

Christian Reconstruction

61:4

Vol. XIX, No. 6

©Gary North, 1995

November/December 1995

Critical Mass

No. 28: Conclusion

by Gary North

I began this series in the spring of 1991. It was triggered by my drive to Houston. One route took me through several small towns that appeared to be stagnant or shrinking, possessing few of the facilities that tempt grown children to remain close by. As soon as they graduate from high school, the kids are gone: to college, to the big city, to better jobs, to a larger pool of marriageable people. They are unable to prosper, they believe, in a community with a low division of labor, i.e., low specialization. In a big city, there is a market for every skill. In a small town, there isn't.

There is a trade-off here. Big cities are impersonal. You can get lost in them. People who have a hard time making friends may find themselves isolated and adrift. But for over two centuries, people in the West have decided that the city's opportunities outweigh its disadvantages. They have moved from the countryside to the city. In the United States, the move from the central city to the suburb took place after 1900. Around 1970, a trickle of people began to move back to smaller towns. This may be the beginning of a mass movement or it may not. But people are not moving to dying small towns; they are moving to small towns that have recreation, education, or other benefits.

A growing community at some point reaches critical mass. It becomes a magnet for outsiders. The division of labor reaches a point where opportunities multiply faster than the local population does. Without planning, the community begins to grow steadily, then rapidly, usually for no single reason that anyone can put his finger on.

Similarly, a community can reach critical mass on the downside. It begins to shrink. Those who can move away do. Those who can't stay home and die. Per capita wealth drops as more people retire. This has been happening all over the Midwestern rural United States since the turn of the century, but especially since the Great Depression-dust bowl era. The 1980's brought another debt-based farm bust, and towns began to die. North Dakota and South Dakota experienced losses of population - the only states that did in the 1980's. But Rapid City, South Dakota, is growing. Californians are fleeing there. Businesses are relocating. South Dakota has no state income tax: a visible benefit. The same is true of Wyoming. There can be reversals.

Churches Face the Same Problem

The small town and the small country church are linked by more than regional calendar art. They are linked by the reality of negative critical mass. Similarly, the mega-church is an urban phenomenon. A church with over a thousand members

is a **mega-church**. There are few of them. They are never planned. They have not come into existence because a church growth committee of a half dozen people sat down together ten years ago to map out a strategy to grow to a mega-church. The **mega-church** is like a successful rock band: no one can say exactly why the band succeeded. And like a successful rock band, a **mega-church** is vulnerable when its leader retires, dies, or runs off with the choir director's daughter.

The mega-church cannot become an operational model for other churches. There are too many imponderable in establishing a **mega-church**. There are too few of them. The question is: Can a local church of 100 to 200 members - the typical church - be designed and launched on a systematic basis, the way a fast food franchise can? Is there a model for church-building that is repeatable?

I think there are several models, each tied to a specific church tradition. The church planting system that works best for Baptists - an acrimonious church split - may not work equally well for Presbyterians. What works best for **charismatics** - a lively trio of drums, guitar, and keyboard - probably will fail for Episcopalians.

But there are certain ecclesiastical constants in late twentieth-century America. Let us begin with visitors. First, visitors know nothing about theology and care less. Second, they are suffering from the isolation of urban life. Third, their children are in the public schools, with all of the problems thereof. Fourth, they have not grown up in a church. They may have attended fitfully as children, but after high school, and probably before, they stopped attending. Fifth, they are individualists. They are not known for their long-term commitments: to jobs, spouses, political parties, or geography. Americans move on average once every five years. Sixth, they are not disciplined liturgically. They are the fidgety products of the rock music culture and television. They are passive listeners, and to keep them listening passively for an hour, someone must entertain them. Seventh, wives are the dominant force spiritually.

Next, let us consider church members. Here, the age of the church makes a big difference. The longer a church has survived, the more stable its membership, and the more resistant to change. The small church is especially resistant to changes that might lead to growth. "We four, no more" is its motto. Its members have lived so long in the shadows of ecclesiastical obscurity that they have come to equate church growth with compromise. They are committed to a particular liturgy and traditional ways of doing things. Rent a copy of the 1955 movie, *A Man Called Peter*. What Peter Marshall

experienced in his Washington, D.C. church is typical.

Church growth can take place without planning, but this is rare. Those who seek to build a growing church should begin with a plan. This is what I have tried to provide in this series: the outline of a plan. It has the following features:

1. A congregation-wide commitment to growth
2. An organized, congregation-wide prayer program for growth
3. A worship day with specific services devoted to the wants of specific groups
4. A unique service proposition (USP) that the local church offers the community
5. This USP must meet people's wants, not their spiritually mature needs
6. A program for advertising this USP? beginning with the Yellow Pages
7. Leadership training
8. Church service programs broken down into step-by-step instruction manuals
9. Members' personal contact programs: neighborhoods, service clubs
10. Church visitor follow-up program

The Motivation for Church Growth

Peter set forth in his sermon in Acts 4 the fundamental motivation for church growth: "Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved." First, people are perishing. Second, society is ignoring Christ. This must be stopped. Evangelism is the only biblically approved way to stop it.

All other motivations are secondary: denominational expansion, more business contacts, larger Sunday school, upward social mobility, and salary increases. When these motivations replace the first two - personal and social salvation - or when either of these two replaces the other, then the church has compromised her message: the Great Commission, the discipline of the nations. Liberals want to save society without saving souls from the hell they do not believe in. Fundamentalists, pietists, Eastern Orthodox, and Lutherans want to save souls from hell without saving society, the possibility of which they do not believe in. The Great Commission mandates both.

Here we encounter the Great Commission's great barrier: a lack of commitment to its precepts on the part of the vast majority of those who regard themselves as Christians. The Roman Catholic Church used to say that it was committed to both aspects of the Great Commission, but liberation theology, liturgical experimentation, and the collapse of the hierarchy's will to resist heresy have undermined Catholicism since 1964. Officially, the Church is still committed to the Council of Trent. In fact, it is far more committed to the Council of Trends.

If churches were committed to growth, they would grow. They are committed to growth in the way that small-town America is committed to growth: verbally but not operationally. If McDonald's Ray Croc had been committed to growth in the way that the twentieth-century church has been committed to growth, there would be a sign above the McDonald brothers' restaurant in San Bernardino, California: "Over 31 million

burgers sold. " Not billion million,

People get what they pay for - not what they want at zero price, but what they actually pay for. If the church is not growing today, this is because Christians are not paying the price required by God to grow His church. The church has grown in times of persecution, mass poverty, hand-copied Bibles, suppression of Bibles by governments, suppression of Bibles by the church, wars, and every other conceivable external restraint. If it is not growing in this time of ease, the fault is not in its members' lack of physical capital. It is the church's lack of dedicated human capital.

The members' primary motivation for church growth has faded. They do not believe that the Great Commission is operational. Its stated goals supposedly cannot be achieved in history. It is not seen as a guide to action; it is seen as a justification for inaction. "It just isn't realistic. No use striving to attain the unrealistic."

There was a time when premillennialism served as a motivation for evangelism. "When that last sinner is brought to Christ, then He will return to take us all to heaven. If you should bring that person to Christ, Christ will immediately bring you to Him in the sky." In short, "Do not pass death; do not collect \$200." This argument was a rare manifestation of fundamentalist Calvinism: the idea that there is a fixed number of sinners to be converted in history. But that public appeal for foreign missions and personal evangelism has faded since the 1950's. The door-to-door evangelism of fundamentalism has become an anachronism, along with the gospel tract. Evangelism Explosion exists, but it was developed by a Presbyterian, D. James Kennedy. Whether it still works in our entertainment-saturated society, I do not know, but I have never had an EE team at my front door.

As the fear of hell has faded from modern man's culture and mind, so has evangelism. Even Christians prefer not to hear about it. The only sermon devoted entirely to hell that I have heard in over two decades was at Kennedy's church. This downplaying of hell began with the ministry of D. L. Moody, who rarely preached on the subject. "Terror never brought a man in yet," he proclaimed, "I'm saved by grace," evangelical Christians occasionally proclaim. The crucial question, "Salvation from what?" is no longer asked in polite circles.

Conclusion

Motivation must be followed by dedication. We need both to be successful. The modern church is short on both. Until it regains both, the implementation of plans for church will be sporadic. A few long regations will do things instinctively that lead to growth, but their success will not be repeated systematically. The church was the first successful international franchise operation. It spread across Europe and the New World, where it concentrated its efforts. A civilization followed in the wake of its pioneering efforts. But in our day, the church has fallen on soft times. It has little motivation, little energy, and less vision. Taking the "last days" scenario literally, Christians have regarded the church as a rest home for the elderly. The church resembles a bedridden elderly person with tubes down his nose.

It makes me wonder when God will cut the tubes, push the doddering geezer out of bed, and tell him, "You're only 35 years old. Walk."