

# CHURCH GROWTH AND THE GLOBAL SOUTH: TOWARD A BIBLICAL AND MISSIONAL ECCLESIOLOGY

Jerry M. Ireland

The first Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization became in many ways a collision of competing missiologies between church growth advocates from the West and radical discipleship proponents from the Global South. Though probably somewhat overstated, C. René Padilla has described the first Lausanne Congress in 1974 as a “death blow” to the Church Growth Movement (CGM) (Padilla 1976, 12; Tizon 2008, 43). Of particular concern for Padilla was the CGM’s tendency to foster what he calls an unbiblical dichotomy between evangelism and discipleship, or between *kerygma* and *didache* (Padilla 1976, 216). Nonetheless, these two very different approaches to mission, now commonly referred to as “frontier missions” and “holistic missions,” continue to represent a deep divide within evangelical missiology. This divide was especially evident in competing mission conferences held in 2010 in Tokyo and Cape Town, respectively (Yeh 2011, 5).

The debate between these two mission strategies centers especially on the relationship between evangelism and discipleship. This paper explores this issue by examining critiques of the Church Growth Movement by scholars from the Global South. Two crucial questions lie at the center of the problem. First, how should evangelism and discipleship be defined? Second, what precisely is the relationship between evangelism and discipleship as it relates to the missionary task? A key focus of this study will be how these two schools of thought interpreted the Great Commission (Matt. 29:18-20).

## Discipling and Perfecting

Padilla contends that the original Lausanne Covenant (1974) does not allow for understanding church growth apart from church depth (Padilla 2010). In this he has clearly set his sights on Donald McGavran's distinction between "discipling" and "perfecting." This prominent feature of the CGM has been the source of much criticism, especially by scholars from the Global South, as this essay hopes to demonstrate. To better understand these critiques, it will be helpful to review the essence of McGavran's argument.

In his 1955 publication, *Bridges of God*, McGavran first put forth the idea of distinguishing between "discipling" and "perfecting." He based this argument on Matthew 28:18-20 and Jesus' command to "make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you" (NASB95; McGavran 2005, 13-14). From this passage, McGavran argued that the Lord sets forth a two-stage process that begins with discipling and is followed by instruction, or perfecting. In this one becomes a disciple, first, when they have renounced former religious allegiances and idolatry, and second, when Jesus is enthroned at the center of their lives. Thus in McGavran's view, discipleship is fundamentally evangelism (McGavran 1975, 109; cf. Bosch 1983, 230). Perfecting then relates to bringing about ethical change and Christian maturity (McGavran 2005, 15; Bosch 1983, 230; Costas 1974, 111-112). Therefore, the command to "make disciples of all nations" is distinct from the subsequent call to teach all that the Lord has commanded. McGavran worries that confusing these two elements, discipling and perfecting, leads to slow and ineffective growth among churches because 1) it sets the bar too high regarding the requirements for Christian conversion, and 2) missionaries called to seek the lost spend too much time perfecting the found (Smith 1985, 27).

McGavran expanded on these ideas in *Understanding Church Growth*, which went through several revisions between its original publication in 1970 and the most recent release in 1996. He continued to describe the tendency to confuse discipling and perfecting as an “antigrowth concept” that hindered the rapid expansion of the church. This proves especially problematic given that for McGavran, “the chief and irreplaceable purpose of mission is church growth” (1990, 22).

McGavran further elaborated his approach by defining discipleship according to three meanings of the verb “to disciple” which he labels D-1, D-2, and D-3. D-1 relates to “turning a non-Christian society for the first time to Christ.” D-2 refers to “turning the individuals from nonfaith to faith in Christ and incorporation into a church.” Finally, D-3 relates to what McGavran calls “perfecting”—that is, “teaching an existing Christian as many of the truths of the Bible as possible.” McGavran fears that churches that are too focused on D-3 type discipleship frequently miss opportunities for D-1 discipleship. He does not mean this to diminish the importance of perfecting (D-3), but rather that confusing the two proves fatal to the mission of the church regarding the unreached (McGavran 1990, 123-124). In fact, McGavran (1990) goes as far as to say that even when the church has participated in the sins of slavery and alcoholism, it was still the church even though it clearly required further perfecting. Beyond that, McGavran claims that it was church growth that finally enabled Christianity to end slavery (124). “Only because it spread enormously and gained tremendous political power was it able for the first time in history to end slavery” (1990, 124). For McGavran, conversion amounts to verbal confession, and this alone is sufficient for the establishment of churches no matter how imperfect converts may be in practicing their faith:

The least perfected church is superior to its non-Christian origins. Congregations as they are—so imperfectly showing forth glories—are constantly going further. Indeed, in many

cases the congregations that grow best are those that have most contact with their kindred and neighbors—are most solid with the world—though they as of yet neither have as much knowledge of the Bible nor manifest many fruits of the Spirit as favored congregations of highly sanctified Christians (1990, 124).

McGavran's proposal becomes confusing at several levels, not the least of which is that he seems to describe the instruction that takes place among Christians as both discipling and not discipling. For example, McGavran describes D-3 perfecting as one of three meanings of the verb "to disciple," while simultaneously arguing that discipling and perfecting are two different things. C. Peter Wagner (1981) seemed to recognize this problem and offered some clarification. He pointed out that D-1 and D-2 are distinguished by the fact that they focus on unbelievers, where as D-3 focuses primarily on those who are already Christians. Thus, D-3 "fits more into the stage of perfecting than discipling" (132). According to Wagner, "the Bible does not use discipling as Christian nurture, but rather as winning non-Christians to the faith (D-1 or D-2)" (133).

Not all within the CGM hold to this distinction. For example, W. Charles Arn defined success in evangelism in terms of decision making and success in discipleship as behavioral change (Arn 1986, 59). Oddly though, the same text that contains Arn's essay lists and presumably endorses McGavran's D-1 through D-3 discipleship paradigm in the glossary, even though Arn and McGavran clearly have different definitions of both evangelism and discipleship.

### **C. René Padilla**

We have already noted the influential role that C. René Padilla played at Lausanne I. He also emerged from the 1974 Congress as a key figure in holistic mission and became a forceful critic of the church growth movement. In a brief essay in *Christianity Today* in 2010 clearly

meant to influence the Lausanne meeting in Cape Town that same year, he declared, “A key problem of evangelical churches worldwide is the unilateral emphasis on numerical growth. For the sake of it, the gospel is watered down, church services are turned into entertainment, and Jesus’ command to make disciples is replaced by a strategy to enroll as many converts as possible” (Padilla 2010, 33).

These ideas occupied Padilla’s thought long before his brief essay leading up to the Cape Town conference. In his Lausanne (1974) plenary paper, Padilla addressed the issue of evangelism and discipleship. In doing so, he described the “paradox of Christian discipleship” as being *in* the world but not *of* the world. Crucial here is the meaning of “world” and how biblical evangelism relates to both the “in” and “not of” aspects. For Padilla, only by understanding the Bible’s frequent references to the world (Gr. *kosmos*) as being opposed to God and His purposes, can we discover the significance of both being “in” but not “of” the world. He argues mainly that evangelism that focuses solely on individual sins and an escapist soteriology misses the mark regarding the biblical meaning of both evangelism and repentance. Being “not of the world” requires a radical reorientation of one’s whole self and mitigates against a shallow view of conversion.

Padilla’s definition of evangelism here is noteworthy for the way in which it differs from that of McGavran. Specifically, he defines the evangelistic task as of necessity encompassing all of the created order and the promise of a new heaven and new earth. “The only true evangelism is that which is oriented toward that final goal of “the restoration of all things” in Christ Jesus, promised by the prophets and proclaimed by the apostles (Acts 3:21)” (Padilla 1975, 117).

Contrary to the CGMs tendency to set a dividing line between discipling and perfecting, Padilla argues that “without ethics there is no real repentance” (128). So while the CGM locates ethical

maturity as part of perfecting, Padilla says that it is in fact a matter of conversion itself. Even if one defines evangelism solely in verbal terms (*kerygma*), Padilla argues that biblical salvation includes both *diaconia*, or service, and *didache*, or teaching, and therefore encompasses all of human life (130). True evangelism, says Padilla, incarnates the sacrificial life of Christ and thereby takes human suffering seriously. “There is no place for statistics on ‘how many souls die without Christ every minute,’ if they do not take into account how many of those who die, die victims of hunger” (131).

The plenary papers at the first Lausanne Congress were not presented in person, but were sent ahead of the gathering to the delegates. Presenters were then given an opportunity to respond to questions or criticisms that were sent in. Questions directed to Padilla’s paper specifically asked if he was opposed to the emphasis on numerical growth that characterized the CGM. This afforded Padilla the opportunity to make some of his most critical remarks about the CGM. While mostly referring to McGavran’s Homogenous Unit Principle, a topic beyond the scope of this study, Padilla strongly criticized an idea that also relates to McGavran’s comments about racial issues and thereby about the meaning of conversion. Padilla asked, “How can a church that, for the sake of numerical expansion, deliberately opts for segregation, speak to a divided world?” (1975, 137). His point is that to set aside the ethical demands of the gospel in favor of a narrow definition of salvation, a definition that focuses only attaining the most rapid growth possible, stands at odds with the essence of the gospel itself. Thus “quality is at least as important as quantity, if not more, and that, therefore, faithfulness to the Gospel should never be sacrificed for the sake of quantity” (138). A focus on numerical expansion tends to result in nothing more than “baptized heathenism” (Padilla 1979, 7).

Some questioners accused Padilla of making too much of a distinction between believing faith and repentance, arguing that in his encounters with gentiles, Jesus' message focused on believing faith and not on repentance (1975, 141). In response, Padilla points out that the Lukan version of the Great Commission (Luke 24:47) emphasizes repentance as central to the disciples' mission. Furthermore, the book of Acts demonstrates that the disciples followed this instruction faithfully. Though admitting to the paucity of references to repentance in the Pauline epistles, Padilla argues that this should not lead one to conclude that Paul distinguishes between believing faith and the fruit of repentance, or between justification and its fruits (1975, 142). This connection is implied, says Padilla, in Paul's discussion of dying to sin and being raised to life, and in the contrast between gratifying the desires of the flesh and walking in the Spirit (Gal 5). Anything less amounts to what Bonhoeffer calls "cheap grace." He observes, "a conversion without repentance—which is a spurious conversion—can only lead to a life without repentance—which is a spurious Christian life" (143).

For Padilla, the issue is not so much a matter counting converts, but rather determining who actually counts *as* a convert. He fears that the CGM's focus has been one that propagated consumer Christianity because it left out the transformative effect of the Gospel, or assigned it second place. Salvation narrowly defined as accepting Christ and not as including the fruit of repentance produces a form of Christianity that may be easily accepted but that is ill-fitted to the Gospel:

The church's accommodation to the world is realized mainly through the reduction of the Gospel to a purely spiritual message—a message of reconciliation with God and salvation of the soul. In accord with this, the mission of the church is defined exclusively in terms of evangelization, which in turn is understood as the proclamation that by virtue of the death of Jesus on the cross, the only thing that a man must do to be saved is to 'accept Jesus as his all-sufficient Savior.' This separates faith from repentance, the 'essential elements of the Gospel from the non-essential, the *kerygma* from the *didache*, and

salvation from sanctification. On its most basic level, it means a separation between Christ as Savior and Christ as Lord (1979, 216).

### **Orlando Costas**

One of the other prominent voices from the Global South at the first Lausanne Congress in 1974 was that of Orlando Costas. Costas contributed a paper at this gathering titled “Depth in Evangelism—An Interpretation of ‘In-Depth Evangelism’ Around the World.” While never directly mentioning the CGM, Costas raised several issues clearly associated with it and unveils what were some of the initial thoughts that would define the emerging holistic mission movement. In fact, so nascent was holistic mission at this time, that it had not yet been so named—thus accounting for Costas’ term, “In-Depth Evangelism.” In this essay, Costas defines “In-Depth Evangelism” as a worldwide evangelistic movement” and as an “effort to mobilize the church of Jesus Christ with all of her resources for a comprehensive witness in the world” (Costas 1975, 675). He goes on to say that “the seriousness with which the Great Commission has been taken plus the principle of global objectives have given to the movement a holistic worldview” (675).

The same year as the first Lausanne Congress (1974), Costas released *The Church and Its Mission: A Shattering Critique from the Third World*. In this text, he spends three chapters dealing with the CGM, offering a substantial critique. Costas describes four main faults with the CGM, namely what he refers to as a “shallow hermeneutic,” a “questionable theological locus,” a “truncated concept of mission,” and finally an “anthropological-functionalist syndrome” (1974, 131-149). Of these criticisms, the second—“a questionable theological locus”—most directly relates to the topic of this essay, for here Costas challenges McGavran’s discussion of the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20). He makes an important exegetical point in doing so:

Both the “baptizing” and “teaching” clauses of verses 19 and 20 appear in parallel forms, as explanations of the “Go ye” clause of verse 19. Further, “baptizing” (baptizontes) and “teaching” (didáskontes) are two participles which are dependent on the main verb, “disciple ye” (matheūsate). They explain the nature of the command integrating both functions to the process of disciple-making (Costas 1974, 142).

Costas goes on to add that McGavran’s poor exegesis leads him to misinterpret the meaning of the word “disciple.” “A disciple is not merely one who receives and accepts a body of information. He is one who submits himself to the instruction of a teacher. Jesus called a group of men to be his disciples and taught them for three years. After his resurrection he continued to teach them through his Spirit” (1974, 142). Becoming a disciple, says Costas, is about entering into a lifelong relationship with Christ, and therefore is “more than joining his church” (143). Because of this one cannot separate the ethical demands of the Gospel to a “post-conversion stage” as does the CGM. Conversion requires reflection on Christ’s demands upon one’s whole life. As Costas argues, “To push the issue of ethical change to a post-conversion stage, as church growth theology does, is to limit the biblical understanding of conversion which calls for a turning from sin unto God, as well as to deny the didactic imperatives of the Great Commission” (143). Because of this, Costas insists that “mission must be seen as a unitary whole. It cannot really permit a categorization of priorities such as church growth theorists have done” (143). This concept, the rejection of missional priorities, would become a key feature of the holistic mission movement (Tizon 2008, 31, 48).

### **David Bosch**

David Bosch, the late South African missiologist, has also challenged McGavran’s interpretation of Matthew 28:18-20. While not denying the legitimacy of McGavran’s concern that churches tend toward a focus on perfecting that entails the neglect of cross-cultural evangelism, Bosch argues that McGavran has failed to provide a solid exegetical basis for his

argument. First, in ways very similar to Costas, he argues that it is “impossible to read the text as describing discipling and perfecting as two successive activities” since the participle “teaching” modifies the main verb “make disciples” (Bosch 1983, 231). Second, McGavran’s definition of “make disciples” (*mathēteuein*) “is not consistent with Matthew’s use of this verb” (231). Bosch also notes that McGavran’s attempt to clarify this problematic interpretation through his D-1 through D-3 paradigm, though an improvement, still fails to “do justice to the nuances of Matthew 28:19” (231).

Bosch goes on to argue that The Great Commission is fundamentally grounded in entering the kingdom of God, and thereby about being in relationship with Jesus. Furthermore, he argues that a chief characteristic of this relationship is not proclamation but witness, and that witness especially entails an emphasis on justice for the poor and oppressed. To make this case, first Bosch points out that the verb “to make disciples” (*mathēteuein*) occurs only four times in the NT, with three of those found in Matthew’s Gospel. One of those occurrences is Matthew 25:57, which describes Joseph of Arimathea having been “discipled unto Jesus” (Bosch 1983, 231). The Markan parallel to this passage shed’s light on the relationship between following Jesus and entering the kingdom, for it reads “who was looking forward to the kingdom of God.” A second instance of this verb in Matthew bears out this connecting between discipleship and the kingdom of God, for 13:52 describes a scribe who had been “discipled unto the kingdom of heaven.” In addition, this passage must be interpreted in light of Matthew’s preference for the noun “disciple” to describe Jesus’ followers, found far more often in Matthew than other gospels. In a way that differs sharply from rabbinical disciples, Jesus’ disciples are called not primarily to the Torah, but to him (Matt. 23:8). Thus the term “disciple” is supremely relational and cannot be understood in a transitional sense (Bosch 1983, 232). Bosch also argues that during

Matthew's time, as is evidenced by Acts 14:27-28, the words "disciples" and "church" could be used interchangeably (232): "When they had arrived and gathered the church together, they began to report all things that God had done with them and how He had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. And they spent a long time with the disciples" (Acts 14:27-28).

Understanding the relational nature of discipleship in Matthew also shed's light on what Jesus meant in referring to "all that I have commanded you." Bosch says that the verb for "command" (*entellesthai*) in 28:19 is "related to the noun *entolē* (commandment) which [Matthew] employs as a technical term for the commandments of the Old Testament, particularly the Torah—5:19; 15:3; 19:17; 22:36" (1983, 234). Bosch then argues that the nature of this commandment must be understood in light of the commandment to love God and people. To support this, he argues that Matthew 28:19 represents a clear allusion to Matthew 19 and the story of the rich young man, where we read "if you would enter life, keep [*tērēson*] the commandments [*tas entolas*]" (234). Thus,

Jesus radicalizes these commandments in a specific direction: To love one's neighbors means to have compassion on them (see also Luke's Good Samaritan) and to see that justice is done. Thus *dikaisynē* (justice) becomes another key concept in Matthew's Gospel. The disciples are challenged to a life of righteousness (=justice) which infinitely surpasses that practiced by the Pharisees (Mt. 5:20) and to seek God's kingdom and his justice (Mt. 6:33). Justice is, as in the Old Testament, practically a synonym for compassion or almsgiving, as the famous parable in Matthew 25:31-46 demonstrates (Bosch 1983, 234).

Like Costas, Bosch too rejects any notion of priorities:

The moment one regards mission as consisting of two separate components one has, in principle, conceded that each of the two has a life of its own. One is then by implication saying that it is possible to have evangelism without a social dimension and Christian social involvement without an evangelistic dimension. What is more, if one suggests that one component is primary and the other secondary, one implies that the one is essential and the other optional (Bosch 1997, 405).

### C. Peter Wagner Responds

C. Peter Wagner has responded directly to some of these criticisms by Padilla, Costas, and others. Wagner carefully observes that critics like Padilla are not opposed to numerical growth, but that as Samuel Escobar has pointed out, find the sole focus on numbers to be rooted in an overly pragmatic, North American “cult of success and efficiency” (cited in Wagner 1981, 61-62). Fundamentally, Wagner agrees with Costas’s understanding of church growth as being multi-dimensional. However, Wagner argues on practical grounds that without an emphasis on evangelism, unbelievers will never have an opportunity to experience the full life that God intends. “They must first become believers, and it is the evangelistic mandate that carries the gospel of the kingdom to them so that they, too, all have the opportunity to obey the king and enjoy his blessings” (Wagner 1981, 59). In defense, Wagner cites McGavran’s claim that “the church is made up of countable people and there is nothing particularly spiritual in not counting them” (cited in Wagner 1981, 62; McGavran 1980, 93-94). Wagner also says that church growth advocates are also concerned about qualitative growth, admitting though that this is more difficult to measure (1981, 64).

In responding to some of the above criticisms, Wagner agrees that the Great Commission should be understood as a unitary whole. Nonetheless, Wagner continues to argue for the distinction between discipling and perfecting. To do so, he cites Dennis Oliver’s exegesis of Matthew 28, which argues that the object of the verb “teaching” (*didaskontes*) is not “all things” but “obey” (Wagner 1981, 135-136). To be a disciple is to accept Jesus as Lord, and does not require acquiescence to an ethical code. Wagner does not deny that ethical development should follow, but that one cannot make this a prerequisite to conversion. According to Wagner:

Oliver's exegesis avoids the two extremes of "cheap grace" and "exorbitant grace." It denies for example, the rather common evangelical teaching that you can accept Jesus as your Savior and be saved today, but later you should also accept him as your Lord and obey him. Accepting Jesus as Lord, in my view, is not part of perfecting, but of discipling itself. No one can become a disciple of Jesus without first agreeing to obey him. If you doubt that Jesus is your Lord, I doubt that you are Jesus' disciple. This is not "cheap grace"; far from it. It is turning from idols to serve the living and true God. It is a lifelong relationship with a new person, Jesus Christ (Wagner 1981, 136).

He goes on to argue that "neither is it "exorbitant grace. It does not argue that in order to be saved one must agree to an ethical code. Deciding on a position that will 'disrupt the social order' and 'threaten the power of the state' is not a condition of salvation in any teaching of Jesus and the apostles" (136).

### **Toward a Biblical and Missional Ecclesiology**

Someone once asked a South African friend of mine about the growth of the church in Africa. The person wondered, "If the church in Africa is growing so fast, why is there still so much suffering?" To which my friend Elijah replied, "because the church in Africa is over evangelized and under disciplined."

My friend's response not only endorses some of the criticisms leveled against the CGM by others from the global south, but also can be supported by considering some troubling realities across the African continent. Consider for example the Rwandan genocide in 1994. During a span of about three months, around 800,000 Tutsis were killed by their Hutu neighbors in a country that professed to be ninety percent Christian. According to Smith and Rittner (2004), about eleven percent of the killings took place in churches with Christians killing fellow Christians (181; cf. Katongole 2011, 47). How can it be said of Rwandan Christians that true discipleship had taken place when so many professed believers actively supported and engaged in murder? Did any of these, merely by way of confession, truly "enthroned Jesus at the center of

their lives?” Does not the Rwandan crisis directly underscore that “discipling” must include some ethical transformation in order for true conversion to have taken place?

Though unique in scope, Rwanda has not been the only predominantly Christian nation in Africa to experience ethnic conflict in recent years. Africa has also seen other ethno-religious conflicts in other mostly Christian nations such as Angola, Nigeria, Liberia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (cf. Kunhiyop 2008, 107). Plus, both Kenya and South Africa in recent years have seen a rise in xenophobic violence. More recently, ethnic and religious strife erupted in the Central African Republic, where Christian militias have been accused of kidnapping suspected witches and burning them alive (Freeman 2015, n.p.). Zambia is not only one of the most Christian nations in Africa, but also has one of the highest death rates due to injury and violence (Johnson and Zurlo n.d., n.p; AHO 2016, 12). Just as in Rwanda, in these other nations as well, Christians have sometimes actively participated in and perpetuated the violence (cf. Kunhiyop 2008, 109). And violence is but one issue among many. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), “children in sub-Saharan Africa are more than 14 times more likely to die before the age of 5 than children in developed regions” (2016, “Key Facts). Emmanuel Katongole, reflecting on some of these issues, described his frustration at realizing that “even though in many parts of Africa the church, at least numerically, was a strong and powerful institution, it did not make much difference to Africa’s social history of violence, corruption and poverty” (Katongole 2011, 7).

In addition to violence, the blending of Christianity with ethnoreligious practices such as witchcraft, charms and amulets is not uncommon on the continent that is now home to almost one quarter of the world’s Christians (Ireland 2012; Moyo 2014). Add to this the growing prominence of the prosperity gospel in Africa, and the concerns of scholars from the global south

about church growth methodologies seem quite legitimate (Gifford 2009, 116-135; Phiri and Maxwell 2007, n.p.). Of course, evidence also suggests that church growth methods have created a discipleship crisis in the West as well. A 2008 article in *Enrichment* magazine that addressed the “discipleship crisis in America,” focused exclusively on baptism, church membership, and church attendance—in other words, matters of numerical growth, making not a single reference to ethical or moral change (Crabtree 2008, 20-28). Clearly the concern that an emphasis on rapid numerical expansion as a missionary method would produce ineffective and shallow disciples has proven legitimate on the very continent where Christianity is experiencing its most rapid historical growth.

But that is not the whole story. It can also be said that the concerns of the church growth movement have proven true as well. Central to these concerns was that those called to engage in cross-cultural missions would become bogged down in the disciple-making process, and spend too much time perfecting the found instead of reaching the lost. Has this happened? Indeed, it has. For example, not only are there far more missionaries in sub-Saharan Africa where the church has long been established than in North Africa where many of the world’s unreached reside, but funds going directly to evangelism and discipleship worldwide are in decline, while giving to social justice work is increasing (Weber 2010, 52). And between 1970 and 2000, nine out of ten new missionaries that were sent out went to work in places where the church was already established (Johnson et al. 2004, 11).

### **Summary**

The debate between proponents of the CGM and advocates of holistic mission raises three important issues. First, are there solid biblical reasons for prioritizing certain aspects of Christian missions? The CGM clearly believes there are, while proponents of holistic mission

prefer a broader view of salvation and a non-prioritized approach. Second, what is mission(s)? For the CGM, missions is supremely about taking the Gospel to the unreached, about the constant movement of the Gospel to new frontiers. Proponents of holistic mission see things more broadly and mission includes all that the church does as it lives out its kingdom mandate. This includes not only evangelism in the proclamational sense, but also all types of social justice. Some have sought clarity on this issue by distinguishing between mission (singular) and missions (plural), where the former refers broadly to all of God's activity in the world and the latter to specifically advancing the gospel among those who have not yet heard (Ott and Strauss, xv). Does the Great Commission, which has been so central in this debate, refer to both of these, or to just one? Third, where does training in Christian ethics fit into the church's missionary mandate? Even if one defines mission in the narrower sense, is there a place for ethical formation as a legitimate missionary endeavor? It is to these questions that we now turn.

### **The Great Commission in Context**

What is needed to resolve this tension is an ecclesiology that guards both the ethical formation of local believers and the forward momentum of missions—thus, a missional ecclesiology. It is my contention that, contrary to the debate between frontier mission and holistic mission, these things are not mutually exclusive and that some resolution on the meaning of the Great Commission can be found by looking to the broader context of Matthew's Gospel. In doing so, three things emerge: First, the forward momentum of missions must remain paramount. Matthew emphasizes this by connecting the Great Commission to the Abrahamic covenant and God's desire to redemptively bless all nations (Matt. 1:1). Second, Jesus endorses the priority of eternal matters over temporal matters on at least three occasions in Matthew's Gospel. And third, ethical formation is essential to discipleship and therefore to the Great

Commission. That said, the participles “baptizing” (baptizontes) and “teaching” (didaskontes) at least hint at a two-stage process of conversion which has important missional ramifications.

*What is Mission(s)?*

My contention is that the CGM was right ideologically in their desire to preserve the forward momentum of missions, but exegetically off base in their attempts to defend that idea. I believe an emphasis on the forward movement of missions can be found in Matthew if we look to the entirety of this Gospel. Matthew’s Gospel make a case for expanding our understanding of God’s mission to include all of Israel’s prophetic history. This is evident in the frequent direct references and allusions in Matthew to fulfilled prophecy in the life and ministry of Jesus. In helping his audience understand the mission and ministry of Jesus, Matthew directly cites the OT at least fifty-four times, and makes over two hundred and sixty indirect allusions to OT material (France 2007, 10-11). This means at the very least that a sound theology of missions cannot be established solely on the Great Commission, without taking into consideration the sweeping history of God’s mission in the OT and the relevance of that history to all of Jesus’ life and ministry. So, while the Great Commission may tell us *something* about the nature of missions, it cannot tell us everything. This, I would argue, has been the fatal flaw in McGavran’s use of that passage. By isolating the Great Commission from its canonical context, he placed a burden on that passage that it was never able to bear. Unfortunately, the holistic mission movement seized upon this error and swung the pendulum far in the opposite direction, as reactionary theologies almost always do.

Matthew’s Gospel is hedged in from start to finish by parallel references to the nations (Matt. 1:1; 28:18-20). Matthew 1:1 describes Jesus as the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant by declaring that Jesus is the promised son of Abraham. God’s covenant promise to Abraham in

Genesis 15, however, must be understood in light of Genesis 12:1 and God's command for Abraham to "go forth" from his own country to foreign lands. In doing so, God promised to bless all the "families" on earth (12:3). Therefore, the missionary mandate of Scripture stands firmly on the forward movement of God's people to the nations. As many commentators have noted, the "go therefore" of Matthew 28:18-20 does not take the form of a command. The imperative is not "go" but "make disciples." However, Matthew's "go therefore" is a missiological assumption grounded in the "go forth" of Genesis 12. Both the first line of Matthew and the last line of Matthew testify to this in that they refer back to the Abrahamic covenant. The mission of God fundamentally involves the forward movement of God's people to the nations. Thus, movement is the primary characteristic of missions. As my former professor, Lazarus Chakwera, once put it, "missiology is theology that is going somewhere." Abraham's obedience began with going and by trusting in God to show the way (Gen. 12:4). Whatever missions is, then, it must keep central this feature of forward movement to the nations.

### *Missional Priorities*

By understanding the priority of "going" in missionary endeavor, the need to distinguish between missions (plural) and mission (singular) becomes clear. The holistic mission movement seems to have conflated these two, and tends to define mission and missions both as the comprehensive work of the church in the world in all its many dimensions (Woolnough 2010, 11). By not prioritizing the "go forth" aspect of missions, holistic mission falls prey to the temptation to make temporal needs equal to eternal ones. Israel's circular desert wanderings can be traced to precisely this problem. By failing to trust God to define their mission and priorities, they became caught in a cycle of disobedience and idolatry. So too with modern missions. Without prioritizing and guarding the forward movement of missions, we too risk going

endlessly in circles and accomplishing very little because we have lost sight of the fact that biblical missions was born in the command to “go.”

Does Matthew’s Gospel have anything to say about priorities in missions? I believe it does. The public ministry of Jesus begins in Matthew 4 with His temptation in the desert. The first temptation Jesus faces relates directly to the issue of priorities. As R. T France has argued, in the midst of very real physical need—Jesus had fasted for forty days and was hungry—Jesus was tempted to prioritize His own real human need over the will of God, and to thereby prioritize temporal things over eternal ones (2007, 131). Furthermore, Jesus’ quotation of Deuteronomy 8:3 sets this incident in the context of Israel’s instruction in the wilderness, during which God sought to teach them a similar lesson—namely, that God’s purposes must take priority over human need, no matter how real and pressing those needs may seem (France 2007, 131). Jesus makes this same argument a few chapters later in Matthew 6, when He encourages His disciples to not worry over temporal needs, but to instead prioritize obedience to the will of God. “Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness” (Matt. 6:33). He again underscores the priority of the eternal over the temporal in Matthew 10:28. “Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.”

In addition, Jesus also prioritized His mission to Israel over the gentiles in Matthew’s Gospel. “Do not go in the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter any city of the Samaritans, but rather go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matt. 10:5-6; cf. 15:24). This did not mean, however, that the later mission to the Gentiles was optional, as Bosch’s argument would have us believe. It does show clearly that Jesus embraced missional priorities and commanded His disciples to do the same.

If missions is a “go” word, then ethics is a “be” word. The largest block of Jesus’ teaching on ethics anywhere is found in Matthew’s Gospel, in the Sermon on the Mount (SOM). This section begins with the beatitudes, which describe the inverted nature of the kingdom of God in which the poor are blessed and the gentle triumphant. All that Jesus says in the SOM he expects His disciples to do and teach (Matt. 5:19; 7:24). This would seem to raise serious problems for the “go” aspect of missions described above. How can those called to cross-cultural evangelism continue to press on toward unreached areas, if they are responsible for seeing every convert reach the level of maturity described in the SOM?

I believe that the aspects of disciple-making described in the Great Commission offer some help here. The form of the Great Commission presents the concept of making disciples as a two-stage process, but not in the way described by McGavran. As many scholars have pointed out, the first stage involves belief, confession and baptism—in other words, conversion. The second stage involves in-depth teaching, instruction, and ethical formation (Bauer 1992, n.p.; Bruner 2004, under Chapter 28, section III; France 2007, 1116). France argues regarding this distinction that the notable feature lies in that baptism proceeds instruction as a first step in enrollment in a life-long process of discovering what it means to follow Jesus (France 2007, 1116). Of course, some instruction must proceed baptism, but perhaps only enough to bring one to the point of confession. Once a genuine confession of Christ takes place, the person is eligible for baptism and embarks upon the ongoing process of spiritual maturity and growth.

If we look forward from Matthew to the book of Acts, where the unfolding of the Great Commission most clearly takes place, we see precisely this in Acts 8 in the story of Philip and the Ethiopian. In fact, this story in many ways encapsulates the points I have made so far.

Philip's command, much like Abraham's, was to "go." "Get up and go south to the road that descends from Jerusalem to Gaza" (Acts 8:26). When Philip finds the Ethiopian, he first instructs him on who Jesus is. "Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this Scripture he preached Jesus to him." Importantly, the Ethiopian asked, "what prevents me from being baptized" (Acts 8:36). To which Philip responded that nothing more than a heartfelt confession was necessary. "If you believe with all your heart you may!" (8:37). The Ethiopian was baptized and Philip was whisked away to continue preaching the Gospel in new territories. In other words, as soon as possible, he was caught up once again in the mandate to "go." In fact, all throughout the book of Acts we see the development of apostolic teams established to preserve the "going" aspect of mission (Murphy 1976, 113). These teams focused on the first phase of disciple making but then moved on as soon as possible.

By understanding the two-stage process of conversion described in the Great Commission, we are able to guard the "go" nature of Frontier Missions and the "growth" nature of holistic missions. We do this by distinguishing missions (plural) as that which especially involves taking the Gospel to the unreached, and mission (singular) which describes the multifaceted nature of the local church. This is necessary because the church can not afford to be one dimensional, because the people to whom it ministers live multidimensional lives. But at the same time, missions cannot afford to be omni-dimensional, because if it is, it will inevitably sacrifice the one thing people need most—namely, redemption. Therefore, what we must not do is see these things as mutually exclusive or as fundamentally the same. All throughout the NT, we see Paul constantly pushing forward to new frontiers, all the while providing for the ongoing spiritual maturity of the churches through local leadership. He does this by guarding his own singular missionary mandate and distinguishing it from the broader evangelistic and cultural

mandate of local congregations. Furthermore, missionaries not called to frontier missions can serve this aspect of missions by helping to foster strong local churches that embody the ethical demands of the SOM. In doing so, ethical formation can become a vital aspect of indigenous missions movements. Before Philip was an evangelist among the Samaritans (Acts 8:5) and later to the Ethiopian eunuch, he was one of the seven chosen to lead the church's compassionate ministry to widows in Jerusalem (Acts 6:5). Perhaps this is because people do not begin to love people across the border until they begin loving people across the street. It is helpful I think to recall that the Beatitudes are immediately followed by a reminder of the church's mission in the broader world (Matt. 5:13-16). Not only does Jesus remind his disciple that they have a global mission as salt of the earth and light of the world, but He also warns against anything that would impede or hinder that mission. Salt that loses its saltiness is useless, and so too is light that is hidden under a basket. The proper response then for missionaries gifted in in the area of compassion should be to disciple for compassion as a means of preparing local believers for service in the church and in the world. Approaching ethical formation as a matter of discipleship requires humility and sacrifice, so that local believes and not the missionary function as salt and light in the community. As Steve Saint (2011) explains,

As followers of Christ we must fight poverty through discipleship rather than covering it with spiritual frosting. Either we do God's will God's way or we aren't doing His will at all. Discipleship means teaching others what we have learned so they can teach others to care for their community's physical, economic, emotional and spiritual needs on a sustainable basis! (2 Tim 2:2, Mt 28:19-20) (28).

## Reference List

- AHO. 2016. "Health Status and Trends." *Africa Health Observatory, World Health Organization*. [http://www.who.int/sites/default/files/publications/5101/Atlas2016-en\\_Health-status-and-trends.pdf](http://www.who.int/sites/default/files/publications/5101/Atlas2016-en_Health-status-and-trends.pdf).
- Arn, Charles W. 1986. "Evangelism or Disciple Making?" In *Church Growth: State of the Art*, edited by C. Peter Wagner, 57-68. Wheaton: Tyndale House.
- Bauer, David. 1992. *Matthew. Asbury Bible Commentary*, edited by Eugene E. Carpenter and Wayne McCown, Accordance electronic. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
- Bosch, David. 1983. "The Structure of Mission: An Exposition of Matthew 28:16-20." In *Exploring Church Growth*, edited by Wilbert Shenk, 218-248. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- . 1997. *Transforming Mission*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis.
- Bruner, Frederick Dale. 2004. *Matthew: A Commentary*, vol. 2. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Costas, Orlando. 1974. *The Church and Its Mission: A Shattering Critique from the Third World*. Wheaton: Tyndale.
- . 1975. "Depth in Evangelism—An Interpretation of 'In-Depth Evangelism' Around the World. In *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, edited by J. D. Douglas, ed. 675-694. Wheaton: Tyndale House.
- Crabtree, Charles T. 2008. "The Crisis of Discipleship in the American Church." *Enrichment*, Winter (2008): 20-28.
- France, R. T. 2007. *The Gospel of Matthew*, New International Commentary on the New Testament. Accordance electronic ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Freeman, Colin. 2015. "Christian Militias in Central African Republic 'Burnt Witches at Stake', Says UN Report." *The Telegraph*. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/centralafricanrepublic/12018588/Christian-militias-in-Central-African-Republic-burnt-witches-at-stake-says-UN-report.html>.
- Ireland, Jerry. 2012. "African Traditional Religion and Pentecostal Churches in Lusaka, Zambia: An Assessment." *Journal of Pentecostal Theology*, 21(2): 260-277.
- Johson, Todd M., et al. 2004. "Looking Forward: An Overview of World Evangelization 2005-2025." *World Christian Database, Center for the Study of Global Christianity*. <http://www.gordonconwell.edu/ockenga/research/documents/Lausanneinsert.pdf><http://www.gordonconwell.edu/ockenga/research/documents/Lausanneinsert.pdf>.
- Johson, Todd M. and Gina A. Zurlo. N.d. "Christianity in Africa." *World Christian Database, Center for the Study of Global Christianity*. Christianity. <http://www.gordonconwell.edu/ockenga/research/documents/ChristianityinAfricaFINAL.pdf>.
- Katongole, Emmanuel. 2011. *The Sacrifice of Africa: A Political Theology for Africa*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

- Kunhiyop, Samuel Waje. 2008. *African Christian Ethics*. Nairobi: Hippo Books.
- McGavran, Donald A. 1975. "The Dimensions of World Evangelism." In *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, edited by J. D. Douglas, 108-115. Minneapolis: World Wide Publications.
- . 1980. *Understanding Church Growth*. Rev. ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans (Orig. pub. 1970).
- . 1990. *Understanding Church Growth*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans (Orig. pub. 1970).
- . 2005. *The Bridges of God*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock (Orig. pub. 1955).
- Moyo, Herbert. 2014. "Dual Observances of African Traditional Religion and Christianity: some implications for pastoral care in the pluralistic religious worldview of the Ndebele people of Matobo in Zimbabwe." *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 148:115-132.
- Murphy, Edward. 1976. "The Missionary Society as an Apostolic Team." *Missiology: An International Review* 4(1): 103-118.
- Ott, Craig, and Stephen J. Strauss. 2010. *Encountering Theology of Mission: Biblical Foundations, Historical Developments, and Contemporary Issues*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.
- Padilla, René. 1975. "Evangelism and the World." In *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, edited by J. D. Douglas, 116-146. Minneapolis: World Wide Publications.
- . 1976. "Spiritual Conflict." In *The New Face of Evangelicalism*, ed. C. René Padilla. 203-221. Downers Grove: InterVarsity.
- . 1979. "The fullness of mission." *Occasional Bulletin of Missionary Research* 3 (1):6-11.
- Phiri, Isaac and Joe Maxwell. 2007. "Gospel Riches: Africa's Rapid Embrace of Prosperity Pentecostalism Provokes Concern-and Hope." *Christianity Today*, July 2007. <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2007/july/12.22.html>.
- Saint, Steve. 2011. "Projecting Poverty Where it Doesn't Exist." *Mission Frontiers*, September-October: 27-28.
- Smith, David. 1985. "The Church Growth Principles of Donald McGavran." *Transformation* 2 (2):25-30.
- Smith, James M. and Carol Rittner. 2004. "Churches as Memorial Sites: A Photo Essay." In *Genocide in Rwanda: Complicity of the Churches?* edited by Carol Rittner, et al., 181-206. St. Paul, MN: Paragon House.
- Stott, John. 1976. "Forward." In *The New Face of Evangelicalism*, edited by C. René Padilla, n.p. Downers Grove: InterVarsity.
- Tizon, Al. 2008. *Transformation after Lausanne*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock.
- Wagner, C. Peter. 1981. *Church Growth and the Whole Gospel*. San Francisco: Harper and Row.
- Weber, Linda J. 2010. *Mission Handbook*. Wheaton: IL. EMIS.

- Woolnough, Brian. 2010. "Good News for the Poor—Setting The Scene." In *Holistic Mission: God's Plan for God's People*, edited by Brian Woolnough and Wonsuk Ma, 3-14. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock.
- WHO. 2016. "Children: Reducing Mortality." *World Health Organization*.  
<http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs178/en/>.
- Yeh, Allen. 2011. "Tokyo 2010: Global Mission Consultation" in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 35(1):5-6.

DRAFT