

Spradlin, Matthew Donald. “The Role of ‘Perfecting’ in Donald McGavran’s Church Growth Thought.” Ph.D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2012.

Tucker, James Douglas, Jr. “Post-McGavran Church Growth: Divergent Streams of Development (Donald A. McGavran).” Ph.D. diss., Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, 1998.

Vazhayil, Devasia. “The Missionary Methods of the Church Growth School of Missiology.” Ph.D. diss., Pontificia Universitas Gregoriana, 1994.

Works, Herbert Melvin, Jr. “The Church Growth Movement to 1965: An Historical Perspective.” Ph.D. diss., School of World Mission, Fuller Theological Seminary, 1974.

Walters, Jeffery K. “Effective Evangelism’ in the City: Donald McGavran’s Missiology and Urban Contexts.” Ph.D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2011.

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<sup>1</sup> Vern Middleton, *Donald McGavran: His Early Life and Ministry – An Apostolic Vision for Reaching the Nations – A Biography* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2011), 181.



# A Sermon: "Our Obligation to the Unreached," Romans 1-3

DAVID PLATT

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David Platt (Ph.D.), serves as President of IMB.

*In this sermon, former pastor and current President of IMB, David Platt, considers the obligation of Christians to reach those without the gospel. As pastor of The Church at Brook Hills, Platt asked several questions. Why do we seek to plant churches among various people groups in our own cities? Why do we send people out across North America to work and to make disciples and to plant churches? Why do we move cross-culturally for the spread of the gospel? Platt looks for answers to these and other questions in Paul's epistle to the Romans.*

## THE REASON FOR ROMANS

Let's start by remembering why this book was written. Paul gives an introduction to the book of Romans at the beginning of the letter, but then at the end of the letter, in Romans 15, he lets us in a little more on what he's trying to accomplish. Here's what he says, beginning in verse 18:

*<sup>18</sup> For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to bring the Gentiles to obedience—by word and deed, <sup>19</sup> by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God—so that from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum I have fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ; <sup>20</sup> and thus I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else's foundation, <sup>21</sup> but as it is written,*

*"Those who have never been told of him will see,  
and those who have never heard will understand."<sup>1</sup>*

Paul says he wants to see Christ preached where He's not been named, that is, among people who have never even heard of Christ. Then Paul writes the following in verses 22-25:

*<sup>22</sup> This is the reason why I have so often been hindered from coming to you. <sup>23</sup> But now, since I no longer have any room for work in these regions, and since I have longed for many years to come to you, <sup>24</sup> I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain, and to be helped on my journey there by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a while. <sup>25</sup> At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints.*

Those verses make sense in light of the geography behind the book of Romans, and the context in which Paul writes. Some historical background on Paul's missionary journeys may be helpful to make this point.

On Paul's first missionary journey, he was sent out by the church at Antioch, which is where the Lord said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them" (Acts 13:2). Then, after this journey, Barnabas and Saul came back to Antioch, where they encouraged the saints again.

The church at Antioch sent Paul out again on a second missionary journey, during which he went north to some of the same places he had gone before. It's at this time that he received the Macedonian call, a vision of a man of Macedonia saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us" (Acts 16:9). So Paul went north into Macedonia into places like Thessalonica and Corinth, and then he came down to Ephesus and he made his way to Jerusalem. Then he went back to Antioch, his home base, and he encouraged the saints there at the end of his second missionary journey.

On the third missionary journey, Paul went out again from Antioch and he retraced his steps and encouraged the churches where he had already preached. During this third missionary journey, Paul arrived in Corinth and wrote this letter—the book of Romans—to the church at Rome. He told them he was traveling to Jerusalem, yet he did not mention any plans of going back to Antioch. But why not? Because ultimately Paul wanted to go to Spain, and going back to Antioch was not the best way to get to Spain. So Paul wrote this letter from Corinth to Rome with Spain in his view. He essentially says to the church at Rome, "I want you to help me get the gospel to Spain."

## THE WORLD'S GREATEST MISSIONARY SUPPORT LETTER

When someone goes on a missions trip today, it's pretty common for them to write a letter asking for prayer and support. In the same way, and in light of the background of Paul's missionary journeys, we might think of the book of Romans as a (Spirit-inspired) missionary support letter—the greatest missionary support letter ever written. I'm convinced that Romans 1-8 is the most masterful and beautiful picture of the gospel written anywhere in Scripture. But don't miss the point: this is not gospel just for the sake of gospel, as if Paul simply decided to write a systematic treatise to the church at Rome. No, this is gospel for the sake of mission. That's what's driving Paul as he writes the book of Romans. So don't miss this: the intended effect of the book of Romans was to cause the church at Rome to do whatever it took to get the gospel to people who have never heard it. This is why, at the beginning of Romans, Paul says the following in verses 1-17:

*<sup>1</sup> Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus (the word he uses there is a Greek term for slave), called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God (then he begins to explain the gospel), <sup>2</sup> which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, <sup>3</sup> concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh <sup>4</sup> and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, <sup>5</sup> through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about (so this is what we're after) the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations, <sup>6</sup> including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ,*

*<sup>7</sup>To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

*<sup>8</sup> First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world. <sup>9</sup> For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you <sup>10</sup> always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to you. <sup>11</sup> For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you—<sup>12</sup> that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine. <sup>13</sup> I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as well as among the rest of the Gentiles. <sup>14</sup>*

*I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish (Did you hear that? Paul says, “I owe the gospel to all people... Greeks and barbarian... wise and foolish... I owe them all the gospel.” What a statement!).*

<sup>15</sup> *So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.*

<sup>16</sup> *For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.* <sup>17</sup> *For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.”*

Paul holds out the gospel as the greatest news in all the world—the news that people can be made right with God through faith in Jesus Christ. Everybody has got to hear this! Then, starting in verse 18, Paul starts making the case for why all people need to hear the gospel. So, then, ask the question: why are *we* reading Romans right now? What is the intended effect of our reading it? The intended effect of the book of Romans in our lives is to raise our eyes to people in the world who have never heard the gospel and to cause us (to jolt us!) to do whatever it takes to get the gospel to them. That’s not to say there aren’t other purposes and ways God is using or will use this book, but I believe that one of the purposes is to cause us to say in a fresh way, “We will do whatever it takes to get the gospel to people who have never heard it in our day.”

People say, “That was Paul’s day, but are there really that many people in the world today who have never heard the gospel? Are there that many people among whom Christ has not been preached—men and women who hardly know His name?” And the answer is *yes*. This is where I want to paint a portrait of the unreached in our day.

### **WHO ARE THE UNREACHED?**

Who are the unreached in our day? Who are the people who have never heard? The unreached are *people groups among whom there is no indigenous community of believing Christians able to engage the people group with church planting*. Notice in that definition the term “people group.” When Jesus commanded the church to make disciples of all the nations, the word he used for nations there is *ethnē*, from which we get words like *ethnic groups*. This is important because when Jesus was talking about “nations” there in Matthew 28:19, he wasn’t referring to nations like we think of nations today—two

hundred or so geopolitical nations in the world that, quite frankly, didn't exist two thousand years ago when Jesus said this, at least not in the way they do now. No, Jesus is specifically talking about groups of people—ethnic groups—that share common cultural and linguistic characteristics.

Among the two hundred nations today, there is a plethora of people groupings, and these people groupings are not just among nations, but also in cities. For example, we had a group of church members who recently went into our city to make connections with different people groups represented there. They went to international restaurants and markets, to community centers, to college campuses, and they met Thai, Filipino, Vietnamese, Punjabi, Gujarati, Colombian, Salvadoran, Palestinian Arab, Jordanian Arab, Northern Yemeni Arab, and Moroccan Arab people—just to name a few! And that's in Birmingham, Alabama, hardly the most cosmopolitan city in the world. So think about 200 nations filled with a diverse array of peoples. Most anthropologists and missiological scholars put that number at over eleven thousand different people groups. And remember, unreached peoples are people groups who don't have "an indigenous community of believing Christians." In other words, there is not a church made up of men and women from that people group that is sufficient to engage them with the gospel.

*Technically speaking, when we say unreached, we're saying that the percentage of evangelical Christians in this people group is less than two percent.* That's important, because if there's not a substantial church presence among a people, then not only do over ninety-eight percent of the people not believe the gospel, but also most of them have never even met a Christian (i.e., a person who would share the gospel with them). They are unreached. So how many people groups are in this situation in the world today?

### **HOW MANY PEOPLE ARE UNREACHED?**

Our best estimate is that out of over 11,000 distinct people groups, *over 6,500 people groups are unreached* (according to the definition above). Just to make sure we feel the weight of that number—6,500—that *includes at least 2 billion individual people*. So in a world of 7 billion people, at least 2 billion of them are unreached.

Let's put one more term on the table—"unengaged." *Over 3,000 of these 6,500 people groups are also unengaged*, which means that there is currently no evangelical church planting strategy under way to reach that people group.



Unengaged people groups *include around 200 million individual people*. So, in many cases (not in all, but many), these are smaller people groups that don't comprise large swaths of people, but they still have distinct ethnicity and many times a distinct language.

-----\* Editor's note: The reader will note Todd Benkert's challenge, in "Reconsidering Receptivity in the Age of People Groups," of the two percent criterion for establishing "reachedness," and in doing so will begin to understand the sometimes uncertain nature of terms and definitions in describing the realities of the mission fields of the world.

I was spending some time recently with a group of missionaries from the International Mission Board (IMB), our primary partner among unreached peoples, and these missionaries were working to reach people groups who still had no contact whatsoever with the outside world—people who live in total isolation. What was encouraging, though, was that there were people working to get the gospel to them. What is overwhelming, on the other hand, is to think that right now there are at least 3,000 people groups—many of which are smaller ethnic groups—that have no one specifically trying to reach them with the gospel. There's only one thing worse than being lost, and that's being lost and having no one trying to find you.

### **WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE UNREACHED?**

All these numbers of unreached and unengaged peoples can feel distant; that's the way numbers and statistics work. So, practically, what does it mean to be unreached? Put yourself in the shoes of one of these two billion people in the world who are unreached. Imagine that's you, your family, or your kids—not two billion, but instead one or two or three or four of you.

If you are unreached, practically that means that you do not currently have access to the gospel. In other words, you likely don't even know it exists, or like some people I have met in the world, you have never even heard the name of Jesus. Or maybe you've heard of Jesus, but you know as much about Him as you know about Confucius. That is to say, you know Confucius taught on personal and governmental philosophy and that he influenced Eastern thinking, but that's about all you know. And you don't

know any Christians. You don't know anyone who knows the truth about Christ; you've never *met* anyone who knows the truth about Christ. You don't have access to the gospel.

Some people say, "I don't know why we talk about unreached peoples around the world when there are unreached people who work at my office." That's not true. Those people aren't unreached. Why? Because they have access to the gospel. *You* are their access to the gospel! If you're unreached, it means you don't have access to Christians, to truth about what Christ has done, and unless something changes, you will likely be born, live, and die without ever hearing the gospel. Put yourself in their shoes: if you die today, you will likely die having never heard the good news of what God has done in Christ. Which leads to the inevitable question: what happens when you die?

Would you go to hell forever if you died and you had never even heard the gospel? This is where we come, biblically, to what it means to be unreached. It's a question that Paul is answering in the book of Romans. Biblically, to be unreached means that *you have knowledge of God*. This is what Paul is saying in Romans 1:18-20:

*<sup>18</sup> For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. <sup>19</sup> For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. <sup>20</sup> For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.*

Paul says that everyone everywhere has knowledge of God. God has made it plain to them, having shown Himself and His glory in creation. That's why it says right after this in verse 21, "... although they knew God." Wherever you are as an unreached person, you have knowledge of God. This was illustrated clearly in a story my wife and I have been reading with our kids.

During family worship we've been reading a book called *Keeping Holiday*. It is a Pilgrim's Progress-type allegory about coming to faith in God. The whole story is about a journey of a boy named Dylan and his cousin, Clare, who are looking for the Founder of a place called Holiday, and the Founder represents God. Last night in our reading, they were having a conversation with the stars, and this is how it went:

Although the star's voice sounded as though it came from far, far away, it spoke distinctly. "We have one purpose," the star said slowly and with great gravity. "One grand, glorious purpose.... [N]othing will ever deter us from doing what we were designed to do. We have done it for centuries, for millennia, yet we never finish and we never tire. We have occupied these same places in the sky, night after night, day after day, always doing the same work. We know no change. Yet we never grow weary. We feel only delight in this most solemn, most joyful task we have received...."

"... What is that task?" Dylan asked and waited as his words found their way up to the stars...."

"... We announce to everyone that the Founder..." The star paused and Dylan's heart beat faster. The star's voice grew even more solemn, and at the same time a tremor of joy ran through it. "That the Founder—is. We announce to every person on earth—for where is the place where stars are never seen?—to them all, we announce that the Founder *is* and that he is marvelous. He does remarkable things, amazing things. Look at us, the stars, and know that the Founder is altogether wonderful. Nothing, no one, is so excellent as he."<sup>2</sup>

I read that and thought, "Yes! That's right! That's Bible." God says in Isaiah 40:26, "Lift up your eyes on high and see: who created these? He who brings out the starry host by number, calling them all by name, by the greatness of his might, and because he is strong in power not one is missing." Based on verses like this, if you're unreached, no matter where you are in the world, you have knowledge of God.

Second, if you're unreached, *you have rejected God*. You have, according to Romans 1:21-25, an inherently sinful nature that rebels against the knowledge of God, and this looks different in different places. Maybe you're in West Africa, and you practice voodoo in your attempts to appease and direct evil spirits around you. Or maybe you're in India, and you offer incense every day to gods you've crafted with your own hands. Or you're in Saudi Arabia, and you bow down five times a day to recite wrote prayers to a false god. If you're in the mountains of Nepal, you might worship the Buddha, and perhaps you've sent your firstborn son off to the monastery to attain Buddhahood. Or maybe you're in China or North Korea, and you've rejected the idea of God altogether. In the end, regardless of what your rejection of God looks like, if you're unreached, you have knowledge of God, and you

have rejected the knowledge God has revealed to you. You have turned aside from the one true God.

As a result of rejecting God, Romans teaches clearly that *you stand condemned before God*. According to Romans 1:18-2:16, Gentiles are guilty; according to Romans 2:17-3:8, Jews are guilty; according to Romans 3:9-20, all people are guilty. These are depressing verses. You've heard the question, "What happens to the innocent guy in Africa who dies without hearing the gospel—does he go to heaven?" No question, he absolutely does! The problem is that the "innocent" guy doesn't exist. We bias the question from the start: there are no innocent people in the world waiting to hear the gospel. Instead, there are guilty people all over the world, and that's why they need to hear the gospel.

I fear that we all too often view heaven as the default state for unreached peoples. We think God owes heaven to them, which is not true. They are guilty and condemned. Why? For rejecting God. This is a fundamental misunderstanding: many professing Christians come to the conclusion that if certain people don't have the opportunity to hear about Jesus, this excuses them from condemnation, and they go to heaven because, after all, they never had the opportunity to hear about Jesus. I get the emotion behind that—we *want* there to be a way. But as soon as we say that people who haven't heard about Christ get a pass, then the worst thing we could do is to go tell them the gospel.

The reality is, if you are unreached, then you stand condemned before God, and *you have never heard the good news about how you can be saved by God*. Picture Paul in tears in Romans 3:21-26:

<sup>21</sup> But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—<sup>22</sup> the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: <sup>23</sup> for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, <sup>24</sup> and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, <sup>25</sup> whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. <sup>26</sup> It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

This is the gospel! Even if you have lived your whole life unreached by this good news, by hearing it now that puts you in the *reached* category. This

is the good news that Jesus stood in your place condemned, that he lived the life you should have lived, that he died the death you should have died, and that he showed his power over sin in the resurrection. To all those who, through no righteous work of their own, put their trust in Christ for their salvation, they will spend eternity in heaven with God. That's good news. That's gospel! However, in the words of Carl F. H. Henry, "The gospel is only good news if it gets there on time." Do we realize this?

Let's step out of the shoes of those who have never heard the gospel and praise God that we're not in those shoes. Aren't you thankful? Yes, you once had knowledge of God and rejected Him... but now you stand accepted before God! And not just accepted before God, but adopted by God! How is this so? This is so because we've *heard* the good news about how we can be saved by God! That is, we had access to this news—somebody told us. Praise God, somebody told us! We're not in the shoes of the unreached.

### **WHY MUST WE GO TO THE UNREACHED?**

So why must we go to the unreached? I use the word *must* in a Romans 1:14 way, where Paul says, "I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and the foolish." Why are we obligated to give our lives, whether we live here or move somewhere else, to get the gospel to people who've never heard it? This is, after all, the intended effect of the book of Romans—to cause our hearts to consider how we can get the gospel to people who've never heard it. Why must churches do this? Why must *you* do this, Christian? Why must you and I go to the unreached?

There are four reasons in the book of Romans why we must take the gospel to the unreached. First, *because their knowledge of God is only enough to damn them to hell*. There are over 6,000 people groups—2 billion people—for whom hell is the only option based on their knowledge of God. Oh, feel this: there are over 2 billion people in the world at this moment who have enough knowledge of God to show them that he is incomprehensibly glorious, and that they are sinfully lost... but that's all they've got.

I just can't get out of my head the burning bodies I saw on my recent trip to Nepal. We rounded the corner and came upon a Hindu holy river where funeral pyres are set out above the river. The custom is to bring a friend or family member to the pyre within twenty-four hours of dying, lay the body

on the pyre, set it on fire, and then let the ashes fall into the river. They believe this will help them in reincarnation. When I saw this, I was stopped and stunned in silence at the sight and smell of burning bodies. And as I'm looking at these bodies, I realize that what I am seeing is an earthly picture of an eternal reality. Those people who were alive twenty-four hours before are burning in hell now, and it hit me that most, if not all, of those people on the funeral pyres died without ever hearing the gospel. This cannot be tolerable for us! Their knowledge of God is only enough to damn them to hell.

The second reason we must go to the unreached is because *the gospel of God is powerful enough to save them for heaven*. This gospel is good—it works! I'm reminded of being in Northern India, right near Nepal, walking through city slums. Everywhere you look in these city slums and rural villages there are masses of people that have never heard. Some of them are starving to death. As I was walking through the slums, we stopped in the home of an elderly woman who had Hindu gods all over her one-room shack. It's all she's ever known. I said, "I want to tell you about the one true God who loves you and who sent His Son to die so that you might know him." After sharing this good news, in an instant, in a moment, in the power of the gospel, just like that, she left behind generations of Hinduism, and she said, "I want to trust in Christ alone for my salvation."

There is not a person or people group on this planet that is beyond the power of God to save. We are obligated to go to unreached peoples because the gospel of God is powerful enough to save them for heaven. If they hear it, they'll believe—not all of them, to be sure, but many will. We know, according to Revelation 5:9-10, that there are going to be representatives from every people group around the throne singing God's praises for his salvation. How then can we *not* take the gospel to them when we know many of them will believe?

This leads to the third reason why we must go to the unreached, that is, *because the plan of God warrants the sacrifices of His people*. It just makes sense. It's why Paul starts Romans by saying he's "a servant—also translated 'a slave'—of Christ Jesus" (Romans 1:1). He says he's obligated to preach the gospel to all peoples because that's the plan for how they're going to hear it! He makes this point in Romans 10:12-14:

<sup>12</sup> For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. <sup>13</sup> For "everyone who calls on the name of the

*Lord will be saved.”<sup>14</sup> How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?*

This is a picture of the plan of God to take the gospel to all the people groups. Follow the logic: *Christ sends servants who preach so people hear and believe and call on the Lord and are saved.* Where can the plan break down? There’s only one potential place—when servants of Christ fail to spend their lives preaching the gospel to all nations. You might ask, “Couldn’t God get them the gospel another way?” Sure, God could write the gospel in the sky with stars, but he didn’t. Stars aren’t going to do this, and neither are dreams and visions. If you look at the book of Acts, you will not see one person come to faith in Christ without a human messenger, regardless of dreams that people have.

Brothers and sisters, we are plan A, and there is no plan B. We must go to unreached people because this is the plan of God, and it warrants the sacrifices of His people. Yes, *sacrifices* is the right word. If we have this much access to the gospel in our culture, and there is such an absence of the gospel in other cultures, then surely God is leading many more of us (maybe the majority of us) to lay down our lives here and go to those cultures there. If God calls us to stay here, then surely he is leading us to live simply and give sacrificially so that as many people as possible can go, and this gospel can spread to them. This involves sacrifice among all of us in our lives, in our families, and in our churches. The plan of God warrants it. Why? Because of the fourth reason.

We are obligated to reach the unreached (1) because their knowledge of God is only enough to damn them to hell, (2) because the gospel of God is powerful enough to save them for heaven, (3) because the plan of God warrants the sacrifices of His people, and (4) *because the Son of God deserves the praises of all peoples.*

This is how the book of Romans begins—by telling us we’ve received grace (Romans 1:5). But why have we received grace? “To bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations” (1:5). Christian brother or sister, you and I have received grace by being born into a reached family and a reached people group. But why me? I don’t know, but I do know this: I have received grace for a goal. I have received mercy for a mission. And *you* have received grace for a goal; *you* have received mercy

for a mission—to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of Christ's name among all the nations. That's the mission, that's the goal: every nation, every people group bowing around the throne of Jesus singing His praises. That's what we live for. That's what we work for. That's what we strive for. That's what we die for: for the day when all the peoples of the earth take their rightful place around the heavenly throne and give our Lord and King the glory he is due.

Don't you long for that day? I was thinking about it while reading 1 Samuel 5 this week, where the Philistines brought the ark of God into their temple, and they set it up next to Dagon, their false god. The next morning, Dagon was bowing down to the ark of God. So they picked him up and put him back in his place, but the next morning, not only was he bowing down, but his hands were cut off.

I can't wait for the day when all the false gods of the world are exposed in all their emptiness, and every knee will bow, and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. I want to see that day. I want to live for that day. God, use my life to hasten the coming of that day. God, use your church to hasten the coming of that day.

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout the sermon, *The English Standard Version* of the Bible is used.

<sup>2</sup> Starr Meade, *Keeping Holiday* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 140-141.





# Book Reviews

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*Handbook of Religion: A Christian Engagement with Traditions, Teachings, and Practices.* By Terry C. Muck, Harold A. Netland, and Gerald R. McDermott. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014, 812 pp., \$31.20 hardback.

Attempting to review a book like the *Handbook of Religion* can be daunting. Given its size, scope, and purpose, many opportunities are present for criticism. Thankfully, the book's quality minimizes these opportunities. Between them, the *Handbook's* three primary editors (Hal Netland, Gerald McDermott, and Terry Muck) possess decades of experience researching and teaching the history and theology of religious movements. They approach this task as overt evangelicals. More than fifty authors contributed chapters to the book. Most are Christians and some are practitioners of the various religions surveyed. After four introductory essays (part one), the *Handbook* is divided into several subsequent sections that cover major living world religions (part two), indigenous religions (part three), new religious movements (part four). The work concludes with several essays treating the links between religion and topics such as the environment, politics, human rights, and science (part five). The following review examines the contents of this book only in part.

Each of the religions treated in part two are established, ancient and world-wide in their scope. The authors claim that Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, and Islam have endured because they are "socially meaningful" (44). Along with Christianity, these religions encompass four and a half billion people. Each religion has spread beyond its originating culture and posits its teachings as applicable to all people at all times. Terry Muck's entries on Buddhism provide his reader with a convenient window for analysis. Muck's initial entry on Buddhism explores its history, beliefs, and practices. His ability to condense two and a half millennia into two pages is admirable. He aptly summarizes Buddhism's four noble truths and introduces the various schools of Buddhism that arose as the religion spread from India, across Asia, and ultimately to Europe and the United States. Muck insists that "Buddhist-Christian interaction has

been rich and deep” (88) and synthesizes seven such interactions. These summaries provide context for enduring Buddhist-Christian tensions in Sri Lanka as well as a missionary impulse found within Buddhism. In his treatment of theological exchanges between Buddhism and Christianity, Muck emphasizes the practice of Buddhist meditation (in its various iterations), but does not contrast the significant differences between Buddhist meditation and biblical meditation. This omission may have been necessitated by space constraints, but its inclusion would assist the *Handbook’s* readers in understanding the differing objects and goals of these practices.

Rita Gross’ adherent essay is fascinating and atypical. Few Buddhists can likewise claim to have authored important books about Buddhism and gender or to have served as president of the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies (112). Gross rejected the Christianity of her childhood and grew to better understand Buddhism early in her teaching career. She found validation for its claims in her own sufferings (111–112). With the exception of Korea, Buddhism has largely resisted Christianity’s missionary impulse, but has endured what Gross calls the “deleterious” effects of communism in China and the “damaging” movement of Islam (113). As a reader, I found it interesting that the goals of the three movements (Christianity, Communism, and Islam) were undifferentiated in Gross’ presentation. Gross prizes religious pluralism; she finds adherence to the truth claims in “large segments of Christianity” (113) and its claims of exclusivity unreasonable and uncompassionate. She writes, “Religious diversity is inevitable and natural, which seems to me to be a much more reasonable and compassionate way of thinking about religious diversity than its alternative” (114). Consequently, she rejects “aggressive, intensive proselytizing efforts on behalf of exclusive truth claims” she finds to be “misguided and lacking in basic compassion and respect” (114). In Gross’ view, Christians would do well to learn from Buddhist missionaries who do not rely on “heavy-handed, traditional, exclusive truth claims” (114). Rather, she hopes, through increased Buddhist-Christian dialogue, to “reach those segments of Christianity that still believe they have an exclusive monopoly on religious truth that they must spread around the globe at any and all costs, including the tragedy of the eradication of religious diversity” (114).

The treatment of new religious movements (NRM) in part four was one of the *Handbook’s* most interesting elements. The various NRMs are

interesting, not because they comprise a percentage of the world's religions (excepting Mormonism), but because they are so diverse and have been made to seem almost commonplace by popular culture over the past quarter-century. NRMs are divided into seven types, from variants of Christianity (Jehovah's Witnesses; Church of Christ, Scientist; and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints), to nature religions (paganism, Gnosticism, and environmentalism), to psychological religions (Scientology, Transpersonal Psychology, or the catch-all descriptor of "New Age"). The various entries are generally composed of two analyses written by Christians (These contain history, beliefs, practices, as well as theological exchanges.) and a third entry penned by an adherent, although some NRMs were presented without adherent essays. I immediately reviewed the treatment of those NRMs with which I have familiarity (Transcendental Meditation, Paganism/Neopaganism, and Satanism). When Kennet Granholm's essay on Satanism moved between *Rosemary's Baby*, Anton LaVey, and "Norwegian Black Metal scene of the late 1980s and early 1990s," (579) it was clear that he had more than a passing acquaintance with the movement. Similarly, Geoff Gilpin's recounting of the rise, spread, and decline of Transcendental Meditation condensed an accurate and interesting history into a brief word count.

I was a bit disappointed in John Morehead's discussion of theological exchanges between Christianity and Paganism/Neopaganism. Rather than offering a positive assessment of the theological foundations of paganism old and new, he offers a soft rebuke to Christians who have a history of misrepresenting pagan beliefs or who give the false impression "that paganism is primarily a system of beliefs, whereas in reality it is focused on ritual" (540). Morehead is right to point out that Christians have a hit-or-miss track record of describing paganism in a way that an adherent would accept (which makes adherent Gus DiZerga's essay a helpful read), but Morehead does not discuss the link between belief and practice that drives paganism. Paganism may be focused on ritual, but these rituals are expressions of underlying theological commitments regarding ultimate reality. The chapter would be stronger if these commitments were named and discussed. Morehead's chapter ends with a difficult word for contemporary evangelicals who desire to minister to pagans, namely that pagans prize pluralism and view "missional Christians" more favorably than "confrontational Christians" of previous generations (542). *Caveat lector.*

The *Handbook of Religion* is a significant resource for evangelicals looking for a single-volume reference on other faiths. Every religion treated is supported with ample bibliographic resources for further investigation. Students, laypeople, and pastors looking for an authoritative source on global religions will find the individual entries more concise and authoritative than a *Bing* or *Google* search. Students of world religions will certainly want more specialized and detailed treatments of the various religions, but will also find the *Handbook* a useful first-stop reference.

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*Overturning Tables: Freeing Missions from the Christian Industrial Complex.*

By Scott A. Bessenecker. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014, 180 pp., \$16 paper.

Scott A. Bessenecker is Associate Director for Missions at InterVarsity Christian Fellowship and author of an earlier book, *The New Friars: The Emerging Movement Serving the World's Poor*. Bessenecker's role at InterVarsity involves sending more than two thousand students annually on short-term missions.

The book's title references the Gospel account of Jesus entering the temple and overturning the tables of corrupt moneychangers. The foundational assumption of the book is best expressed by the term "military industrial complex," borrowed from Dwight Eisenhower. Bessenecker adapts Eisenhower's term and applies it to the current status of institutional missions, dubbing missions sending and ministry engaging agencies as "the Christian-industrial complex."

Eisenhower warned of the impending abuses inherent to profit-driven businesses serving as material suppliers for the United States military. The end result for the military has been immediately accessible but exorbitantly priced guns, bullets, and tanks. The obvious implication for missions is that a comparable self-serving, corruptive influence has wormed its way into

the institutions of the contemporary church, particularly among senders of missionaries. The author's goal is "to kick-start a discussion," and he admits to raising more questions than providing answers. Bessenecker proposes a "fresh vision for church and mission" (28).

Bessenecker raises serious concerns about the matter of Western churches and missions agencies acting as if they are businesses. As an example, he argues that a limited liability corporation (LLC) is ill suited as a container for the mission of the church or for the advancing of the kingdom of God. More importantly, the Western corporate-styled, capitalistic worldview more-often-than-not opposes the motivation and ministry of the kingdom of God. He argues that the structures, matrixes of success and reporting, and systems for sending and supporting missionaries are in many ways more reflective of capitalism than of the kingdom of God.

Bessenecker's diagnosis gives the reader pause and is catalyst for an important, but uncomfortable conversation. His argument begins with a discussion of the profit driven influence on modern missions, i.e. colonialism. He traces missions through the Protestant Reformation, citing the Puritan theological influences on contemporary Christianity and her institutions. The same Christian institutions uncritically adopt "a corporate-style capitalist paradigm to inform and drive our mission" (19). Bessenecker argues that, at some point, our institutions become the destination rather than a vehicle for fulfilling God's mission. Individualism is another dimension of the Western worldview that has inordinately eaten away at the community-oriented nature of Christianity. He observes this deterioration most clearly when modern missionaries attempt to apply contextualized discipleship and partnership alongside majority world Christians.

The author explains, in certain cultures today, people view the world communally rather than from an individualistic perspective. Also, many are not nearly as consumed by the problem of materialism as are Americans. Bessenecker explains, before the era of capitalism and the Enlightenment, "Christianity was a dominion as much as it was a lifestyle and belief system. But all that has changed" (95). He claims that even within the church, the profit motive seems to be lord and the gospel has become a commodity. The church has become a business with people as consumers of the spiritual product it provides. He argues, "The church is not a franchise, and people are not targets to whom we sell Christ" (101).

Bessenecker lists several influences on his argument. His interpretation of the key narrative for which the book is entitled is drawn from John Howard Yoder's *The Politics of Jesus* and Ched Myers' *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus*. His explanation of the influence of capitalistic worldview on contemporary Christianity draws from Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* and Orlando E. Costas' *Christ Outside the Gate: Mission Beyond Christendom*. The influence of David Bosch's *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* is apparent throughout Bessenecker's writing.

Why is this particular discussion relevant, today, for the church and her institutional affiliates and partners? Conflicting paradigms strike, first and foremost, at the American institution of the church and their ramifications radiate to her every appendage. Thus, the discussion is significant, especially as Western missions encounters majority world partners. Bessenecker points out the disparity between salaries of CEOs and executives of missions institutions and their missionaries, as well as income disparity between their indigenous field partners.

Furthermore, Bessenecker questions why Western agencies are so "male, pale and frail?" (20) Bessenecker extols the value of diversity and youth in missions leadership. He challenges institutions for forgetting that so much innovation within the church has come from the margins of society. He provides notable figures like Esther, Mordecai, and even Jesus of Nazareth. Our institutions, Bessenecker believes, protect the center and make it more difficult for those on the margins to thrive within our core.

The book offers a few possible innovations, but for the most part it challenges what might be referenced as a DNA change. Substantive recommendations from Bessenecker would incorporate the following stances and directives:

- Financial accountability that involves lean, decentralized, sustainable administration of missions and ministry as opposed to "building cash-hungry behemoths" (181)
- Matrices that are focused on the long haul of kingdom activity and flourishing rather than numerically driven productivity (180)
- Focus on discipleship and lifestyle rather than the traditional ways of reporting to boards and constituents (179)
- Agencies must acknowledge periods of dormancy and reprieve as normative rather than demanding constant numerical growth (178)

- Acknowledge spiritual maturity as a valuable matrix (177)
- Become interdependent with majority world partners and those laborers who come from the margins (159)
- Share power with the poor in spirit and empower those in the margins (157)
- Refuse intra-agency and intra-church competition (155)
- Portion a percentage of funds for missionaries from indigenous communities (62)
- Listen and learn from the majority world (150)
- Reject hierarchical, constituent-based, corporate structures (64) for a more ecumenical, elder-oriented structure (101)
- Reject the concept of gospel as product, the church as business and people as consumers of the gospel and church services (95)
- Free the prophets from profits, allowing for the spawning of smaller innovations and for the turning of purse strings over to the excluded (90-92)
- Fuel missions without money (87) and foster in-kind giving (65)
- Facilitate the sending of missionaries from the bottom billion of society
- Create bi-vocational missionary options (62)
- Reexamine the traditional board structure (65)
- Change the nomenclature because words offer the power and platform for substantive change (113).

The above extrapolations from the book raise viable considerations for a “Christian-industrial complex” that is currently in decline. The major strength of this book, however, is not found in the author’s recommendations, rather, in its encouragement of self-examination that is painfully personal, particularly for those in positions of influence who are able to challenge the status quo of the Christian-industrial complex. Some of Bessenecker’s arguments are rehashed, but they are effectively applied in a contemporary setting. For church leaders, elders, pastors, Christian agency leaders, and board members, *Overturning Tables* is not to be ignored.

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*Follow Me: A Call to Die. A Call to Live.* By David Platt. Carol Springs, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2013. 244 pp., \$15.99 paper.

Christian publishing, like its secular counterpart, often seems to ride waves. One bestseller exposes a lack of writing on a topic and many other authors respond. Take, for instance, the recent wave of books emphasizing the importance of discipleship by stressing true conversion over cultural Christianity. Two examples are Francis Chan's *Multiply* and J. D. Grear's *Stop Asking Jesus Into Your Heart*. It seems likely that these books, and many more, are part of a wave created by David Platt following the publication of his best seller, *Radical*. Speaking about his reason for writing *Radical*, Platt explains, "... I sought to expose values and ideas that are common in our culture (and in the church) yet antithetical to the gospel. My aim was to consider the thoughts and things of this world that we must let go of in order to follow Jesus" (4). Arguably, his purpose was accomplished, and so much more.

Thankfully, it appears that Platt was unwilling to leave the church with just another discipleship volume focused solely on what believers must be separated *from*; he also purposed to clarify what the growing disciple must be separated *unto*. In *Follow Me: A Call to Live. A Call to Die*, Platt does just that. In unambiguous terms he writes, "The purpose of this book, then, is to take the next step. I want to move from *what* we let go of to *whom* we hold on to." Additionally, he notes, "I want to explore the gravity of what we must forsake in this world I want to expose what it means to die to ourselves and to live in Christ" (4).

Within its pages is nothing less than a summary theology—what Platt refers to as a "journey"—regarding the inextricable link between Christian living and missions. To guide this "journey," Platt sets forth a very straightforward thesis. He asserts, "I am convinced that when we take a serious look at what Jesus really meant when he said, 'Follow me,' we will discover that there is far more pleasure to be experienced in him, indescribably greater power to be realized with him, and a much higher purpose to be accomplished for him than anything else this world has to offer. And as a result, we will all—every single Christian—eagerly, willingly, and gladly lose our lives to know and proclaim Christ, for this is simply what it means to follow him" (5). Essentially, then, Platt argues that out of one's own call to Christ extends a joint call to be the one who extends Christ's gospel call to others.

Many books that purport to be theological treatments of discipleship tend to fall into one of two categories. The first category contains those books that skim the surface, being miles wide but only inches deep. The second group perpetuates the notion that theologians are those who can dive deepest, stay down longest, and come up driest. *Follow Me* avoids both categories. Platt's work is consistently biblical and gospel-centered in the best sense of those terms. He does not seek to introduce "trendy thought" or provide extra-biblical arguments. He simply teaches what the Bible teaches using well-crafted prose in a systematically arranged, easily followed fashion.

Writing with the heart of a pastor and the passion of a missionary evangelist, Platt uses an almost attorney-like approach to build his theological case and prove his thesis. Platt's starting point is the theology of salvation. In this discussion, readers witness the extraordinary love of Jesus for humanity evident in the very nature of how salvation is offered and acquired. Readers are challenged to consider the high probability that many who say they believe in Jesus are not truly born again, and that there are those who claim they have accepted Christ into their hearts yet are not actually Christians. In contrast to the self-centered thinking of Western individualism, Platt insists that salvation does not result from human initiative or a choice that man makes to pursue God. Such human initiative is not then followed by the individual gratuitously allowing God into his or her life. Platt insists that quite the contrary is true. Those who are spiritually dead are as incapable of seeking Jesus for themselves as are the physically dead to make a rational decision. Those who are born again are Christians because God through Christ loves and calls them to himself, not because of a routinized prayer asking Jesus into their hearts, or because of any other formula devised by men. "Christianity," Platt says, "does not begin with our pursuit of Christ, but with Christ's pursuit of us. Christianity does not start with an invitation we offer to Jesus, but with an invitation Jesus offers to us" (29). Far from the imagery of a pitiful mystic striving for followers, "Jesus is not [a] puny religious teacher begging for an invitation from anyone. He is the all-sovereign Lord who deserves submission from everyone" (38).

Building on his discussion of salvation, Platt crafts the remaining elements of his thesis. There can be little doubt that he wants his readers to comprehend the full depth of Christian commitment that arises out of answering Christ's call to salvation. Such understanding will lead to knowing the joy

of supernatural regeneration as opposed to mere religious superficiality. To this end, in subsequent chapters dealing with core issues such as life as a child of God, finding, knowing and doing the will of God, the vital importance of church membership, and building one's vision for the future based on following Christ, Platt demonstrates that when we truly follow Christ, Jesus "... transforms our minds, our desires, our wills, our relationships, and our ultimate reason for living" (67). Platt's message is clear: When Christians are fully transformed in their understanding of what it means to follow Christ, they will inevitably begin to multiply, making more disciples locally and globally. They will understand, accept, and act upon the fundamental truth that the call to follow Christ is a call to go and make disciples wherever the gospel has not yet been preached.

One of the significant strengths of *Follow Me* may very well be the result of a criticism levelled at Platt's previous book, *Radical*. Several reviewers and church leaders argued that Platt had not given sufficient emphasis to the centrality of the local church in the Christian's life. *Follow Me* addresses this concern in thorough fashion. Platt dedicates an entire chapter to the vital role of responsible church membership in following Jesus. Furthermore, the book concludes with a "Personal Disciple-Making Plan" designed to guide believers, as members of the Body of Christ, who are daily pursuing lives of following Christ. In keeping with the major themes of the book, Platt urges his reader to consider and develop a plan to grow as a Christian and to make disciples. He uses a question and answer format designed to aid the reader in the development of such a personal strategy for growth. The questions are simple and straightforward: How will I fill my mind with truth? How will I fuel my affections for God? How will I share God's love as a witness in the world? How will I show God's love as a member of a church? How will I spread God's glory among all peoples? How will I make disciple makers among a few people?

It is this reviewer's opinion that *Follow Me* is, objectively speaking, a better book than *Radical*. However, it may never gain the celebrity of its predecessor. After all, the call to be radical seems to be more appealing than the call to simply follow. The act of following may not promise the excitement of doing something radical, but it does something far greater, something transformative. Platt writes of the first disciples, they "learn[ed] to think like him, love like him, teach like him, live like him, and serve like him" (226).

This is every believer's call today—to follow him. "It is a call worth dying for. This is a king worth living for" (226).

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*Loving the Poor, Saving the Rich: Wealth, Poverty, and Early Christian Formation.*  
By Hellen Rhee. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012, 279 pp., \$30.00  
paper.

In what manner have Christians historically interpreted the accumulation of wealth and distribution of alms in relation to Christian formation? Helen Rhee, an associate professor of church history at Westmont College, provides a scholarly inquiry of essential Christian literary sources from the early Patristic Era in order to develop a comprehensive understanding of how the pre-Constantinian Christian communities viewed wealth and poverty in relation to their Christian identity.

The aim of the book, according to Rhee, is "to show how early Christians adopted, appropriated, and transformed Jewish & Greco-Roman moral teachings and practices of giving and patronage, as well as how they developed their distinct theology and social understanding of wealth/wealthy and poverty/the poor" (xiii). Throughout the first six chapters, Rhee develops her thesis through an in-depth evaluation of the Greco-Roman economic and cultural landscape, synopsis of the Jewish understanding of wealth and poverty, and critical treatment of numerous Christian sources. These sources include The Shepherd of Hermas, the Didache, Clement, Origen, Peter of Alexandria, Tertullian, and Cyprian. Rhee provides ample evidence to support her proposition: early Christian communities viewed wealth as a gift from God to be used in providing for the needs of the poor. Furthermore, she demonstrates that the Christian understanding between the wealthy and poor slowly altered the Greco-Roman social construct of patronage. In addition to her evaluation of the Christian doctrine of wealth/poverty and its impact on the larger culture, Rhee makes the case that the use of wealth, as well as the status of the poor, was interpreted within a soteriological framework (49-87).

Rhee explored another question: “Did early Christians view generosity and poverty as evidences of salvation?” According to Rhee, a shift in the soteriological understanding of the atonement took place in the middle Patristic Era. She asserts that Christians in the Patristic Era viewed almsgiving as a necessary component of Christian formation and regarded a lack of generosity as a sign of unbelief and deserving of God’s eschatological judgment. As she moves through her analysis, she discovers a shift in theology: “A momentous shift in patristic soteriology [took place, moving] from focusing on the work of Christ to focusing rather on the human work” (76). To bolster her claim, she writes, “In the 4<sup>th</sup> century onward ‘redemptive almsgiving’ would be one of the most consistent elements in the sermons and teachings of church leaders” (76). The argument that almsgiving as a salvific substitute for the work of Christ became the preeminent view, however, is unconvincing. It is more likely that Rhee’s opinion, i.e., that redemptive almsgiving began to form the heart of the church’s soteriology, is oversimplified and incomplete. Readers of the same primary sources can conclude that the stewardship of wealth and the role of alms were interpreted by early Christian communities in relation to their spiritual growth (sanctification) and not exclusively with one’s standing with God (justification).

In addition to a historical analysis, Rhee attempts to extrapolate transferable principles that the contemporary church can apply in seeking justice for the impoverished masses. How should contemporary Christians (individually and corporately) respond, on the one hand, to free-market capitalism, which can allow a few to hoard massive amounts of money, and on the other, global poverty? Providing an answer to this question, though not explicitly stated in the introduction or the thesis as the thrust of the work, seems to be Rhee’s overarching aim. Had Rhee ended the book after chapter six, she would have remained true to her stated thesis, which was limited to the question of how Christians in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries understood and interpreted wealth and poverty. In an attempt to provide a contemporary application for her conclusions, however, Rhee drastically departs from the work of a historian and begins to take on the role an economist and ethicist. She admits this departure, “I may be entering dangerously into the territory of someone else’s field, say that of Christian ethics or even economic ethics, without proper training and credentials in that field, and therefore risking a ‘right’ to be heard” (192). She clarifies her attempt by writing, “Notwithstanding these challenges, however, I will venture this very thing in a limited way” (192).

Though she is stepping outside her field, Rhee provides two helpful avenues for her historical treatment to be applied by modern Christians and one disconcerting point, which raises more questions than it answers. Rhee encourages contemporary Christians to imitate the early Christians by living simplistically (198) and giving generously to those in need (200). These imperatives are important and necessitate the attention of Christians in every age. One problem arises even amidst this valuable understanding as provided by Rhee. That problem is her insistence upon distributive justice (207-210) and bias against free-market capitalism. Rhee contends, for modern Christians to follow the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> century believers' model, they must support governmental efforts to allow the poor opportunities to enter the free-market. She claims that the free-market excludes the poor because it takes for granted that one needs an "initial endowment" (207). According to Rhee, the poor do not have access to the necessary capital in order to enter the market, and therefore are trapped in a perpetual state of poverty.

Unfortunately, Rhee ignores the opportunities that a free-market, unlike oligarchies, dictatorships, and monarchies, affords to the poor. For example, no mention is made of free public education, grants and federal loans for college, or the enormous number of job-training programs, all which provide ample opportunity to "endow" the poor with both education and training to enter the free-market. Furthermore, Rhee's concept of distributive justice raises more questions than it answers, such as: (1) Whose resources would be confiscated in order to create this utopia? (2) Is the mass redistribution of wealth from unwilling citizens a Christian mandate/principle? (3) Does the distributive theory provide any assurances that the plight of the poor will be significantly altered? (4) Last, and possibly most troublesome, Rhee's notion of distributive justice, as a principle derived from the first centuries of Christian history, ignores the obvious fact that free-market capitalism did not exist in that period. Because of this issue, Rhee cannot provide a fair comparison between the church in the early centuries and 21<sup>st</sup> century free markets.

In the end, Rhee's contribution is limited to her analysis of the early Christian concept of wealth/poverty and rich/poor in relation to Christian formation. Her desire to connect the giving of alms and salvation falls short and is unconvincing. Furthermore, her approach to social justice is helpful only in calling Christians to live with contentment and give generously to

the relief of the poor. Her additional call for Christians to support distributive justice, however, misses the mark and lacks significant historical and Scriptural merit.

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*The Missionary Family.* By Dwight P. Baker & Robert J. Priest, editors.  
Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2014, 334 pp., \$16.99 paper.

This publication is the 22nd in a series of books put forth by the Evangelical Missiological Society. Contributing authors provide considerable research and evaluation of selected topics. Presupposed, for most evangelical missions efforts, is the presence of a husband and wife (and often children). Therefore, the editors have chosen three specific issues they observe in present discussions affecting missionary families and agencies (or churches) that send them.

The first section, edited by Robert Priest, contains six chapters dedicated to discussing the scenario in which a missionary family is placed in a dangerous setting. Three of the chapters include a historical approach to the topic, utilizing primary resources and/or interviews with those in subsequent generations. One author provides a personal account of choosing to bring his family into such a setting and how this experience influenced his later decision making process as head of a missions agency. Two other chapters research missions agency policies and personnel management practices. The basic premise throughout this book is that the nuclear family is an integral part of missions – as a model of Christ and his church – displaying change the gospel brings in relationships, and specifically as a bridge for speaking the gospel into lives, a bridge that would not be present if a man or woman went to the field alone. Each author touches upon the topic anecdotally, but none make specific recommendations regarding best practices. Readers are left to draw their own conclusions regarding what practice(s) they choose to adopt.

The authors' accounts of familial struggle are riveting in their detail and provide honest evaluation of how the head of each family cared for the family



in the midst of struggles. In addition, each historical setting that provided the environment for such decisions is adequately described. Missionaries and other professionals considering or dealing with missionary personnel are clearly expected to be the primary audience of this volume and would benefit from the aforementioned descriptions. However, a chapter dealing with the “theology of suffering” and its application to a missionary family is sorely needed. This topic is referenced throughout the chapters, but is not specifically addressed from a scholarly standpoint. Christian Scripture is the rule and guide for evangelical Christians. Therefore, at least one chapter should focus solely on what the Bible teaches regarding purposeful subjection of one’s self and one’s family to suffering rather than merely a treatment of the experiential and historical. This theological framework for the subject matter would have assisted the reader in assessing the included personal accounts.

The second section is also edited by Robert Priest and contains four chapters regarding questions about missionary children and sexual abuse. Specifically, questions about “recovered memories” are addressed in detail – the use of the issue in historical practice in both the secular and religious world of investigation, its present standing among scholarly investigators, and some suggestions for standard practices and procedure. Great care is taken in citing sources on this delicate topic and no specific agenda concerning any specific cases or agencies is followed. Each author calls for the utmost care and inquiry to be made before anything is made public and the authors come to consensus on the highly questionable nature of recovered memories in the area of abuse. Missionaries’ careers are first and foremost based upon their character and allowing accusations to be made public without a thorough investigation is similarly unjust to ignoring the plight of a victim. For those who investigate accusations, this section provides a thoughtful and well-documented guide to understanding the role of recovered memories.

The third and final section is edited by Dwight Baker and contains fifteen chapters. An initial chapter is authored by Sherwood Lingenfelter, who writes as a scholar (a missiological anthropologist) and father of a daughter who “came out” as an adult. This experience with his daughter caused Lingenfelter to reflect deeply on experiential and theological debate regarding the church’s treatment and the biblical view of the LBGTQ community. Lingenfelter humbly calls for the Christian community to realize its failures to reach the hearts of this community due to either taking a hardline theoretical stance



(“what should be”) or acting in simple denial of the reality of the deep struggle these individuals face (“what is”). His chapter calls for ongoing dialogue. Baker, as editor, provides thirteen compelling short essays (a forum) from men and women with different training – sociologists, missiologists, theologians, and academics. Another essay by Lingenfelter closes the section. In it, he acknowledges the shortcomings of his initial chapter and gladly welcomes responses provided by other authors. He elicits dialogue from among the Christian community concerning biblical teaching on same sex attraction and how those in the Christian community who struggle with same sex attraction can better understand their role in the church.

It is obvious that all involved seek to be kind and thoughtful in this dialogue. One has to respect Lingenfelter’s position as both a professed evangelical and father. However, two considerations come to mind. First, this edition is entitled *The Missionary Family*. It is disconcerting to this reader that a whole section is dedicated to the Christian community’s relationship to the LBGTQ community while very little evidence suggests that this particular controversy is widespread among missionary families. As a former “MK,” I can think of many other issues common to missionary families that would merit treatment in this edition. Second, no space is given to address the impact of homosexuality in a missionary setting. All in all, though expected, this writer saw little attention given to application in this section. In short, this section belongs in a book that is dedicated to the issue of the Christian community interacting with the LBGTQ community, but does not seem like a natural fit in this volume.

Overall, this work finds an appeal to a wide audience in the missional world – families actually contemplating missions, directors of missions agencies, and sending churches, as well as leaders entering theological dialogue. *The Missionary Family* is well written and its editors evidence great care in their selection of writers. Given the aforementioned reservations, this edition is a useful resource and is well worth reading.

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*Missions: Biblical Foundations and Contemporary Strategies*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. By Gailyn Van Rhee­nen with Anthony Parker. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014, 512 pp., \$39.99 hardback.

Gailyn Van Rhee­nen, D.Miss., is graduate professor of missions at Abilene Christian University. A veteran missionary and church planter, he ministered among the Kipsigis in Kenya. He writes experientially to provide a study on missiology with appropriate breadth and depth. *Missions* begins with a biblical theology for missions in chapter one, clearly presenting “a missionary God who enters into human contexts and sends various sorts of missionaries to participate in his mission” (43). Van Rhee­nen’s stated goal for this biblical theology is to inform missionaries’ decision-making processes. He provides many Scriptural examples and describes the continued role of missions in church history.

An emphasis on Christ honoring disciples who, in turn, make disciples in the context of missionary activity is at the heart of this book. With this philosophical underpinning in place, *Missions* describes various missionary roles, including church planters, trainers of church leaders, Bible translators, business missionaries, and various kinds of support personnel. Additionally, Van Rhee­nen describes phases of the missions cycle, including a training process, a time of active service, and a phase-out period in which maturing ministries are turned over to local leaders. For students of missiology, this developmental arc provides a window into the intended goal of Christian missions: facilitating the development of national churches and ministries.

*Missions* highlights distinct epochs in world missions as well as profiling key personalities who shaped the character and emphases of each time period. For example, Polycarp is included in the epoch of Gentile Engagement (AD 100-500), William Carey in the epoch of colonial expansion (AD 1600-1900), and the global embracing epoch (AD 1900-present) highlights the work of Donald McGavran. This section proves to be a useful reference for the historical development of missional thought. The remainder of *Missions* builds upon this foundation of biblical theology and church history with greater technical focus.

Van Rhee­nen transitions to a detailed description of missionary ministry activity. He depicts missions as incarnational ministry marked by compassion and intimate relationships, rapport, and reciprocity, i.e., mutual respect

between the missionary and nationals. He also contrasts this ideal approach with the negative example of what he calls “extractional missionaries” who fail to value the culture of the people to whom they minister. Extractional missionaries, he explains, are characterized by improper methodology that causes indigenous people to first learn the missionary’s own foreign culture in order to gain exposure to the gospel. This instructive warning is included in order to caution the reader of potential pitfalls.

Helpfully, Van Rheezen presents a detailed model of cross-cultural evangelism built upon Ralph Winter’s *cultural distance* categories. A thorough discussion of acculturation also defines culture shock and adaptation for the reader. *Missions* teaches missionaries to approach other cultures as learners in order to avoid ethnocentrism. With categories ranging from E-0 to E-3, Van Rheezen distinguishes between those who are culturally similar, yet unconverted, and those whose culture and language are very different from the missionary. The goal of the missionary, he explains, is to relate to people of other cultures within the contexts of their cultures.

*Missions* advocates a missional helix utilizing a sequence of theological reflection, cultural analysis, historical perspective, and strategy formation that continually repeats while a cross-cultural ministry develops. Van Rheezen strongly emphasizes a shaping of ministry within the environment of spiritual formation, which is a covenant relationship with God and Christ as king over the life of the individual missionary. As the missionary seeks to teach others about Christ, Van Rheezen explains, he or she must teach new converts to teach others. Once new ministries are established, the lengthy process of nurturing new converts in a loving community is done via discipleship and through intentional modeling of spiritual disciplines.

*Missions* also contains information important for those in stateside ministry not currently planning on going overseas as career missionaries. A very helpful section describing strengths and weaknesses of short-term missions is recommended reading for anyone involved in local church or student ministry.

Several unique stylistic elements color Van Rheezen’s presentation throughout *Missions*. A story of two young missionaries, Jim and Julie, weaves its way throughout the book to provide a narrative example of each chapter’s content in application. This couple’s positive experience with short-term missions reveals a calling to serve as full time missionaries. These fictional

characters are undoubtedly similar to many in the book's intended audience. At the close of each chapter, a structured "reflection and application" section lends itself well to the classroom and to self-study. Included case studies also challenge the reader with opportunities for application.

Overall, this book provides a useful and enjoyable overview of missionary activity for those entering cross-cultural ministry at home or in overseas contexts. *Missions* clarifies its topic from differing viewpoints, grounding missions strategy in biblical theology and basing action upon established models from Scripture and church history.

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*Global Evangelicalism: Theology, History and Culture in Regional Perspective.*

Edited by Donald M. Lewis and Richard V. Pierard. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014, 306 pp., \$24.00 paper.

Evangelicalism has become more than just a religious enterprise in North America and Europe. It has become a global movement, and researchers need to recognize its effects upon the societies in which it has taken root. The stated purpose of this book is facilitating common language and initial discussion points about the influence of evangelicalism in the context of higher education. The editors of the book are Donald L. Lewis, Professor of Church History at Regent College, and Richard Pierard, who taught at Indiana State University and crafted the definition of 'evangelicalism' for the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (1985). Through a collection of essays by fellow evangelical academics, the editors desire "to [first] help evangelicals understand their roots and the diversity of the movement" and second, "to enable those outside the movement to come to understand some of its internal dynamic" (13). They propose to do this by exploring the topic in three sections: Theoretical Issues, Regional Case Studies, and Cultural Phenomena.

In part one, "Theoretical Issues," the authors examine definitions of identity. In the first chapter, Mark Noll has the unenviable task of defining the allusive

word *evangelicalism*. As anyone might, he struggles to clarify the term from theological, historical, geographical, and denominational perspectives. He concludes by stating, “an understanding of evangelical Christianity will not arise solely out of theological definitions.” Therefore, most of the contributors (nearly all of whom are historians) choose to define the movement from a historical perspective using David Bebbington’s quadrilateral theory of biblicism, crucicentrism (a cross-centered approach), conversionism and activism. In the second essay, Wilbert Shenk aptly surveys an overall history of evangelicalism from German pietism to the present day. Donald Lewis then presents an overview of ‘globalization’ from current academic discussions in other fields and highlights ideas for study including indigenization, reinvention, and key cities.

In part two, the history of evangelicalism is assessed across five global regions. John Wolffe and Richard Pierard provide an excellent survey of Europe and North America, discussing the important topics of revivalism, missions and eschatology. Ogbu Kalu uses a much broader definition of evangelicalism than others. He reviews the movement in Africa, noting contemporary aspects in which the movement must adjust, such as war and AIDS. C. Rene Padilla discusses how Protestant evangelicalism is replacing the dominance of Roman Catholicism in South America. Scott W. Sunquist addresses the expansion of the movement across Asia through martyrdom, persecution, and political influence. Stuart Piggin and Peter Lineham present the history of evangelicals in Australia and the Pacific Islands. They note that new creative approaches among Pentecostals and Anglicans in these regions are reviving Christianity in the West.

In the third part of the book, David Thompson demonstrates how the emphasis of personal commitment to Christ in conversion influences individual participation in voluntary societies. This emphasis has often led to a transcendence of denominational boundaries and a co-operating ecumenism. Sarah Williams concludes *Global Evangelicalism* with a critique of prevailing assumptions (particularly those of feminists and Marxists) that have characterized historiographical interpretations of gender studies in evangelicalism and argues for a fresh approach to the subject.

Several themes are prominent in the book. The authors acknowledge the difficulty faced in defining the term “evangelical,” a challenge that creates its own problems within the field of study. Evangelicalism possesses an adaptability by which it is able to be embraced in different cultures, and this malleability from

culture to culture affects its depiction in scholarship. Also, the movement as a whole has been instrumental in changing political, ethical, and cultural conventions in numerous places around the globe. Scholars need to have a careful understanding of evangelicalism's core principles as they engage the movement in its adapted forms. Also noted is the fact that Pentecostalism is becoming the predominant flavor of the movement in its current global expansion. And lastly, significant growth of evangelical ideology around the world coincides with a noticeable decline in its birthplace of North America and Europe.

*Global Evangelicalism* meets the editors' expectation that it serve as an academic primer on the subject. It is an engaging yet fair view of evangelicalism from a primarily historical perspective. Avoiding theological issues provides those in the secular world an introduction to evangelicalism without having to understand its various nuances of subsets. This book will assist those in academia in recognizing the influence of the movement and creating dialogue among those in higher education. Superb essays by Lewis and Williams should generate plenty of relevant discussion and scholarship in future studies. Shenk's historical overview would be appropriate for any college class looking for a synopsis of the history of the topic. Included case studies will aid students of missiology looking at the impact of evangelicalism within each region. Each chapter concludes with an excellent bibliography for additional reading should the reader desire to delve more deeply into the subject matter. Instructors tackling the impact of evangelicalism will find *Global Evangelicalism* an excellent resource for use in foundational discussions.

Although they are not overly injurious to the book, this reviewer does see weaknesses within the volume. Though not a challenge for him alone (others struggle with a final, essential definition), Noll's failure adequately to define the movement leaves one considering only a single option: "I'm not exactly sure what it is, but I will tell you when I see it." The essay of Piggin and Lineham focuses on persons and events in a rather myopic manner and could be broadened in its perspective. Nevertheless, if an instructor or a teacher on the university level was leading a class on the impact of evangelicalism, *Global Evangelicalism* would be an excellent book with which to begin the discussion.

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*Kingdom Conspiracy: Returning to the Radical Mission of the Local Church.*

By Scot McKnight. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2014, 289 pp., \$16.66 hardback.

Scot McKnight is professor of New Testament at Northern Seminary. In this work, McKnight contends for the biblical meaning of “kingdom” as opposed to the rise of what he sees as an erroneous view held by many in the current generation.

McKnight positions the primary disagreement between the “skinny jeans” (Millennials) and the “pleated pants” generation (previous generations). However, he insists that the discussion centering on the true meaning of kingdom cannot be reduced to age or generational differences. The greater problem, according to the author, is the “new way of being Christian and the rise of false kingdom views.”

McKnight acknowledges that members of the younger generation do have a true passion to see the world changed positively by their work. He points out that the “skinny jeans” version of “kingdom” entails “good deeds done by good people (Christian or not) in the public sector for the common good” (4). Conversely, McKnight describes the “pleated pants” understanding of kingdom as encompassing the rule and reign of Christ as both present and future. Simply stated, McKnight defines the “skinny jeans” view of kingdom work as social activism seeking to make the world a better place and the “pleated pants” view of kingdom centered on evangelism and the church. McKnight rightly identifies the underlying danger of the the view of Millennials: the false belief that true kingdom work can be done apart from the church and apart from the gospel. After identifying these opposing views, McKnight presents and defends the biblical narrative of the kingdom. He begins his defense by calling the reader’s attention to the fact that the Bible is a story about redemption and the work of Christ. McKnight rightly identifies 1 Corinthians 15:3-5 as the most succinct summary of the gospel and kingdom story. His central thesis is that there can be no kingdom work without the story of Christ and the redemption he offers. McKnight accurately argues that any kingdom work without Christ is simply good works without faith and will have no lasting or eternal value.

McKnight continues and presents the biblical basis for God’s kingdom and describes the work of the kingdom. In chapter four, he discusses the contextual

basis for the kingdom and the fact that the kingdom includes three non-negotiable criteria: it is universal, it is established through the covenant kingship of God, and it includes a future universal rule. The next nine chapters present the characteristics and attributes of the biblical view of kingdom. McKnight does an excellent job of identifying the true parameters of God's kingdom: the kingdom must consist of God's people (the redeemed/the church) and the mission of God through his people, as well as Christ as king and the mission of the King unleashed on the world. McKnight maintains that kingdom is also a moral fellowship defined by standards set by Christ the king. Through redemption and establishment of kingdom fellowship among believers an eternal hope exists.

This book succeeds at presenting the biblical view of the kingdom of God for a theological and academic audience. *Kingdom Conspiracy* combines the overarching biblical theme of the Old and New Testaments. While McKnight argues clearly in order to remedy a perceived generational discrepancy as to what constitutes true kingdom work, he may be too focused on stereotyping the Millennial generation. McKnight plainly outlines his understanding of the Millennials' view of kingdom work and supports his theory well, pointing to the fact that this generation is both departing from the church, and attempting kingdom work separately from the church. It is my opinion that McKnight could have spent less time with an "us versus them" approach and simply clarified the differences between the generational views of God's kingdom. This defensive approach may distract from his work. Having an intimate knowledge of several Millennials, I personally know some who are deeply involved in kingdom work, who faithfully and biblically labor in kingdom work, and who understand clearly the gospel and the redemptive work of Christ.

McKnight's work is valuable in presenting a strong biblical understanding of kingdom, but his presentation may limit his effectiveness. In summary, McKnight effectively uses the biblical narrative and Scripture to support his positions and to point out the error of anyone (Millennials or otherwise) attempting kingdom work (socially or politically) apart from Christ and the church.

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*Introduction to Global Missions.* By Zane Pratt, M. David Sills, and Jeff K. Walters. Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2014, 280pp., \$27.00, hardback.

In my estimation, the best authors of books on missiology are those who have worked in the field about which they write. By that standard alone, *Introduction to Global Missions* is a valuable book. Zane Pratt serves as Vice-President for Global Training for the International Mission Board and both David Sills and Jeff Walters serve as missions professors at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, KY. These three men have decades of experience with missionary service and seminary teaching.

*Introduction to Global Missions* is intended to “provide an introductory survey of the most important subjects for any missionary” (vii). Its anticipated audience is the university or seminary classroom. With the exception of occasional references to college-age readers (e.g., 149), however, the overview nature of the work and the readability of its content make it a significant resource not only for students, but also for local church leaders.

The first chapter (adapted from Sills’ previous book, *The Missionary Call*) focuses on the beginning point of one’s missionary journey – the process for discerning God’s call to the nations. The general outline that follows develops basic subdivisions of missiology: biblical and theological foundations, historical foundations, cultural studies, and practical strategies. A concluding chapter addresses issues the 21<sup>st</sup> century missionary might face, including the task of defining the church’s mission, responding to missions research, and confronting urbanization and internationalization.

The strengths of this work are several. First, the authors’ commitment to a Scriptural foundation for missions is evident. Several chapters on the Bible’s missiological and theological foundations for global mission are some of the strongest in the text. The Word of God is “the rule of Christian mission,” the story of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration that should compel believers to reach the world (74). The concept of missions is consequently found throughout the biblical narrative and serves as a theme that “ties the entire narrative together” (39).

Based on their biblical and theological commitments, Pratt and his co-authors rightly affirm the exclusivity of the gospel (85), the reality of an eternal hell (77), and the role of the church in reaching the world (89-90). Also, they necessarily raise concerns about evangelism without follow-up teaching

(28), missions without proclamation (257), and contextualization without appropriate boundaries (262-63). Even in the midst of continual and dramatic global changes, the authors insist that “Scripture rules, shapes, directs, and judges all of our mission theory and practice” (76).

Second, the authors emphasize the centrality of the church in the work of missions. The church is “the instrument of Christian mission” (89), the body of Christ through whom disciples are made and mature. Hence, missionaries and national believers alike need the fellowship of a local body (90). While the New Testament does not explicitly command planting churches, the gathering of believers into new congregations replicates the pattern of the book of Acts and facilitates the work of global missions (207-09).

Third, this text emphasizes the task of discipling and training new believers and leaders on the mission field. One might, of course, expect seminary professors to emphasize discipleship and training, but their focus is a welcomed corrective to existing methodologies that seem to neglect discipleship. While my personal observations are that much more solid training is happening on the field than many readers recognize, this book presents a stronger model because of its attention to theological underpinnings and practical strategies of disciple-making. The chapter on applied anthropology and contextualization is particularly helpful in considering how one might disciple across cultures.

Fourth, *Introduction to Global Missions* highlights the tasks of missions without ignoring the spiritual life of the Christian worker. According to the authors, too many missionary candidates have failed to “guard their heart” instead making choices that have virtually closed the door to appointment (221). Proclamation of the Word of God is central to missions, but the missionary must also live out the Word as he explains it (199). Missionaries who seek to disciple new believers must themselves be disciplined “if they hope to have a well deep enough to drink from for the rest of their lives” (205). Language learning is worth the effort not only to be “a better speaker for Christ’s sake,” but also because language study “throws us completely on the Lord for help” (234). This focus on one’s personal walk with Christ is both imperative and applauded.

Most books, of course, can be improved. Any negative evaluations I raise about this book are simply suggestions for improvement rather than cause for concern. For example, the goal of this book to be an introductory text is both a strength and a weakness. In a single volume, the authors cover major

areas of missiology without losing the reader's interest. On the other hand, the brevity of some sections leaves the reader wanting more. Covering two thousand years of missions history in 40 pages unavoidably results in summary-level discussion of major eras. The single chapter on world religions is, by the authors' admission, "only a cursory treatment" (165), but one wonders if other chapters might have been shortened to provide more space for this crucially important subject.

This work rightly recognizes the significance of prayer in missions efforts (10, 245), yet attention to the spiritual battle involved in missions is scant. As a reviewer, I admit my personal interest in spiritual warfare (and thus, perhaps my bias in this critique). Nevertheless, evangelicals have too often left to others this discussion of a thoroughly biblical topic. Some attention to the necessity of wearing the full armor of God (Eph. 6:10-17) would have strengthened this book's discussions on the personal life of the missionary.

Given that many of the readers of this text will be female, more attention to the role of women on the mission field would have broadened the appeal of this text. Granted, that discussion is a controversial one, which might require more space than an introductory text allows, but it is nonetheless needed. The insights of the missionary-professors who penned this work would likely have been informative and beneficial and their inclusion is something I personally missed.

In general, I wished for more experiential insights and anecdotes from the authors throughout this work. Adding personal stories can be complicated in a multiple author work, but this text warrants more illustrations and application, which the authors could have supplied. Because I know these men to be experienced, thoughtful missionaries, I finished this book wanting other readers to know more about *them* and their experiences as they have personally fleshed out the principles in this text.

One final minor concern is the placement of Chapter Two ("*Panta Ta Ethne*: All the Nations") in the Biblical and Theological Foundations section of the book. While one would assume a study of Matthew 28:19-20 from its title and thematic placement, the chapter is instead a summary of definitions essential to the study of missiology. This chapter is one crucial to the stated goals of the book, but it would perhaps have been better included in the introductory section, which includes discussion of the missionary call.

These suggestions notwithstanding, I recommend *Introduction to Global Missions* without reservation. In fact, I have chosen it as a primary text for my

introductory missions classes, and I would invite my local church missions leaders to study it as well.

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*Paul's Missionary Methods: In His Time and Ours.* By Robert L. Plummer and John Mark Terry. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012, 253 pp., \$22 paper.

Roland Allen first published his classic *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?* in 1912. To celebrate the centennial of his influential book, Robert Plummer and Mark Terry have assembled fourteen articles aimed at re-examining the missiology of the Apostle Paul and Roland Allen's later interpretation of Paul's efforts. Plummer and Terry are well-suited to lead this effort: Plummer as an accomplished New Testament scholar and Terry as a veteran missions scholar and practitioner. The book is divided into two sections: Paul in the New Testament and Paul's influence on missions – or, put another way: Paul's message and Paul's missiology (9). Articles are divided evenly between these two sections, with the first group exploring issues related to Paul's theology such as historical and cultural context, career timeline, basic gospel elements, ecclesiology, and missionary suffering. Group two focuses more closely on Paul's missions strategy, including his efforts to contextualize the gospel message, plant indigenous churches, and develop leaders both for the local church and for partnership in his mission. The collection of authors is impressive, including such leading lights as Eckhard Schnabel in New Testament and David Hesselgrave in missions.

As a whole, these articles maintain a high level of scholarship, exhibiting informed and careful biblical exegesis and missiological insight. The authors offer extensive praise for Allen's analysis and application of Paul's mission but also provide measured critique, identifying some weaknesses in Allen's argument. Hesselgrave, in particular, cautions us against following Allen's

reluctance to engage issues of theological and missiological controversy, a reluctance based on the rationale that Paul's methods were more oriented toward "facts" rather than "doctrine" and that church unity in missions can be founded as much on "spiritual" unity as it can be on "doctrinal" unity (136-138). Hesselgrave rightly rejects such minimization of doctrine for Paul's (and our own) church planting efforts. Rather, he calls missionaries to wrestle with contemporary theological and missiological controversies if they are to follow Paul in maintaining the purity of the gospel and the clarity of their mission (138-42). At a time when the word "gospel" is used in a multitude of ways, this book – especially Plummer's article – presents an unadorned, biblically-warranted definition of the gospel and demonstrates the priority of the verbal proclamation of that message within Paul's mission. Another contribution of this volume is the general recognition that missionaries must accurately understand both Paul's unchanging, universal message and how he contextualized it in his day before they can correctly express that same message in the varying modern contexts. This volume is a great help to those seeking to avoid the twin dangers of over-contextualization and under-contextualization. Noteworthy is M. David Sills' trenchant observation that contextualization should not be understood as changing the gospel to make it more acceptable but only as translating the gospel to make it more understandable (208). Contextualization does not seek to remove the necessary offense of the gospel, only the unnecessary barriers of culture.

At the same time, this book also points to the need for more work in the area of contextualization. For instance, Terry helpfully writes, "There will always be a dynamic tension between supracultural doctrines and variable cultural traits" (170). Sills also provides important clarity concerning the controversial issue of "contextualized theology," positing that it "simply deals with issues that did not require detailed treatment in the missionary's home culture but do require this treatment in the target culture" (199). However, further clarity is necessary when Michael Pocock proposes that "missionaries need not imitate the apostles slavishly in every regard," which might result in a "new legalism." Pocock, however, provides no guidance for determining which practices to imitate and which to ignore (154-55).

Key questions that remain unanswered are: "What exactly in Paul's message and ministry is universal and normative?" What is contextual and non-normative?" "How does one determine which is which?" Muslim

“insider movements” are one controversial example within current debate regarding appropriate boundaries of contextualization. Pocock seems to speculate that Roland Allen would embrace insider movements as just the kind of ‘spontaneous expansion of the church’ he had in mind (157), whereas Sills argues that “Allen did not see in the life of Paul any tendency toward a liberal contextualization that would intentionally allow the former religion to influence or have authority in a new Christian” (212). This disagreement illuminates a need for further clarity on the issue of contextualization. In conclusion, the authors and editors of this volume have contributed a welcome and worthy addition to the missiological conversation.

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