

Christian Reconstruction

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CRITICAL MASS Part XIV The Division of Labor

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Cor. 12:15-18).

The greater the number of integrated parts, the greater the body of Christ. This is why church growth is a moral imperative. But this does not mean that church growth is cost-free. We must count the costs of church growth.

The recent church growth movement has a lot of critics, for good reason. Those who promote the church growth movement are almost always weak theologically compared to the historic creeds of the denominations they belong to. They are rarely "creedal people." They are "fellowship people." They are to the church what greeters are to the Rotary Club. "Hi there. My name is Joe. What's yours?"

But the church growth movement exists for a good reason: church growth is not only legitimate, it is morally mandatory. Not to grow is to stagnate, shrivel, or die. Every business wants growth. Every political party wants growth. What group doesn't want growth? The question is: At what price?

Because the church has been on a century-long retreat, except on the foreign mission field, Christians tend to forget that stagnation also has a price: the threat of attrition. Attrition has an even higher price: the threat of extinction. So, a price must be paid for church growth and for attrition. Attrition is too high a price to pay: you eventually wind up in a different, theologically weaker church anyway.

Growth and the Division of Labor

Consider the benefits of a growing congregation. Specialization increases with the increase in the division of labor. The productive church member finds that his talents fit the needs of the congregation more closely than before. The needs of the congregation can therefore be met less expensively than before. As with all specialization, output per unit of resource input increases,

There are limits to this growth process. One major limit is parking space. The general rule is: one acre for every hundred members. At the end of my street, the nearby Baptist church has bought an entire block and is now putting in a new parking lot. There had been a real estate office and a Unitarian fellowship, plus a lot of trees. As I write this, there is only dirt. That congregation is already across the street from a small shopping center's parking lot. It is the biggest

Baptist church in town. Soon it will be even bigger.

The number-one limit to growth, however, is leadership-management. This is true of every organization. A large, complex organization needs both a system and a team of managers to keep it expanding. Leadership talent is rare. Only extraordinary people have it, and they are in heavy demand. Like any other leader, a pastor eventually reaches his limits. He cannot manage any additional tasks without losing his grip. At that point, the church must replace the pastor or cease growing.

Costs rise as complexity increases. When the costs of complexity become larger than the savings associated with the increase in specialization, the organization stops growing. At some point, a congregation ceases to grow. This is its moment of truth. Will stagnation or attrition overcome it?

Attrition and the Division of Labor

The psychological problems facing a shrinking congregation are many: loss of confidence, increasing embarrassment, a sense of futility, growing frustration followed by desperation. The economic problems facing a shrinking congregation are also bad, especially if the congregation is in debt.

In my opinion, the greatest problem facing a shrinking congregation is the reduction of the division of labor and its corollary, a reduction of specialization. When a congregation begins to shrink, the number of tasks associated with it rarely shrinks equally rapidly. It is like a family's expenditures: when the income stream drops, expenditures rarely are cut proportionately without careful budgeting – and nobody likes to budget. So, as a congregation shrinks, the leaders ask the remaining members to take on more burdens. This request must be accompanied by a motivational appeal. As a temporary emergency measure, the appeal may work. But when the burdened members see that the attrition process is continuing, they are tempted to quit carrying these extra burdens. The polite way to do this in modern congregational Christianity is to transfer to another congregation. Roman Catholics cannot do this easily, since their system is geographical: a parish system. Not so in American Protestantism.

The productive church member wants to find his or her niche of service – that one special task which he or she does best. The good servant wants to feel comfortable. The best way to feel comfortable is to feel competent, i.e., on top of the situation. People rarely like radical change because it places them in new situations that are unfamiliar to them. They may enjoy an occasional challenge, but continual new challenges are not what most people want. While we all enjoy the challenge of budgeting more money, nobody likes the

challenge of budgeting less money. The same is true of churches. When the challenges are attrition challenges rather than growth challenges, most people prefer to avoid them. To avoid them, some members will transfer. The longer the attrition process goes on, the more people will leave: compound shrinking. Eventually a shrinking congregation reaches negative critical mass. Then it dies.

The Common Denominator

Sound theology is controversial; it drives away most people. The pastor who preaches sound theology finds that his congregation stops growing early in his career. He must content himself with a limited audience. The congregation's common denominator theologically is high, but it is small.

Here is the inescapable truth: to grow a church, there must be a change in the prevailing standards for preaching. This can be done in several ways. First, the formal theological standards are reduced, as with liberalism. Second, the theological content of preaching is reduced, as with neo-evangelicalism. Third, the theological content of the morning worship service is reduced. This is my recommendation. Why? Because this inescapable reduction can be offset in the other meetings.

The fact is, outsiders who know nothing theologically cannot be force-fed advanced sermons based on the Westminster Confession of Faith or its equivalent. They will leave. They do leave. They have left for three centuries.

Theology must be made both understandable and practical if newcomers are not to be driven out. As surely as foreign missionaries on a new field must downgrade the content of their sermons, so must preachers alter their sermons to meet the abilities and interests of newcomers. Communications require that the one speaking deal with the capacities of those listening. For example, no one tells foreign missionaries to preach from the Westminster Confession in terms suitable for seminary students. It would be far more sensible to tell seminary professors to teach their students as if the students were recently converted savages.

Personal debt and church debt make fear-driven pragmatists of most American pastors. With their congregations in debt and vulnerable to an exodus of donors, pastors are terrified to speak out against abortion, let alone other, less controversial abominations of the day. Built from the beginning on compromise and borrowed money, a large congregation whose leaders begin taking controversial stands will face the attrition process. Debt plus church-growth techniques water down the testimony of most growing congregations. The only alternate, pastors believe, is attrition.

The way to water down communications without sacrificing the integrity of the church is to acknowledge that different services inevitably meet the needs of different members. Churches acknowledge this with respect to age-specific Sunday school programs. Few of them honor this principle in the worship services. They have not understood the three-part structure of biblical homiletics.

Grammar, Dialect, and Accent

To communicate, you must speak the language of your listeners. You must properly employ grammar, dialect, and accent. So it is with preaching.

First, there is Sunday school. Here is where the basics of the Christian faith are taught, what I call the grammar of the

faith. Bible stories are appropriate here, for they are more easily remembered than theology. We teach our children here. We also teach others who know little about the Bible.

The evening service should be theologically rigorous. The Christian Reformed Church requires every congregation to be taken through the Heidelberg Catechism once a year: 52 sermons. This makes good sense. Here is where the theological heritage of the denomination is maintained. I call this the "dialect of the faith" the denominational tradition. I argue that elders and deacons must attend. So must candidates for church office. Here is the backbone of any congregation.

The key to growth is the traditional American 11 a.m. service. It must be set apart (sanctified) for introductory evangelism. It is from 11 a.m. to noon (not one minute longer) that attrition is overcome. It is here that the spiritually wounded of a nation must be confronted with the simple gospel message. To attract people and keep them, the gospel must be tied to practical topics: getting your life together, disciplining children, attaining better relations with in-laws, helping the poor, and a dozen other practical, real-world, problem-solving topics. Jesus speaks to these issues. He heals people who are suffering from lack of answers and lack of will. I call this the accent of the faith: whatever local conditions require. "Solutions spoken here!"

By structuring Sunday's entire program in terms of this three-part communications model, churches can bring the immature, step by step, into positions of authority within the congregation. This is the homiletic structure that produces spiritual maturity.

The Faithful Servant's Problem

Watered-down preaching takes a toll of good and faithful servants. Attrition also creates a problem for them. Where should they serve? Where there are lots of opportunities for service – in a debt-ridden, theologically squishy, large, or at least growing congregation? Or where the truth is defended: in a debt-ridden, theologically rigorous, stagnant, or shrinking congregation? This is the choice facing serious Christians.

If a congregation creates a pre-school or day care, it overcomes the real estate problem. The parents of the children enrolled will indirectly pay the church's monthly mortgage. This solves two very large pastoral problems: the fear of bankers and the fear of an exodus.

If a congregation offers three-part homiletics, it provides spiritual growth for faithful servants: as learners during the evening service and as teachers during Sunday school. It also provides good servants with a worship service geared to the spiritual needs of their neighbors by way of preaching which fulfills their emotional wants.

Conclusion

A faithful servant today faces a pair of choices that compromise him. He can worship in a theologically mature congregation facing attrition or in a congregation filled with theological basket cases, possibly including the pastor. In either case, the church is probably in debt up to its ears. There is nothing like debt in the ears to create judicial deafness: hearing they will not hear. Until the leadership within the churches comes to grips with the reality of debt and the reality of communications theory, this limited set of choices is unlikely to improve.