

Christian Reconstruction

Isaiah 61:4

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CRITICAL MASS

Part X: Is This Congregation Worth Your Effort?

by Gary North

For which of you, intending to build a tower, sitteth not down first, and counteth the cost, whether he have sufficient to finish it? Lest haply, after he hath laid the foundation, and is not able to finish it, all that behold it begin to mock him, Saying, This man began to build, and was not able to finish. Or what king, going to make war against another king, sitteth not down first, and consulteth whether he be able with ten thousand to meet him that cometh against him with twenty thousand? (Luke 14:28-31).

I have spent the previous nine issues of *Christian Reconstruction* in presenting a program of church renewal. I have argued that it is possible to take a congregation to critical mass. But a congregation can reach critical mass in two ways: growth and dispersion. You want to be part of a church that takes the first approach. You should probably get out of a church that has reached the second.

Each approach has its own pitfalls. Churches that are fast-growing are forever threatened by theological leveling: the problem of the lowest common denominator. New members do not know the details of the church's tradition, nor do they care, yet authority is being transferred to them: they vote. Churches do not honor the biblical principle of dual membership: communing members and voting members. Churches have adopted the democratic theology of secular humanism: **one member, one vote**, with no distinctions between types of membership. Non-tithers have the same vote as tithers, just as non-taxpaying welfare recipients have the same political vote as taxpayers. The results are similar over time. In non-hierarchical churches, this is especially true. Charles Haddon Spurgeon's Metropolitan Tabernacle Baptist congregation went Arminian within five years after his death. If the legacy of his preaching could not sustain a large congregation's Calvinist purity, whose can?

The so-called "church growth movement" relies on techniques that self-consciously downplay both theology and tradition; they are regarded as impediments to growth. If a local congregation has adopted these techniques apart from a systematic program to train these new converts theologically, it is in the process of selling its birthright for a mess of pottage. Paul is clear: milk-drinking Christians must learn to eat meat (1 Cor. 3:1-3). The great temptation of the church growth movement is to substitute milk for meat as the permanent diet. It avoids meat on principle. The spiritual immaturity of this movement is a curse, yet its promoters are too immature spiritually to understand this. They equate theology with stagnation, church discipline with attrition, and adultery with bad manners.

On the other hand, this does not validate the "we're tiny for Jesus" mentality—what Rushdoony has called a

permanent remnant psychology. Instead of milk, these churches offer only beef jerky: dried-out strips of meat. They substitute long, boring theological lectures—museum-piece preaching—for action-motivating sermons. Some of them offer complex liturgies without enthusiasm. The more rigorous the denomination's theological tradition, the more likely is this sort of congregation. When **beef jerky orthodoxy** is combined with what I call "early 1940's Iwo Jima pillbox" architecture, the congregation is doomed to cultural impotence. If you are in such a congregation, leave; if you aren't, stay away.

There is much more to God's church than theology and tradition, but if there is to be sustained confrontation with humanism on every front, there must be a strategy of planned succession: point five of the biblical covenant model. There has to be a way to pass the church's vision, along with legal authority, to the next generation. So, before you make a major commitment, it is imperative that you ask yourself: "Does this church have a future?"

A Growing Church

Very few congregations grow beyond 200 members, so this is not a major problem for most Christians. (Those few that do ought to start new congregations, not become mega-churches.) If you have joined a church that is growing, or are thinking of joining, you need to find out what has been the basis of its growth. What is the church giving up theologically in order to attain its growth? Is the church being swamped by people who are on the move: church-hoppers? Is it going to lose its theological distinctives? Is it growing because of some non-denominational program of church growth that systematically devalues theology? You must also find out if the church's debt is growing. If it is, will the church become vulnerable to an exodus if the pastor starts preaching doctrine and the elders start disciplining adulterers? If the answer is "yes," you had better keep your wife and daughters away from both the pastor and the elders.

You need answers because you are about to invest your hopes and a lot of your time in building this church. If you are searching for a remnant of others to serve, and then train to serve, a growing church is an advantage. It attracts more members who might be interested in what you are doing: the division of labor principle (1 Cor. 12). Will your efforts be swamped by hordes of new members who move the congregation away from dominion theology? If so, you either have to re-think your local strategy of dominion or else find a new congregation. The world will not be transformed by country club churches that are in fact spiritual nurseries. A congregation needs a systematic program to get new members out of their diapers. Most church

non-denominational church growth programs, if not all of them, ignore this problem.

Growth covers a multitude of sins. It is usually better to suffer the problems of growth than the problems of contraction. There is greater opportunity to employ the division of labor. Also, a dedicated Christian Reconstructionist who puts on the sheep-like cloak of service can more easily avoid confrontations with church authorities in a large congregation than in a small one. They are too busy putting out the brush fires of antinomianism. People who do not make trouble tend to be ignored by church authorities in a large congregation. This is a major advantage for a Christian Reconstructionist who has decided not to make trouble. We should not go looking for trouble; we should instead go looking for converts out of both paganism and pietism.

A Shrinking Church

You may be in a church that has apparently reached negative critical mass. One of the best guides I have ever read to evaluate the spiritual condition of a local congregation is the essay, "Church Renewal: The Real Story," by Lewis Bulkeley. I had him write it when I was the editor of *The Journal of Christian Reconstruction*, Vol. VIII, No. 1 (Winter, 1980-81). He wrote it for ministers to use in deciding whether to accept a congregation's call, but it works just as well for laymen. (Copies of this issue may still be available: write Chalcedon, P. O. Box 158, Vallecito, CA 95251.)

Bulkeley's essay warns the prospective pastor: **some congregations probably cannot be saved.** Like the obese person who has tried a dozen diets, so is a congregation that has tried a dozen church growth strategies. Most diets fail, long-term; so do most programs of church renewal. Neither the dieters nor the members are willing to pay the price of sustained change. It costs too much. The discomfort is immediate; the benefits are distant. The experience of prior failures has created an expectation of defeat.

It is not wise to invest even part of a career in trying to salvage a congregation that has hit the rocks and has been leaking oil for a decade. It has already gained its reputation as the local version of the Exxon Valdez. It has positioned itself as a failed congregation. Its members believe this, and those who remain by now probably accept the fact. Residents nearby believe also this, and they are unlikely to join the church at this late date unless they believe that there is a brand-new congregation worshipping in the old building. Better to start a new church from scratch, Bulkeley wrote, than try to revive a church with a ten-year reputation for failure.

You must ask yourself: Why is this church shrinking? Is it because the members have ceased to invite friends? If so, find out why. Are they embarrassed to bring anyone to a shrinking congregation? Is there a lack of pastoral leadership in evangelism? Has there been a shift in pastors? Is there resentment against the new pastor? Did members leave after the previous pastor took another call? Was there a split in the church over some issue? Has there been a change in liturgy? Or is the shrinking part of a long, established process of attrition? This is especially obvious in the case of congregations that are filled with old people.

Have the members given up hope in the congregation's future? That is, are they merely biding time, filling the pews for the sake of tradition? This, in my view, is the key question. If they have given up hope in the congregation's future, then there is probably little that you can do to reverse this attitude unless you are an exceptional leader. If you

are, then you can re-shape the local church. If you can get it growing, old-timers will respect your abilities and your suggestions, and the newcomers will be there because of what you did. But it is a very difficult task to bring hope to people who have suffered years of disappointment, especially if you are not the pastor. If the pastor resents rivals to his leadership, then your success may turn out to be short-lived. So, you need to get at least passive acceptance for your program, and preferably positive support, from local church authorities.

You must also identify the cause or causes of the decline. You must then ask yourself: "Are my skills even remotely sufficient to reverse this erosion?" If they aren't, find another congregation. Nothing says that you have a moral obligation to remain on board a sinking ship. Others have left before you arrived; others will probably leave after your departure. It is unwise to sink a major capital investment — emotional, financial, and temporal — into a congregation that is dying but prefers its way of death to reform and renewal. Go for the highest payoff. As any good wildcat oil driller will tell you, don't keep drilling holes in a field with two dozen filled-in dry holes. The odds are against you.

A Stagnant Church

This is much better opportunity for renewal. Reversing negative critical mass is very, very difficult. Better to try to invest your effort in a strategy to create positive critical mass.

Ask yourself this question: Why the stagnation? It is better to deal with a stagnant congregation that has not done much to grow than one that has tried lots of things and has failed. Find out if the congregation as a whole has ever tried a program of evangelism. If not, there is hope. If it did, what went wrong? Has there been a large turnover in membership? Is the congregation aging? How long has the pastor been here? Is the church reducing its debt? Can the pastor afford to take risks by changing his preaching? Does he want church growth so much that he is willing to risk a new program of "dead bones" motivation? If not, can you find members who will work with you to develop a local program of service?

If the congregation is a European immigrant church older than three generations, get out now. If its program of church growth is to recommend large families, get out now. If the denomination operates a college, not as a means of educating the next generation in a unique theology, but rather as a large gene-pool center that reduces the likelihood of local interbreeding, get out now. If it is self-consciously trying to preserve a way of life that great-grandpa brought over to the New Country, it is time for you to start investing in the New Country. Get into a different church now.

Conclusion

Don't drill wells in a field full of filled-in dry holes. Don't invest in a shrinking company that has stuck with the old management. And don't stay in a local congregation whose members see change as a threat without significant benefits. Find out why the church has not grown, and then estimate whether your talents can overcome whatever this restrictive factor is. It is not your job to breath life into a dead body. If you're convinced that the horse has died, stop counting its teeth. Seek out like-minded Christians elsewhere who are willing and able to make significant sacrifices in order to make a stagnant church grow or a growing church mature, both theologically and spiritually.

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