

Christian Reconstruction

Isaiah 61:4

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CRITICAL MASS

Part I: The Small Church

by Gary North

Recently, I drove from Tyler, Texas, to Houston and back. Driving down to Houston, which is about a four and a half hour drive by one route, you pass through a number of small towns whose populations are anywhere from two or three thousand to thirty thousand. The other route is about a three and a half hour drive. You drive through hardly any towns. The first route is a more interesting drive. As you pass through these towns, you see some of them are apparently reasonably successful, while others look as though they are struggling.

It is the other route that is more significant. The towns that you pass through are under five thousand in population. As you drive through, you wonder what it is that keeps these towns alive. There appear to be no major industries. There is some agriculture, but it is all relatively small-scale. There are no movie theaters, although there are video rental stores. There are no supermarkets. There are no large churches, although there may be a reasonably sized Methodist Church or Baptist Church. But on the whole, these towns look as though they are dying. In all likelihood, they are dying. The problem of a dying town is a familiar one in heartland America.

Why do these towns die? They are dying all over the nation. This is not a recent phenomenon, nor is it confined to the United States. There is apparently a kind of critical mass that a town approaches, either on the upward or downward cycle. At some point, the town either attracts sufficient population to keep growing almost automatically or loses population almost automatically. Let us consider the problem of the small town that is losing population. The division of labor shrinks within the community. Specialized occupations begin to move out. One of the first to go will be the physician, usually when he retires or dies. No one will replace him. A major problem that the small towns face all over rural America is the absence of medical care. The small number of people in the community cannot support a hospital, and in some cases cannot even support a small clinic. Other occupations also suffer similar declines of business.

In stark contrast is a growing metropolitan area. As more and more people stream into the city, more and more specialized occupations become profitable. Individuals can serve each other on a cost-effective basis because the specialized skills of the suppliers can more easily be matched with the specialized demands of the buyer. Per capita output increases, and therefore per capita wealth increases.

Consider entertainment. What is there to do after seven in the evening in a small town? Go to the local Dairy Queen. That is just about it. In a city, there are lots of things to do. This wide availability of urban alternatives is

true not only in the field of entertainment but also in terms of the number of churches, the number of manufacturing concerns, the number of service industries, and all other aspects of a modern economy. The increase in the division of labor enables people with very specialized tastes and very specialized skills to get together and make a voluntary exchange.

This economic specialization increases people's wealth by increasing their ability to serve each other. This increase in the various areas of service is basic to modern capitalism. It is also basic to the development of successful churches. **The goal of all economic organizations is service.** This is also the goal of all ecclesiastical organizations. A large or growing metropolitan area will enable people who want to serve each other in particular ways to find it less expensive and more profitable to locate other people who desire to purchase these services.

The Problem of the Small Church

In the *Wall Street Journal* (March 20, 1991), an article appeared on a particular religious organization that operates in Texas and Tennessee. I happen to know the founder of this organization. (It is not a church.) The little group is ostensibly Christian, but it no longer preaches the divinity of Christ. Furthermore, it preaches the Talmudic doctrine that non-Jews are under a specific set of laws. These laws must be obeyed, but they are not the biblical laws that are aimed specifically at Jews. The founder of this religious organization is an expert in the Talmud and other Jewish traditional religious sources.

The congregation in Tennessee was the focus of the article. It does not have hymns or music, nor does it have prayers or a sermon. The leader of the organization wears a small gold six-pointed star, generally known as the Star of David, although it never had anything to do with David. The congregation invites a rabbi from Atlanta to present weekly information on how Judaism operates and what responsibilities Gentiles have in the world of Judaism.

The reporter interviewed Michael Katz, the rabbi who leads the congregation's members in this weekly study of the Torah. He also instructs them in certain aspects of Talmudic law and Jewish civil law. Mr. Katz observed that the congregation faces a real problem in keeping their children interested and involved. He said that he is worried about the organization's long-term survival unless it grows quickly, since "the marriage pool is extremely limited." As a Jew, he has to be aware of this problem. Today, about half of all Jews marry outside the faith. Ultimately, a religion that does not actively proselytize is doomed if half its members are marrying outside the faith. This is especially true of an urban-based religion, since members of urban societies

seldom if ever reproduce at a rate of 2.1 children per family. This is the minimum figure for extending families, the so called replacement rate figure.

What Mr. Katz says about the little group that he speaks to each week has to be taken seriously by any small, struggling religious organization. There is no doubt that it is difficult for small churches that are not successfully proselytizing to gain a sufficient number of converts to replenish the marriage pool. Children leave small congregations and small towns, and head for the university or better-paying urban jobs. It does not matter whether they are Jewish, Catholic, or Protestant; they tend to marry those people with whom they come into contact at the university or in their work. The smaller the church, the fewer the available opportunities. There is less matching of tastes in marriage partners. The large college or university offers a wider diversity of eligible partners. Unless the religious student is highly motivated to marry a person of similar views, the university's wide range of choice will capture the student.

Universities are generally secular, few employment opportunities are structured along religious lines. This means that it is virtually impossible for any religious organization to maintain growth strictly on the basis of the religious commitment of those born into the organization. They have to recruit.

Solutions That Seldom Work

Small congregations and small denominations have devised a number of solutions to this problem. None of them works very well. One of them is the summer family camp which young people from the entire region or denomination attend. Another approach, if the religious organization is large enough, is the creation of a denominational college. People are recruited from a denomination to attend the college. There are other periodic meetings, such as revival campaigns, hymn sings, and similar social get-togethers.

The reason why these strategies seldom work to reverse the decline of membership is they are not tied to the daily life of the attendees. The thing that gathers people together on a permanent basis is a shared calling (work), a shared vision, or a shared way of life. Occasional social gatherings are peripheral to the fundamental issues of life and death. So, they are not sufficient to bring people together on a permanent basis, which is the foundation of marriage.

The college is the most effective way to reverse the decline, but since colleges tend to become liberal within three generations of their founding, the students seldom retain the same faith as their parents. The school becomes dependent on students from other religious traditions. This again threatens the marriage pool. The school eventually sheds its denominational ties if it grows large, that is, independent. What Baylor University is doing now, the University of Southern California did decades ago.

What we find, then, is that as the children go away to school, or reach a marriageable age, they abandon the institutional commitment of their parents. Their faith changes. If there is not a sufficient number of eligible single people in the congregation, they either transfer to a larger denomination or find other people to date who are not connected in any way with the original denomination.

Then they give up membership in the local church. The old slogan – "A person marries that person who is most available when he or she is most vulnerable" – has a ring of truth about it.

This is why one of the most important aspects of a successful church ministry is to meet the marriage needs of the young singles in the congregation. If this cannot be done through recruiting new families into the congregation, then it has to be done by recruiting single individuals from other denominations or from outside the church. If new families cannot supply the children of marriageable age, then there has to be a systematic attempt to recruit the sons and daughters of families of other religious persuasions or denominational traditions. This is a very difficult project, and very few small churches have been successful at it. They cannot offer youth programs to match those of rich, established congregations. The larger churches in fact draw away the youth of the smaller congregations. This is the critical mass effect in action. The critical mass phenomenon takes place in the local congregation, just as it does in a small Texas town. It loses its young people to the denominational equivalent of Dallas, Houston, Austin, San Antonio, or one of the many suburbs. You find this not only in the United States, you find it in all countries. The upward critical mass of the city continues to pull people into it, while the downward critical mass of the smaller towns continues to push people out.

The Problem of Reconstruction

All this is relevant for any new movement. Christian Reconstruction is such a movement. It has been initially confined to individuals who are in small denominations, especially Calvinistic denominations or charismatic congregations that are outside mainstream pentecostalism. The difficulty that Reconstructionists find is that there is resistance to the distinctives of the Reconstructionist position within their circle of friends in church. They find themselves isolated in their congregations, and they may even be at war with members of the denomination or local congregation.

They usually get tired of arguing. There is therefore a tendency for individuals who have adopted Reconstructionist ideas to search out other individuals with similar ideas who would like to start a church. The problem with this is that these ideas do not appeal to large numbers of people. This means that it is very difficult to locate others in the community who share these ideas. It also means that there is not a sufficient number of them to support a full-time pastor. Even if they could support a full-time pastor, it is unlikely that they would be successful in recruiting large numbers into this new denomination. Not only would the new congregation suffer from a reputation of being cultic, it would also suffer from all the other problems of any small organization that has not yet reached upward critical mass.

The problem that the Reconstructionist faces is this: because ideas are what motivate him, and so few Christians are motivated by ideas, he is almost always perceived as a loner. He may be perceived as a peculiar person, a utopian person, obsessed person, or some similar pejorative term. This makes it even more difficult for the individual to locate people of similar persuasion.

I will be dealing with this critical problem of the critical mass in the next few issues of *Christian Reconstruction*.

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