

## The Bible, not culture, provides the model

# Healthy Churches Are Growing Churches



By Joe S. Ellis

**G**rowth and health are as normal for churches as for children. Parents do not make children grow. They allow them to grow by (1) providing the conditions that are necessary for growth (nourishment, shelter, clothing, and a healthy environment, for instance), and (2) making sure that hindrances (such as disease or negative circumstances) do not interfere with growth. Under these conditions, growth happens naturally. If a child does not grow, it is a signal that something is wrong and must be corrected.

Neither do we make churches grow. They grow naturally when the people and their leaders provide for the factors that support growth and learn to cope with those factors (or people!) that interfere with it. If your church is not growing, either something is lacking and must (not “should”) be provided; or something is hindering and must (not “should”) be dealt with. Lack of growth must not be tolerated as normal.

### The Church Was Designed to Grow

The New Testament church exemplified the model of health and growth. When that church leaped into life, the effect was so dramatic that it split history in two. What happened in the span of one generation would be unbelievable if it were not a matter of history. At its inception 3,000 people joined the campaign, and exploding growth followed. Soon the church in Jerusalem had grown to 5,000 households—not indi-

viduals, households! At first the church grew by addition and soon by multiplication. Priests of the hostile religion that had so bitterly opposed Jesus were converted, as were people of note in hard-to-convince Athens, and even members of Caesar’s household.

Because of our distance in history and our jaded experience with very different paradigms of “church,” we often fail to grasp how amazing those early days were. We tend to read past (and thus miss the impact of) the many verbal exclamation points that punctuate the account of the church’s progress in the book of Acts.

Donald McGavran, as a passionate adherent of the Restoration Movement and its principles, said, “Being a real New Testament church means believing and doing what the New Testament church did. Today in a world where three out of four people have yet to believe in Christ and at least two out of four have yet to hear of him, if a congregation is not reproducing, it is not a New Testament church, no matter what it calls itself.”<sup>1</sup>

### An Idea Whose Time Has Come

The moment in which we are living is a hinge pin—a turning point—in history, a remarkable converging of conditions that could make the world receptive to Christ as never before.

The concept of restoring the biblical church is amazingly compatible with today’s populations. When these people encounter the church as God designed it, the results are breathtaking. Authentic Christianity

was made for just such times—and people—as these.

Many churches today are becoming more like the biblical model. They are dynamic, motivating, and magnetic. Many of them are newer churches, although an increasing number of long-established churches are also experiencing fresh effectiveness. The time is right for such churches.

### A Puzzling Contradiction

Yet far too often churches have failed to recognize that their practice must be as authentic as their doctrine. If non-Christians decide against Christianity or turn away from the church, it is, more often than not, because of the way churches operate rather than what they believe.

The fact is, churches must be genuine both in matters of faith and function. It is ironic when churches can be so meticulous about what they teach and so irresponsible in the way they behave.

This failure to function authentically grows out of the fact that most churches (at least in America) are unwittingly influenced by a paradigm of church that comes not from Scripture, but from the culture around us. Yet this nonbiblical cultural model is widely assumed, persistent, taken-for-granted, and—to a large extent—unwittingly subscribed to and practiced by the majority of American churches.

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## An Unbiblical Model

It developed, in part, out of a social trend that flourished during the 18th and 19th centuries. Before the advent of insurance companies and social programs, people formed voluntary nonprofit organizations to provide specific benefits for themselves. Commonly known as benefit societies or fraternal lodges, these organizations were owned by the members. They operated by democratic or representative self-government in which members had voting rights. Their organizational structures and procedures were spelled out in constitutions and bylaws.

Some of these confederations still exist as lodges, fraternal organizations, or clubs. Others eventually became mutual insurance companies; and yet others bear the name “church.”

The key factor is that people join the organization to receive the promised entitlements. This model creates churches whose characteristics and dynamics are diametrically opposite to the biblical model of the church as a mission entity in which membership means not privilege, but responsibility.

During the latter half of the 19th century and first half of the 20th century, churches creatively found effective ways to take advantage of the opportunities provided by the rapid cultural developments around them. By the 1950s, these accumulated innovations had crystallized into a paradigm, or system of traditions, that have been held as sacrosanct ever since.

However, in the 1960s, a great social and cultural revolution struck America. William Easum calls it a “crack in history so enormous that it is causing a metamorphosis in every area of life.”<sup>2</sup> The resulting cultural model is referred to as postmodernism. In this transition, history did not just move farther down the track it had been on for five centuries; it

jumped to a different track and headed off in a fundamentally different direction.

As a result, America has now become a mission field. And today’s churches must think of themselves as “missions” to a pagan society, instead of “inside-the-culture” institutions. If churches do not realize this fact, they cannot understand the times in which we live nor wisely order their strategies to fulfill Christ’s purpose in this age.

We must be careful not to confuse the 1950s church patterns with bibli-

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cal norms. Ineffective churches have unthinkingly carried over into this present cataclysmic era a mind-set and pattern of behavior that developed a generation or more ago with little or no biblical undergirding. The now-familiar habits are not the way churches functioned in the apostolic era. They are simply habits that we developed in an era that is now gone. If we are to be biblically sound we will not continue to impose these old approaches on the church in an age that is vastly different from the one in which they were developed.

As we have said, the church was made for just such times as these. But if the church is to be effective in fulfilling its evangelistic mandate, it cannot go on as if this crack in history had not occurred. We cannot bring back the conditions of the 1950s; and the church cannot impact the present and future world most effectively with a paradigm that was developed to fit that decade. But in most

cases churches have clung even more tightly to their default paradigms, “borrowing from our fathers’ altars, not the fire, but the ashes.”

George Barna, an astute student of today’s culture and churches, describes the majority of these churches as five to 40 years behind the times, reactive rather than proactive, chasing history rather than leading it, and on the cutting edge of obsolescence. They project an image of being closed circles that are angry, hostile, and negative, with no “good news”—of having no clear sense of values, beliefs, or direction—of being oblivious to the real world and real life.<sup>3</sup>

As a result, a vast majority of churches do not motivate their members to reach out to the people in the world that now exists. Nor do they draw these people to the church and effectively engage them with the gospel.

## A Challenge

A challenge issued by the apostle Paul to the church in Ephesus still rings true: “Wake up, O sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.’ Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is” (Ephesians 5:14-17, *New International Version*).

<sup>1</sup>Donald McGavran in an address to the faculty of Cincinnati Bible Seminary, 1979.

<sup>2</sup>William Easum, *Dancing with Dinosaurs* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 23.

<sup>3</sup>My notes from a seminar led by George Barna. For Barna’s published materials, see his Web site at [www.barna.org](http://www.barna.org).

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