

“Fuller Theological Seminary birthed Church Growth Movement”

by Rev. Ken Silva

(source: “Apprising Ministries” website)

No doubt there’s rough spiritual sea dead ahead; and while I don’t agree with everything he taught, [Apprising Ministries](#) has told you before that Dr. Walter Martin (1928-1989), author of the classic textbook *The Kingdom of the Cults*, was widely recognized as one of the foremost defenders of what he would so often call “the historic orthodox Christian faith.”

Circa 1987 Dr. Martin made the following dead on target assessment: Anyone who does not know that today the church visible—world around—is in full-blown apostasy does not know what is going on. And further, I say that anyone who thinks the visible church is in better condition now seriously needs to have their spiritual head examined.

Against this backdrop I bring your attention to the following, which I adapted from a 2004 message [But Does It Work: Truth Vs. Technique](#) by [Dr. John MacArthur](#). Below you’ll see that the spiritual cesspool [Fuller Theological Seminary](#) has played a large roll in the rot advanced in the man-centered [Church Growth Movement](#) that has contributed mightily to the current dismal state of evangelicalism:

The Pragmatic Roots of the Church Growth Movement

Pragmatism as a philosophy of ministry has gained impetus from the church growth movement that has flourished over the past fifty years or so. Donald McGavran, the father of the modern church growth movement, was an unabashed pragmatist:

We devise mission methods and policies in the light of what God has blessed—and what He has obviously not blessed. Industry calls this “modifying operation in light of feedback.” Nothing hurts missions overseas so much as continuing methods, institutions, and policies which ought to bring men to Christ—but don’t; which ought to multiply churches—but don’t. We teach men to be ruthless in regard to method. If it does not work to the glory of God and the extension of Christ’s church, throw it away and

get something which does. As to methods, we are fiercely pragmatic— doctrine is something else.[1]

As a young missionary in India and son of missionary parents, McGavran had noticed that it was not unusual for missions organizations to labor in India for years and have little or no fruit to show for it. McGavran's own agency had planted only twenty or thirty small churches in several decades of missionary work.[2] McGavran determined to devise a strategy of missions that took note of which methods seemed to work and which ones didn't. "As he declared in the preface to a book he coauthored in the 1930s, he had dedicated himself to 'discarding theories of church growth which do not work, and learning and practicing productive patterns. . .'"[3]

McGavran's pragmatism seems to have been initially prompted by a legitimate concern for stewardship. He "became alarmed when he saw all too many of God's resources— personnel and finances— being used without asking whether the kingdom of God was being advanced by the programs they were supporting." [4] But pragmatism became the philosophical basis for nearly all that McGavran taught, and that in turn set the agenda for the whole church growth movement.

McGavran founded the Institute of Church Growth, which in 1965 united with the Fuller School of World Mission. From there the pragmatic precepts of the church growth movement have reached into virtually every mission field worldwide.

C. Peter Wagner, professor of church growth at the Fuller School of World Mission, is Donald McGavran's best-known student. Wagner is the most prolific if not the most influential spokesman in the church growth movement today. He writes of the movement's inherent pragmatism:

The Church Growth Movement has always stressed pragmatism, and still does even though many have criticized it. It is not the kind of pragmatism that compromises doctrine or ethics or the kind that dehumanizes people by using them as means toward an end. It is, however, the kind of consecrated pragmatism which ruthlessly examines traditional methodologies and programs asking the tough questions. If some sort of ministry in the church is not reaching intended goals, consecrated pragmatism says there is something wrong which needs to be corrected.[5]

Wagner, like most in the church growth movement, claims that the “consecrated pragmatism” he advocates does not allow compromise of doctrine or ethics. “The Bible does not allow us to sin that grace may abound or to use whatever means that God has prohibited in order to accomplish those ends He has recommended,” he notes correctly.[6]

“But with this proviso,” Wagner continues, “we ought to see clearly that the end *does* justify the means. What else possibly could justify the means? If the method I am using accomplishes the goal I am aiming at, it is for that reason a good method. If, on the other hand, my method is not accomplishing the goal, how can I be justified in continuing to use it?”[7]

Is that true? Certainly not. Especially if “the goal I am aiming at” is a numerical goal with no biblical warrant, or if “my method. . . not accomplishing the goal” is the clear preaching of God’s Word. That is precisely the kind of thinking that is moving biblical exposition out of Christian ministry and replacing it with vaudeville.

One recent best-seller goes even further:

It is. . . critical that we keep in mind a fundamental principle of Christian communication: the audience, not the message, is sovereign. If our advertising is going to stop people in the midst of hectic schedules and cause them to think about what we’re saying, *our message has to be adapted to the needs of the audience*. When we produce advertising that is based on the take-it-or-leave-it proposition, rather than on a sensitivity and response to people’s needs, people will invariably reject our message.[8]

What if the Old Testament prophets had subscribed to such a philosophy? Jeremiah, for example, preached forty years without seeing any significant positive response. On the contrary, his countrymen threatened to kill him if he did not stop prophesying ([Jer. 11:19-23](#)); his own family and friends plotted against him (12:6); he was not permitted to marry and so had to suffer agonizing loneliness (16:2); plots were devised to kill him secretly (18:20-23); he was beaten and put in stocks (20:1-2); he was spied on by friends who sought revenge (v. 10); he was consumed with sorrow and shame—even cursing the day he was born (vv. 14-18); and finally, falsely accused of being a traitor to the nation (37:13-14), Jeremiah was beaten, thrown into a dungeon, and starved many days (vv. 15-21). If an Ethiopian Gentile had not interceded on his behalf, Jeremiah would have died there. In

the end, tradition says he was exiled to Egypt, where he was stoned to death by the Jews. He had virtually no converts to show for a lifetime of ministry.

Suppose Jeremiah had attended a church growth seminar and learned a pragmatic philosophy of ministry. Do you think he would have changed his style of confrontational ministry? Can you imagine him staging a variety show or using comedy to try to win people's affections? He may have learned to gather an appreciative crowd, but he certainly would not have had the ministry God called him to.

The apostle Paul didn't use a system based on merchandising skill, either, though some self-appointed experts have tried to make him a model of the new pragmatism. Reading into the Bible's white space, one advocate of marketing technique asserts, "Paul was one of the all time great tacticians. He perpetually studied strategies and tactics to identify those that would enable him to attract the most 'prospects' and realize the greatest number of conversions." [9] Of course, the Bible says nothing like that. On the contrary, the apostle Paul shunned clever methods and gimmicks that might proselyte people to false conversions through fleshly persuasion. Paul himself wrote,

When I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. And my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God ([1 Cor. 2:1-5](#)).

He reminded the church at Thessalonica,

For our exhortation does not come from error or impurity or by way of deceit; but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not as pleasing men but God, who examines our hearts. For we never came with flattering speech, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed—God is witness—nor did we seek glory from men, either from you or from others, even though as apostles of Christ we might have asserted our authority ([1 Thess. 2:3-6](#)).

Biblical truth is the *only* framework by which we can evaluate the rightness or wrongness of ministry methods.

Any end-justifies-the-means philosophy of ministry inevitably *will* compromise doctrine, despite any proviso to the contrary. If we make effectiveness the gauge of right and wrong, how can that fail to color our doctrine? Ultimately the pragmatist's notion of truth is shaped by what seems effective, not by the objective revelation of Scripture.

A look at the methodology of the church growth movement shows how this occurs. The movement studies *all* growing churches—even those with false doctrine at the core of their teaching. Sometimes Mormon assemblies, Roman Catholic churches, even Jehovah's Witness Kingdom Halls are held up to the specialist's scrutiny. The church growth expert looks for characteristics common to all growing churches and advocates whatever methods seem to work.

Are we to believe that growth in non-Christian congregations is proof that God is at work? Why would we want to duplicate the methodology of religious groups that deny the gospel? Isn't it fair to question whether any growth resulting from such methods is illegitimate, engineered by fleshly means? After all, if a method works as well for a cult as it does for the people of God, there's no reason to assume positive results signify God's blessing.

Utterly missing from most of the church growth literature is any critical analysis of the faulty doctrinal platform on which much contemporary church growth is built. One author has said of Peter Wagner:

Wagner makes negative assessments about nobody. He has made a career out of finding what is good in growing churches, and affirming it—without asking many critical questions. This enables him to hold up as models of church life not only Wimber's Vineyard, but Schuller's Crystal Cathedral, the entire Southern Baptist denomination, and just about any other church that is growing. [10]

The fact that a church is growing is often mistaken for divine sanction. After all, people reason, why be critical of any teaching that God is blessing with numerical growth? Is it not better to tolerate doctrinal flaws and lapses of orthodoxy for the sake of growth and unity? Thus pragmatism molds and shapes one's doctrinal outlook.

Wagner himself, for example, has embraced the signs and wonders of the Third Wave movement for reasons that are largely pragmatic. He is candid about this:

I am proud to be among those who are advocating power evangelism as an important tool for fulfilling the great commission in our day. One of the reasons I am so enthusiastic is that *it is working*. Across the board, the most effective evangelism in today's world is accompanied by manifestations of supernatural power.[11]

Obviously, then, Wagner's pragmatic perspective *has* shaped his doctrine, not vice versa.

Wagner virtually concedes this point. He says the methodology of the church growth movement is "phenomenological," not theological. That approach "may appear altogether too subjective to many traditional theologians," he admits.[12] He continues, "As a starting point, church growth often looks to the 'is' previous to the 'ought' . . . What Christians experience about God's work in the world and in their lives is not always preceded by careful theological rationalizations. Many times the sequence is just the opposite: theology is shaped by Christian experience." [13]

That being the case, isn't Wagner's assertion that his pragmatism "is not the kind. . . that compromises doctrine"[14] rendered meaningless? After all, if experience suggests signs and wonders are effective tools for church growth, and if it is legitimate to allow our experience to shape our theology, it is quite logical to amend one's doctrine—as Wagner himself did—to accommodate some pragmatic, heuristic observation.

It is folly to think one can be both pragmatic *and* biblical. The pragmatist wants to know *what works now*. The biblical thinker cares only about *what the Bible says*. The two philosophies inevitably oppose each other at the most basic level.

Endnotes:

1. Donald McGavran, "For Such a Time as This," (unpublished address, 1970), cited in C. Peter Wagner, "Pragmatic Strategy for Tomorrow's Mission," in A. R. Tippett, ed., *God, Man and Church Growth* (Grand

- Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 147.
2. C. Peter Wagner, ed., Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, Third ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), viii-ix.
 3. *Ibid.*, ix.
 4. *Ibid.*, ix.
 5. C. Peter Wagner, *Leading Your Church to Growth* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1984), 201
 6. C. Peter Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1976), 160-61.
 7. *Ibid.*, 161 (emphasis in original).
 8. George Barna, *Marketing the Church* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1988), 145 (emphasis added).
 9. *Ibid.*, 31-32.
 10. Tim Stafford, "Testing the Wine from John Wimber's Vineyard," *Christianity Today* (8 Aug. 1986), 18.
 11. C. Peter Wagner, *The Third Wave of the Holy Spirit* (Ann Arbor: Vine, 1988), 87.
 12. C. Peter Wagner, ed., *Church Growth: State of the Art* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1986), 33.
 13. *Ibid.*
 14. *Leading Your Church to Growth*, 201.