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WHY I AM BIBLICALLY OPPOSED TO THE CHURCH GROWTH MOVEMENT

By Dr. Randy White

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Church growth is all the rage. For pastors, the focus is on leadership. For laymen, on "reaching people." In the church world, church-growth is the standard of success. If a church "reaches people," and the pastor is a "visionary leader," then the church will be considered a success. If a church makes it into somebody's bogus "Fastest Growing Church" list, then the growth frenzy continues with the sheep flocking to check out what innovation has been initiated to reach the masses for Christ.

Personally, I think the Emperor has no clothes.

For at least four reasons, I reject the church-growth and church-health principles taught at almost every pastor's conference, and expressed in almost every church. Our church will be different, because I reject these principles. Although different will likely mean odd, behind-the-times, and shrinking in size, I go there anyway.

I refuse to believe that a "Christian community" will save anyone

Community is the big word today (along with missional...and if you claim to be a missional community, you are really on the cutting edge). Churches work hard to design *community*. They do it through small-groups, centered around felt-needs, and gathered in living rooms across the country. These community groups gather for the bigger community in a weekly celebration of magnificence. This weekly celebration has been carefully scripted, from the ridiculously silly and manipulative countdown screen, to the last triumphant note of victory at which the community members are sent out to create a Christian society by building community within their neighborhoods.

These community groups gather for "Bible study," which is almost always a double misnomer. The only Scripture used will be out-of-context references that came from the latest book by the latest Hollywood-looks celebrity pastor who gathered his thoughts (from the internet?), and allowed a nameless editor to work them into something profitable. The group will neither study the passages, nor the book itself. They will simply read a chapter before they come, spend 45 minutes talking about the parts they liked, share

how the chapter made them feel about themselves as well as any insights gained, then go away and tell their friends about their marvelous Bible study. It reminds me of when my dad told me we were having tube steak for dinner. I was somewhat disappointed when I found out he just used that lofty sounding name to refer to hot-dogs. Today much of the Bible study in missional-communities is the equivalent of tube steak.

Following "Bible study," the groups engage in fellowship time, then go on their way as biblically empty as when they arrived. Soon they will gather for a "mission project" in which they repair a home (painting the door red so all the town will know that this is one of the homes repaired by that missional community, and will rise up and call the missional community wonderful). If not a home repair project, it may be picking up trash for the city, or painting a dilapidated school, or providing shoes for shoeless children. The sermon will often be aimed toward raising up an army of Christians who adopt the orphan, visit the imprisoned, and blog for social justice.

Even if I believed that these "missions projects" were as successful as the church websites claim ("we had an awesome God-thing happen at our last gathering"), I don't think it has any lasting impact. As I see it, the Christian is not so much to engage his society, but to come out from it. The church today is filled with those who are both in the world and of the world, and who are organized to change the world into a kinder, gentler place to be. The success rate of the mega-church missional-church movement has been an utter failure. Society is more liberal and godless than ever before, with no end to its decline in sight. The mega-missional church will gather in their multi-campus celebrations this weekend and slobber over themselves for their victories, yet not a single victory can be detected in our society. Not one.

Building missional community does nothing more than produce a feel-good complacency to the community members. Although they live, assured they are going to be people of impact, as part of a community, they fail to really make any difference. They fool themselves into thinking the Emperor's clothes are superb.

Have you noticed that I've not mentioned anything about the proclamation of the Word, and the spread of the Gospel of Jesus Christ? That's because there is not much to mention from the church today. The church today does good works, has good music (in the ears of many), has a really good sound-system, and a pastor who could lead circles around Moses. What it doesn't have is the backbone to proclaim that our world must reject humanism, social justice, poverty eradication efforts, and other white-washed measures of "expanding the Kingdom of God"—and, must find its only hope in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

I reject all manipulation and aim toward persuasion

The second reason I'm leaving the missional-community church-growth movement is because I reject manipulation of all kinds. In fact, more than ever before, it disgusts me. The modern church is so built on manipulation that I'm convinced it could not continue without it.

I recently attended a relatively small Bible-believing, Bible-teaching church as a guest. I was refreshed to see that almost every participant had their Bible—and opened—during the sermon. This told me that the pastor regularly delivers enough verse-by-verse content that looking up one verse on an iPad just wouldn't suffice. Bibles, for this rare congregation, were a necessity. I was also impressed by the music. It was bad...and that impressed me. It wasn't polished. There wasn't a carefully selected Praise Team who passed the "Sunday morning test" of looks and sound, dressed in color-coordinated clothing, closing their eyes and looking to heaven as if they were in an ecstatic moment (I've often seen these ecstatic moments turn on and off like a light switch). In fact, the song leader was clearly not a professional, and his tone was often off just a bit. But the people sang with joy. I was impressed with their prayers. They prayed for real and legitimate needs during a Sunday morning service. It would never pass the church-growth test, because it wasn't seeker-friendly at all with random people from the congregation praying at-will over the needs of the members. As a first-time visitor, I felt out-of-place during that prayer, and I thought that was wonderful. After all, if I was looking for a church, I'd want one that really cared about the hurting people they knew, the flesh-and-blood people who sat in their pews each Sunday.

Most churches (including mine) are not like this. In most churches (not mine), I wonder if they would be able to continue the "worship" if the electricity went out. The service is so dependent on mood-lighting, electric instrumentation, sound amplification, and

video enhancement that it would fall flat in a New York minute with no power. In my church, thankfully, if the electricity went out, we would give one another a quick glance and grin, and keep on singing or preaching. If the electricity-dependent "worship" of the modern church lost electricity, we would see quickly how much vast emptiness there is in these churches, and in short-order, the churches would be vastly empty. No show, no crowd. (Incidentally, I'm not a fan of the black-box architecture of the missional-community church. This is a total rejection of centuries of theologically-driven architectural principles of church design that understood a theology of aesthetics.)

Rejecting manipulation, I won't do a countdown video before the service; it simply enhances the idea of a show that is about to begin. I refuse to only allow the A-team to "perform." I don't want soft music playing while I pray (or preach, or give an invitation). I don't want "smart lights" that set the mood, changeable at the push of a button to fit the tone of the selected song. I don't want to manipulate my audience into a certain feeling which will evoke a certain action. Doing so is sadly too easy, because our generation (as the Bible predicted) loves the tickling of ears. If you tickle, they will come.

What I do want to provide is persuasion. I want to stand before the congregation with a persuasive argument from Scripture. As a lawyer before the jury, I want to present a water-tight case that will change the thinking of those who have come to hear a Biblical message. I realize that I do this in a day in which feeling trumps thinking, and so my kind of persuasive preaching will often be rejected. Persuasive preaching doesn't have enough stories, illustrations, and "you can do it" back-slapping grunts.

I refuse to let my congregation be deceived by good feelings

Thirdly, I reject the missional-community church-growth movement because it is deceptive. Participants in these churches feel like they are stalwart conservatives in a Bible-believing, Gospel-proclaiming, Hell-reducing, Kingdom-expanding church. They consistently proclaim, "My preacher really preaches the Bible." True, their preacher does hold up a Bible and talk about how true and authoritative it is. He even quotes from the Bible fairly consistently ("*I know the plans I have for you...I will never leave you nor forsake you...I am come that you might have life more abundantly...and, of course) bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse*"). What these church members do not know is that they have adopted the leftist agenda (socialism) or neo-con agenda (reconstructing a Christian society) which is as empty as it has always been.

I will lose church-growth potential because I won't allow a good-feeling production to trump reality. Do my church members know their Bible? Can they give a defense of the attacks against it? Can they rightly divide the Word of Truth? Do they have a Biblical worldview that understands creation (young-earth), eschatology (pre-trib), salvation (Jesus as propitiatory sacrifice), grace (free from the Law), and so much more? Have I developed a congregation that could, and would, stick with it through a months-long study of the book of Numbers? Or Leviticus? If I have not developed this kind of Biblical hunger, then I've just allowed them to be deceived by thinking they've had Bible study, experienced worship, and come away a better (and more Christ-like) person. Since I will stand before God someday to be judged for reality (not feelings), I will be satisfied to spend my time and energy developing a Biblically-literate congregation.

I reject the church as a program organization over which I am the CEO

Finally, the CEO model of Pastor has to go. I know that almost every missional-community church-growth model pastor's conference says this same thing, continually reminding pastors that they are not CEOs. Then, having given the obligatory rejection of CEO style leadership, they tell the Pastor that he should be known as the "Lead Pastor" (lead...short for leadership, a key CEO trait). They instruct him in the best means of vision development and "vision casting." They Peter Drucker him to spiritual death. They study the Bible, not looking for Biblical truth, but looking for leadership traits of Moses (one of the worst leaders of all time), Gideon (zero leadership capability), Nehemiah (who was not a priest nor a pastor, but a government official), Jesus (who did nothing but follow His Father), or Paul (who said pastors should "preach the Word").

Going further, these pastor's conferences (or books) talk about all the programs and paradigms the church could/should implement to develop its missional-community. Of course, as soon as you create any kind of ministry (i.e. *program*) in the church, it requires some oversight, which requires the Pastor to leave his pastoral function and begin acting like the conference/book instructed him to act: like a leader.

Don't call me Lead Pastor. Don't call me Senior Pastor (been there, done that). Don't call me Teaching Pastor (is there any other kind?). Just call me Pastor, and let me devote my life to prayer and the ministry of the Word, ministering to the flock under my care. I happen to believe that if a person attends a church where they cannot call the Pastor and talk to him, they don't really have a Pastor.

Conclusion

I've just rejected everything that has become the favorite methods of the missional-community church, which it uses as it bows down to its idol called *church-growth*. I'm sure some have said "amen" all the way through. If that was you, you've probably struggled to find a place to worship and call your church home. Others have come to the end with a righteous rage, wondering how I could so "not get it." Whichever side you are on, I encourage you to run to the Bible and use it as your only source of revelation about the will of God in church, society, and your own personal life.



Dr. Randy White is Pastor of First Baptist Church of Katy, TX, and ministers online at www.RandyWhiteMinistries.org.

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