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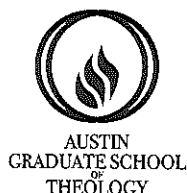
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Consecrated Pragmatism

Trends in Modern Worship

Michael R. Weed

Only a foolish person would
describe a meeting with God as "fun."

Cornelius Plantinga, Jr.

Over a decade ago the Dear Abby column ran a series of letters concerned with changes occurring in the writers' respective places of worship. Letters from Catholics, Protestants, and Jews across the nation reflected common concerns: that worship was being invaded by entertainment and theatrics.

Concerns from such diverse sources indicate that disruptions over worship are being experienced within many different religious groups across the land. This fact alone should alert us to the possibility that, regardless of the particular shape such disturbances take within any particular denomination or religious group, something much larger may be behind this development. Many observers of the American religious scene suggest that the underlying causes of the present unrest and disruption over worship may ultimately reside in powerful cultural forces that are the legacy of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Although it is inevitable that culture influences religion, often in a negative way, many such influences are now becoming widely accepted and well-established within the modern church. In fact, some Christian leaders have presented arguments encouraging accommodation to the surrounding culture. One particularly powerful source of such influences has been the

church growth movement, founded by missiologist Donald McGavran in the 1950s.¹ A fundamental concern of McGavran was to make mission work more effective by minimizing social dislocation experienced by converts in the process of conversion. McGavran saw this as a major hindrance to the spread of Christianity. Addressing this problem, McGavran argued that the Great Commission not only contains a mandate to go to all nations; it also prescribes a strategy for doing so.² He contended that the Great Commission's "making disciples" and "teaching" designate two separate steps in Christian mission. Essentially, McGavran argued that "making disciples of all nations" entails attracting followers and building churches within different "clans, tribes, castes," and other culturally distinct groupings (e.g., social and economic). In this manner social dislocation is minimized and converts are able to "feel at home" with their own kind.³ The Great Commission's reference to "teaching" is taken to mean "perfecting" and may occur later, after disciples are formed into distinct culturally adapted churches.

Given its particular interest in mission effectiveness within cultures, it is understandable that the church growth movement would turn to the social sciences in order to identify and monitor the attitudes, practices, and trends of cultures within which it seeks effectively to attract converts and

¹Other immediate causes of alterations in worship practices are certainly identifiable. For example, the Liturgical Movement originating with the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) has fostered renewals not only among Roman Catholics but also mainline Protestant denominations. Likewise, the charismatic revivals of the late 1960s have affected most worship traditions in America: "Any congregation that sings praise choruses or is led in their worship by a praise team has been indirectly influenced by the charismatic movement," John Witvliet, "Evaluating Recent Changes in the Practices of Christian Worship," *Crux* 38 (2002): 19. See also Ellen T. Charry, "Consider Christian Worship," *Theology Today* 58 (2001): 281-285.

²Donald McGavran, *The Bridges of God: A Study in the Strategy of Missions* (New York: Friendship Press, 1955), 13f.

³Donald McGavran, "Church Growth," *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 242.

build culturally adapted churches. C. Peter Wagner, who was named Donald A. McGavran Professor of Church Growth at Fuller Theological Seminary in 1984, designates the method as “consecrated pragmatism” and stresses that the church growth movement seeks to be scientific in promoting church growth.⁴ He observes:

For some reason or other, a scientific approach has not been used widely among Christians for understanding God’s work in the world with more precision. But church growth intends to do just that.⁵

Wagner continues:

Just as in medicine, it will take specialized and professional training to use these tools well. . . . Specialists are now being trained and equipped to give much more than superficial answers to the question, “Why isn’t my church growing?”⁶

According to Wagner, scientific research supports the church growth movement’s strategy of evangelizing within cultures to form culturally distinct churches. Wagner states that “the principle of homogeneity,” i.e., that people like to be with their own kind of people, is the nearest thing to a “natural law” of church growth.⁷

Clearly the views of McGavran, Wagner, and their successors have broad and far-reaching implications for the life of the church and the shape of Christian mission. For a variety of reasons, no doubt including the vision of a scientific approach to evangelism and church growth, they have also

⁴C. Peter Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow* (Glendale: Regal, 1976), 31, 35–145. Wagner is the author of over ten books and a leading spokesperson for the church growth movement. Cf. Tom S. Rainer, *The Book of Church Growth: History, Theology, and Principles* (Nashville: Broadman, 1993), 54f.

⁵Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow*, 40–41.

⁶Establishing the practical nature of the church growth movement, Wagner states: “. . . none of the members of the faculty of the Fuller School of World Mission—where church growth theory has been generated to date—has his doctorate in theology or philosophy as such. Rather, faculty members combine such academic fields as civil engineering, education, social ethics, linguistics, agriculture and anthropology where scientific methodology is a prominent part of the training” (Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow*, 41–42).

⁷Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow*, 110.

had widespread influence. Perhaps the most immediate and visible influence of the church growth movement's ideas is their impact upon views of the purpose and practice of Christian worship. Before examining the church growth movement's influence on contemporary worship, however, a brief assessment of four of the movement's major assumptions is instructive.

Church Growth Assumptions Assessed

First, an underlying assumption of the church growth movement is that numerical growth is a primary purpose of Christian mission. The New Testament is read in a manner suggesting that numerical expansion of the church was a major concern of the writers of the New Testament and that the early church evidences a self-conscious strategy for church growth. These assumptions are unfounded. The early church shows little interest in numbers nor any strategy other than that of preaching the Gospel.⁸

Second, there are no hermeneutical grounds—exegetical or theological—for distinguishing between “making disciples” and “teaching” in Matthew 28:19, 20. Matthew's word for “disciple” means “one who engages in learning through instruction from another; a pupil, apprentice,” i.e., one who receives instruction or is taught.⁹ “Teaching them . . .” is how disciples are made. The church's mandate from Jesus is to teach disciples, not to attract followers. This point is critical because the unwarranted

⁸See Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995). “. . . on the one hand, there is joy in the rapid growth of the church in its earliest days, but . . . there is no evidence that the numerical growth of the church is a matter of primary concern. There is no shred of evidence in Paul's letters to suggest that he judged the churches by the measure of their success in rapid numerical growth . . .” (126).

⁹See Walter Bauer, et al., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, “*mathētēs*” (ed. F. W. Danker; 3rd, rev. ed.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 609. See also Henry G. Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, “*mathētēs*” (9th ed. with supplement; Oxford: Clarendon, 1940 and 1968), 1072: “learner, pupil, apprentice.”

distinction between “making disciples” and “teaching all things” is used to justify various means of attracting attention within different cultures with the intent of only later providing substantive Christian teaching, or “perfecting.”

Third, regarding church growth’s law of homogeneity, it is important to remember that although Jesus confined his ministry to the “household of Israel,” the fellowship of his disciples included at least one Zealot (Mark 3:18) and one tax collector (Mark 2:14)—groups who bitterly opposed one another—as well as a number of women disciples (cf. Luke 8:1–3).¹⁰ This pattern continued in the early church and was an essential aspect of its identity. Early Christian preaching

demanded a radical reorientation of outlook and life, exclusive allegiance to God the creator, acceptance of Christ’s resurrection, and expectation that Christ would deliver believers from eschatological judgment.¹¹

The first Christians were essentially “converts.”¹² However variously expressed and imperfectly realized, Christian converts were those who had turned from and broken with the dominant culture. Their citizenship was in heaven (Phil 3:20). Within the present age and its culture(s) they lived as respectful aliens and exiles (1 Pet 2:11). Those baptized into Christ had put on a new nature and become part of a new social reality, repairing and transcending the fragmentation of humanity into such distinctions as clans, tribes, and castes: “Here there cannot be Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free man” (Col 3:11). Clearly, both Jesus and the early church intentionally violated the “principle of homogeneity.”

¹⁰Hans Weder, “Discipleship,” *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 2 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 208.

¹¹Abraham J. Malherbe, *Paul and the Thessalonians: The Philosophic Tradition of Pastoral Care* (Mifflintown, PA: Sigler, 2000), 30.

¹²Wayne A. Meeks, *The Origins of Christian Morality: The First Two Centuries* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 211 f.

Finally, church growth views of culture tend to be uncritical. There are no biblical or theological grounds for assuming that the Gospel should be adapted to different cultures—much less to assert that “God accepts culture.” As all individuals are sinful, so all cultures are sinful—and just as individuals may be differently sinful, so cultures may differ in their distortions of God’s intentions for humanity.

Cultures are the social-historical embodiment—beliefs, attitudes, practices—of centuries of human estrangement from the Creator. Far from being morally or spiritually neutral, cultures dominate our ways of viewing reality from birth and have far more control over our lives than do the influences of individual sinners. As William Willimon reminds us, the church is itself a culture—a new culture that inevitably and purposefully lives in tension with the surrounding culture(s). While Christian preaching may need to be adapted in order to be understood, this is not the same as making the message acceptable, much less making the message attractive. Willimon further cautions:

The Bible doesn’t want to *speak to* the modern world; the Bible wants to *convert* the modern world. . . . Too often, when we try to speak to our culture, we merely adopt the culture of the moment rather than present the gospel to the culture. . . . This is why the concept of “user-friendly churches” often leads to churches getting used. . . . The point is not to speak to the culture. The point is to change it.¹³

The church is always a *counter*-culture; conversion necessarily entails social dislocation and relocation in a new community with its own distinct history and culture (Rom 12:2).

The Church Growth Movement and Contemporary Worship

In spite of the critical shortcomings of its basic assumptions, the church growth movement’s views have had far-reaching effects. They are a

¹³William Willimon, “This Culture Is Overrated,” *Christianity Today* 41 (May 1997): 27.

significant influence in the congregational life of virtually all American churches, regardless of denomination.¹⁴ Essentially, they foster the idea that the gospel must be presented in terms of the surrounding culture in order to make it attractive to non-Christians (and to make conversion less socially disruptive). In the United States, the principal force shaping a homogeneous popular culture is the entertainment industry, which, through its marriage with technology, has become an all-pervasive presence.

From day-care centers to nursing homes, young and old spend hours daily staring at television sets. Automobile radios and Walkman headsets further ensure that no one need ever be bored, much less alone with his or her own thoughts. Thus the assumption that the gospel must be adapted to culture has meant that in American churches (and most Western societies) Christianity is adapted to audiences whose values and expectations are those fostered by an omnipresent entertainment industry.

For obvious reasons, the adaptation of Christianity to modern culture has had visible impact upon the conduct of corporate worship. Corporate worship is the aspect of church life that most easily lends itself to being modified in terms of an entertainment and performance format. Such adaptation has meant that worship becomes primarily a means of "outreach," carefully designed to attract outsiders whose tastes and attitudes are essentially those shaped by the surrounding entertainment-saturated culture. Rick Warren is quite candid in this regard:

For the first time in history, there exists a universal music style that can be heard in every country of the world. It's called contemporary pop/rock. The same songs are being played on radios in Nairobi and Tokyo and Moscow. Most TV commercials use the contemporary/rock style. Even country and western has adapted it. This is the primary musical style we've chosen to use at Saddleback.¹⁵

¹⁴Cf. Mark A. Olson, *Moving Beyond Church Growth: An Alternative Vision for Congregations* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 12f.

¹⁵Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan,

Social-scientific insights are used in shaping and guiding this process.

Wagner, for example, observes:

As every sociologist knows, certain laws of collective behavior operate differently in small groups than in large groups. As every psychologist knows, mob psychology has certain effects on people's emotions and their reactions to stimuli which would not be the case at all if the person were alone or in a small group.¹⁶

Wagner concludes that Christian worship should be viewed as celebration and as a means for attracting nonbelievers. He states:

Too many worship services are . . . not the kind that they [members] are very enthusiastic in inviting their unconverted friends to. Why not admit it! It's no fun! . . .

Good celebrations need lots of people to make them fun and attractive.¹⁷

Similarly, Rick Warren asserts in *The Purpose Driven Church* :

At Saddleback, we believe worship is to be a celebration so we use a style that is upbeat, bright, and joyful. We rarely sing a song in a minor key. Unbelievers usually prefer celebrative music over contemplative music because they don't yet have a relationship with Christ.¹⁸

Following this carefully engineered approach, Christian worship becomes an occasion where, guided by scientific insights regarding collective behavior and mob psychology, the unconverted and unbelievers are introduced to fun and entertaining worship experiences.¹⁹

A significant result of this strategy is that Christian worship is not

1995), 285.

¹⁶Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow*, 98.

¹⁷Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow*, 98–99.

¹⁸See Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, 286–287.

¹⁹See “No Experience Necessary,” *Leadership* 22 (Summer 2001): 28–32. This article is an interview by *Leadership* editors with Jim Gilmore, a co-author of *The Experience Economy* (Harvard Business School Press). Gilmore states, “Christians can use the principles in the book to succeed in the marketplace, but the organized church itself should never try to stage a God experience. Increasingly you find people talking about the worship *experience* rather than the worship *service*. That reflects what’s happening in the outside world. I’m dismayed to see churches abandon the means of grace that God ordains simply to conform to the patterns of the world” (31). See also note 28.

ordered by concerns to honor God or the needs of believers to understand and grow in the Christian faith. Rather, guided by data gleaned from questionnaires and surveys, “scientifically informed” worship “targets” unbelievers’ interests and tastes, namely the modern quest for entertaining and fun experiences.

The full implications of this major shift in the focus and meaning of Christian worship are far-reaching.²⁰ Perhaps in an attempt to defend against the implication that the Christian faith is not being passed on, Wagner offers the peculiar and perhaps revealing caution that

it is not too healthy for a church to spend too much time worrying about the next generation any more than it is healthy for a woman to spend too much time thinking about whom she will marry if her husband dies and leaves her a widow. The only generation any church is responsible for winning is this generation.²¹

Regarding the next generation, we do well to remember that the answer to the question, “Will our children have faith?” lies in another question: “Will our faith have children?”²² A “worship style” adapted to an entertainment and performance format and that “lacks theological substance, invites passivity, and fosters an easy-listening consumerism that provides neither music nor words that will help worship participants remember deep truths”

²⁰For example, it poses special difficulties for churches practicing weekly communion. While communion may be “meaningful,” it is difficult to make it exciting, upbeat, and fun, much less entertaining. Thus many such churches (a) move communion to another time, (b) move the “celebration” (e.g., so-called “seeker services” on Saturday), or (c) try to minimize communion’s distraction from the otherwise “upbeat tempo” of the celebration (e.g., by avoiding or downplaying traditional language of sin and sacrifice and communion hymns, etc.).

²¹Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow*, 60. It would seem obvious that the likelihood that one generation will be succeeded by another is far greater than the possibility that a married woman may become a widow. Not to be fundamentally concerned with passing on the faith to future generations, now present to us in our children and grandchildren, would seem irresponsible to most thoughtful Christians.

²²Cf. Walter Brueggeman, “Will Our Faith Have Children?” *Word & World* 8 (1983): 271–283.

is not a worship style suited for passing on the faith to future generations.²³ It carries little risk of worrying about the next generation; it is interested in neither the past nor the future; it is a worship style for the “Now” or “Me” generation.

How Did We Get Here?

As noted, various influences of the church growth movement increasingly dominate congregational life throughout America. The goal of forming successful churches where everyone finds his or her individual needs met is becoming an unchallenged assumption among church leaders; the expectation of finding such churches is a given among “church shoppers.”²⁴ A constant monitoring of trends, tastes, and fashions through questionnaires, surveys, and polls now rivals the study and teaching of scripture as the sign of a church’s devotion to ministry and zeal for evangelism. Ministry itself is in the process of becoming equated with utilizing the latest technologies and methods in successfully managing the numerous programs of the modern church.²⁵

²³Marva Dawn, “True worship, real evangelism,” *Christian Century* 116 (April 1999): 455–458. Dawn continues: “Another result is that the real problems—namely, failure to educate people concerning the meaning and practice of worship, failure to understand the real idolatries that keep people from participating in the church, and failure to equip the priesthood of all believers for outreach to the world—remain unaddressed” (455).

²⁴Decades ago, Peter Berger observed: “Emotional pragmatism now takes the place of honest confrontation with the Christian message. The way is opened for the attitude of the religious consumer, who shops around the denominational supermarket for just the right combination of spiritual kicks and thrills to meet his particular psychological needs. The question of truth loses all significance.” See Peter Berger, *The Noise of Solemn Assemblies* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1961), 126.

²⁵Cf. Olson, *Moving Beyond Church Growth*: “At gatherings of pastors and leaders, there is little conversation about vision or even theology. The latest computer program, sound system, or programmatic technique receives concentrated attention. . . . A whole industry has grown up to provide helps (a softer term for techniques) for preaching, premarital counseling, youth ministry, stewardship, personal devotional life, and any other dimension of church life. The advent of the

It is now evident that what some viewed merely as a shift in strategies, i.e., “using the most advanced methods,” has become considerably more than that. However unintentional, the inescapable result of the church’s uncritical endorsement of modern methodologies is a major shift of attention—and confidence. The focus of modern churches becomes a preoccupation with identifying and monitoring human needs. The modern church’s confidence now rests in human techniques and strategies designed to satisfy the restlessness and impatience endemic to modernity. In other words, what was viewed innocently as merely a tactical move is turning out to be a seismic shift of unforeseen magnitude.

Put simply, modern methodologies arise from and reinforce modern presuppositions and assumptions; they presume both the possibility and the desirability of the rational mastery of virtually all areas of human life, individual and corporate. The unexamined and ready acceptance of these practices inevitably brings their secular and mechanistic assumptions into the heart of congregational life. In this fashion, fundamentally a-theistic assumptions have become dominant influences in most modern American churches.²⁶

Looking back over the last forty years, one may wonder at the rapid and unchallenged spread of church growth techniques and strategies among American churches. This phenomenal growth and popularity is especially puzzling given the biblically and theologically questionable assumptions of

Internet and the proliferation of information only exacerbates the insatiable need for more techniques, more technologies” (16).

²⁶To some, a glance at the 389-entry index of Wagner’s *Your Church Can Grow* confirms the reality of the threat of “practical atheism.” Wagner’s index contains entries for “consecrated pragmatism,” “end justifies means,” “goal setting,” “homogeneous units,” “mobilization,” “possibility thinking,” “pragmatism,” “scientific approach,” “social science,” “staff,” and even “Welk, Lawrence.” There are no entries for “cross,” “communion,” “gospel,” “Lord’s Supper,” “preaching,” or “prayer”!

the church growth movement. While no doubt many elements are involved, at least four appear to be contributing factors, the last being perhaps the most significant and the most foreboding.

First, the insubstantial and arguably un-biblical premises of church growth strategies no doubt appear to many as simply non-biblical and therefore doctrinally neutral. This perception may also partially explain the spread of such methods across denominational lines. Second, once acceptance and practice of church growth methods reach, in effect, a critical mass, relentless pressure is placed on virtually all churches and church leaders to “do what everyone else is doing,” “change in order not to be left behind,” “get our share of the market,” and so on. Third, a sizable and growing industry has emerged, aggressively marketing numerous products associated with church growth techniques and strategies. No doubt each of these has played a contributing role in altering the landscape of American churches over the last forty years.

Finally, however, the most significant factor in the rise and spread of church growth methods throughout American churches undoubtedly lies elsewhere. Namely, by mid-twentieth century, American Christians managed their daily lives on the basis of the same secular assumptions and methods as everyone else. In an ironic twist on the principle of homogeneity, American Christians were becoming at home in the modern world—a world increasingly remote from the world of the New Testament.²⁷

²⁷Cf. Craig Gay, “Evangelicals and the Language of Technopoly,” *Cruce* 31 (1995): 38. “The fact that we have found ourselves increasingly drawn toward social-scientific methods and techniques in our churches . . . is quite disturbing. After all, the future cannot be very bright for a humanly engineered church. Even more troubling, however, is what our attraction to secular methods and techniques suggests about our past and present; for it may suggest that we have become embarrassed by our own traditions vis-à-vis modern scientific culture. Indeed, it may suggest that we have secretly lost faith in the power of the gospel, and are hoping that ‘science’ will provide us with more success and security than prayer and

Given who American Christians were becoming, it simply made good sense to manage the business of the church in the same fashion and with the same methods that were proving so successful in all other areas of modern life. Looking back, these sweeping developments in American churches were socially and historically inevitable. In a sense, church growth theory simply legitimated fundamental changes already occurring in the basic attitudes of American Christians, changes brought by the rising tide of secularizing forces which now carry modern society in their wake. Viewed in this context, the widespread influence of the church growth movement appears to be as much a symptom of more fundamental problems as it is a cause.²⁸ It appears that church growth's "consecrated pragmatism" has been enthusiastically embraced not because it is consecrated but because it is pragmatic.

Recovering Our Bearings

C. S. Lewis is reported to have said that when we get the wrong sum at the beginning of a sequence of calculations we cannot improve matters "by simply going on." For modern Christians, there can be no strategy or tactic to improve matters. Attempts to devise such only perpetuate the deception of trusting in our own power and ingenuity to solve all problems—in effect, to manage transcendence. The modern church, in spite of its plans and programs, is at a point where it cannot "simply go on."

We recover our bearings by returning to the beginning, to a word

the guidance of the Holy Spirit, that we are, as the apostle Paul put it, holding to the form of godliness but denying its power (2 Tim 3:5)."

²⁸Unnoticed was the fact that modern methods and technologies carry secularizing forces which construct a closed world with no place for transcendence. Ironically, efforts to redress the modern world's loss of transcendence now seek to manufacture experiences of transcendence by drawing on these same secularizing methods and technologies (e.g., "worship technologies" to produce "multi-sensory worship experiences"). Cf. Hans Küng, *The Church* (New York: Image Books, 1976), 615. See also note 19 above.

that comes from outside the flow of human history, a word that exposes our pretensions of wisdom, a word that cannot be managed, only served and obeyed.

Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe (1 Cor 1:20, 21).

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