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THE ROLE OF “PERFECTING” IN DONALD MCGAVRAN’S  
CHURCH GROWTH THOUGHT

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A Dissertation  
Presented to  
the Faculty of  
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Philosophy

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by  
Matthew Donald Spradlin  
May 2012

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THE ROLE OF “PERFECTING” IN DONALD MCGAVRAN’S  
CHURCH GROWTH THOUGHT

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To  
Leanne,  
my lovely wife and companion

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## PREFACE

I am thankful to my family and friends who have prayed for me and supported me in the pursuit of this doctoral education. I want to thank my loving wife, Leanne, who has been unwavering in her encouragement and support; without her I could not and would not have finished. Her sacrifices have made this dissertation possible. I love her and am grateful to God for such a wonderful wife who is a spring of great joy to my heart.

I thank my dad and mom, who have taught me to love God and love His Word. I will always be grateful to God for the parents with whom he has blessed me; I do not deserve them. My dad's passion for God, evangelism, and discipleship has been infectious in my life. He is a father to me in the flesh and in the ministry. Throughout my life he has been a bulwark of inspiration, and my mom has been a consistent encourager and a humble example of Christlikeness.

I thank my faith family, Copper Springs Church, for their prayers and care. My church has freely and graciously endured an absentee pastor on multiple occasions in order for me to accomplish this degree and dissertation. I am so grateful and honored to be their pastor. I thank Belinda Smith, who helped me organize my research and edit my dissertation. I want to thank Brian Busby, who has willingly picked up the slack in my absence. I thank God for him. He is a true brother in spirit and ministry.

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more directly. He has also taught me not to take anything for granted, but to challenge the veracity of all assumptions and statements.

Finally and preeminently, may glory and praise be to God my Father who has graciously saved me from my wretched sins and has given me the Holy Spirit to live for and serve the great cause of the kingdom of His Son, my Savior and Lord, Jesus Christ.

Matthew Spradlin

Clovis, California

May 2012

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Introduction**

*The Bridges of God* was published in 1955, laying the foundation for Donald McGavran to become the father of a new movement called the Church Growth Movement.<sup>1</sup> McGavran's contributions to missiology are pervasive and far-reaching; his church growth thought has brought about paradigmatic shifts in missiological thinking and practice. McGavran's ongoing emphasis upon missions as evangelism that results in the multiplying of indigenous churches represented a significant change in thinking from the predominant "missionary station" approach of his day.<sup>2</sup> McGavran's "people

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<sup>1</sup>Donald McGavran, *The Bridges of God: A Study in the Strategy of Missions* (London: World Dominion Press, 1955). Thom Rainer identifies Donald McGavran as the father of the Church Growth Movement, with the publishing of McGavran's book *The Bridges of God* as the impetus for the movement. Thom Rainer, *The Book of Church Growth: History, Theology, and Principles* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers 1993), 21-22, 31, 39. The Church Growth Movement is defined as the movement which "includes all the resources of people, institutions, and publications dedicated to expounding the concepts and practicing the principles of church growth, beginning with the foundational work of Donald McGavran in 1955." Ibid., 21-22.

<sup>2</sup>McGavran gave a basic description of a "missionary station" approach to missions in *The Bridges of God*. McGavran stated, "They acquired a piece of land, often with great difficulty. They built residences suitable for white men. Then they added churches, schools, quarters in which to house helpers, hospitals, leprosy homes, orphanages and printing establishments. The mission station was usually at some centre [*sic*] of communication. From it extensive tours were made into the surrounding countryside. It was home to the missionary staff and all the activities of the mission took place around the station." McGavran, *The Bridges of God*, 45.

movements” approach is a prominent force and methodology in missions today.<sup>3</sup> While the mission station approach still exists, it is considered a dated way of doing missions.

The full impact and continuing influence of Donald McGavran’s church growth thinking are difficult to quantify. The influence of Donald McGavran’s Church Growth Movement is evidenced in multiple publications examining and interacting with McGavran’s church growth thinking.<sup>4</sup> Multiple institutions have arisen in the name of church growth.<sup>5</sup> Many seminaries now offer courses on evangelism and church growth.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>McGavran defined “people movements” as resulting from the joint decision of a number of individuals, which allows them to become Christians without social dislocation and multiply churches among their people group. Donald McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1980), 335. McGavran argued that “a properly shepherded people movement is a cluster of thoroughly indigenous congregations.” *Ibid.*, 386.

<sup>4</sup>Examples of books dealing with general church growth principles include Thom S. Rainer, *The Book of Church Growth*; C. Kirk Hadaway, *Church Growth Principles* (Nashville: Broadman, 1991). Examples of other publications include *Church Growth Bulletin* (later called *Global Church Growth*) and the *Journal of the American Society for Church Growth*. Examples of dissertations dealing with McGavran’s church growth principles include N. Sanford Good, “A Biblical Analysis of the Receptive People Principle in the Writings of Donald A. McGavran and the Modern Church Growth Movement” (Ph.D. diss., Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1981); James Clapsaddle Smith, “Without Crossing Barriers: The Homogeneous Unit Concept in the Writings of Donald Anderson McGavran” (Ph.D. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1976); Todd Alan Benkert, “A Biblical Analysis of Donald A. McGavran’s Harvest Theology Principle” (Ph.D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2008).

<sup>5</sup>Examples of various church growth institutions include the Institute of Church Growth in Eugene, Oregon (later moved to Pasadena, California); the School of World Missions at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California; the Institute for American Church Growth in Monrovia, California; the U.S. Center for World Missions in Pasadena, California; the National Church Growth Research Center in Washington D. C.; and the Billy Graham School of Missions, Evangelism and Church Growth at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky (the name was changed to the Billy Graham School of Missions and Evangelism in 2009).

<sup>6</sup>Examples of seminaries that offer courses on evangelism and church growth

For many pastors and missionaries, the principles of church growth which McGavran espoused have become axiomatic. The influence of Donald McGavran's thought and writings can be seen in the application of his church growth ideas and principles by modern missionary agencies, missionary strategists, and missionaries on the field.

McGavran used two terms throughout his lifetime to describe church growth: "discipling" and "perfecting." In *The Bridges of God* McGavran defined "discipling" as helping a non-Christian people group turn from non-Christian faith to Christ, and "perfecting" as "the bringing about of an ethical change in the disciplined group, an increasing achievement of a thoroughly Christian way of life for the community as a whole, and the conversion of the individuals making up each generation as they come to the age of decision."<sup>7</sup> After 1971, McGavran began to use the term discipling for "the turning of any individual from non-faith to faith in Christ and his incorporation in a church," (thus, a more individualistic than peoples focus) and he used the term perfecting to mean "teaching an existing Christian as much of the truths of the Bible as possible."<sup>8</sup>

McGavran's church growth thought has been the subject of much scholarship.

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are Fuller Theological Seminary, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Dallas Theological Seminary, Westminster Theological Seminary, Gordon Conwell, and the six seminaries of the Southern Baptist Convention.

<sup>7</sup>McGavran, *The Bridges of God*, 13-16.

<sup>8</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 170. For the remainder of this dissertation, these terms will be used according to Donald McGavran's definition. Chapter 3 of this dissertation will more fully examine McGavran's definitions of discipling and perfecting and how the terms are used in his writing, his understanding of their relationship to one another, and why he defined them differently after 1971.

Unfortunately, however, there is a significant void of research concerning McGavran's thought in relation to "perfecting," contemporarily referred to as discipleship. While McGavran never articulated a comprehensive theology or approach to perfecting, the concept and role of perfecting as it relates to church growth permeate his writings. Discipling was certainly the focus of McGavran's thought and writing concerning church growth; however, McGavran saw many ways in which discipling and perfecting intersect with one another, and it is at these points of connection that McGavran addressed the role of perfecting in church growth.

### **Thesis**

Understanding how each function of the church contributes to church growth is important. For instance, what is the relationship between church growth and worship? What is the relationship between church growth and service? What is the relationship between church growth and perfecting? It is this last question this dissertation seeks to answer. Particularly, what was McGavran's understanding of the relationship between church growth and what he called "perfecting"?

Some have argued that contemporary church growth thought is unconcerned with the perfecting of the saved.<sup>9</sup> John Crabtree has persuasively argued that due to

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<sup>9</sup>John MacArthur has argued the Church Growth Movement's emphasis upon evaluating missions by analyzing numerical results minimizes biblical preaching and spiritual growth. John MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel: When the Church Becomes Like the World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1993), 72-88. William Abraham has stated the Church Growth Movement's separating of discipling and perfecting is a misinterpretation of the Great Commission as given in Matt 28:18-20. William J. Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 80. For other works critical of the Church Growth Movement's lack of theological discernment, and imbalance concerning perfecting and other issues, Os

divergent streams of the Church Growth Movement, the movement has lost McGavran's core theological commitment to evangelism that results in church growth.<sup>10</sup> As a result, "over time the theological priority (of the movement) took a back seat to methodology."<sup>11</sup> Such divergent streams within the Church Growth Movement generate the need for renewed study of the theological convictions of Donald McGavran, specifically in relation to perfecting, an essential aspect of McGavran's understanding of Christian missions and a vital aspect of his church growth thought.<sup>12</sup>

Unfortunately, no research is available which analyzes Donald McGavran's thought in relation to perfecting. This research has indicated two possible reasons for this void of scholarship. First, as already stated, McGavran did not devote any books specifically to his thinking concerning perfecting, leading many to view his thinking

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Guinness, *Dining with the Devil* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993); and see Douglas Webster, *Selling Jesus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992). Healthy critique of any movement or thought is advantageous for its development and continued effectiveness. Thom Rainer has stated, "some of the criticisms have strengthened the movement." Rainer, *The Book of Church Growth*, 317. He went on to say, "Indeed critics of church growth do a great service in keeping the movement biblically faithful and balanced." *Ibid.*, 319.

<sup>10</sup>John Albert Crabtree, Jr., "The Divergence of Donald McGavran's Church Growth Movement in North America, 1955-2000" (Ph.D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2003). James Tucker has similarly argued the Church Growth Movement is no longer one unified movement, but has fragmented into five distinct streams of thought. Tucker does, however, argue that historic church growth thought still exists. James Douglas Tucker, Jr., "Post-McGavran Church Growth: Divergent Streams of Development" (Ph.D. diss., Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, 1998).

<sup>11</sup>Crabtree, "The Divergence," 53.

<sup>12</sup>Rainer has stated "McGavran's understanding of the Christian mission then is twofold: first, conversion of the lost; second, a church-centered strategy for discipleship." Rainer, *The Book of Church Growth*, 28.

upon perfecting as somewhat irrelevant to his church growth thinking as a whole.

Second, the focus of Donald McGavran's church growth thought was discipling, which has led to the overshadowing and even neglect of perfecting within church growth scholarship.

The goal of this dissertation is to rectify the current void of scholarship in the area of McGavran's thinking upon perfecting. The purpose of this dissertation is to show that "perfecting" in Donald McGavran's church growth thought was shaped by his conviction that a key aspect of biblical perfecting is teaching and producing church growth—i.e., effective evangelism.<sup>13</sup> McGavran defined effective evangelism or church growth as that which "finds the lost, folds those found, feeds them on the Word of God, and incorporates them in multitudes of new and old congregations."<sup>14</sup> McGavran believed perfecting that does not teach and result in obedience to eternal God's command to make disciples and incorporate them into responsible church membership was errant in a key aspect of faithfulness to God.<sup>15</sup> A broader purpose for this dissertation is to heighten an awareness of the relationship between evangelism and perfecting and the important role of discipleship in church growth.

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<sup>13</sup>McGavran used the terms "church growth" and "effective evangelism" synonymously. Donald McGavran, *Effective Evangelism: A Theological Mandate* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company 1988), 7, 31, 89.

<sup>14</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 265. McGavran defined "evangelism" as, "the good news about Jesus Christ as revealed in the Bible, told with intent of 'persuading men to become his disciples and responsible members of his Church.'" Idem, "Loose the Churches: Let Them Go! An Essential Issue in Indian Evangelism," *Missiology* 1 (1973): 81.

<sup>15</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 5-6.



## Background

I was first introduced to church growth thinking and writings while attending college and serving as a college ministries director at my church. I read Thom Rainer's books *Effective Evangelistic Churches* and *High Expectations*.<sup>16</sup> Rainer used quantitative and qualitative research to help answer the question, "Why are some churches growing evangelistically?" Before reading these books, I had heard criticisms that church growth was concerned with numerical results to the exclusion of biblical theology and practice. However, upon reading Rainer's books, I was amazed at how his research findings were consistent with New Testament teachings and the practices of the early church in the book of Acts.<sup>17</sup> I started to ask the question, "How can a church most effectively be faithful to the task of the Great Commission given to us by the Lord Jesus?" I also began to see the discipline of church growth as an issue of Great Commission stewardship.

After graduating from the Masters College, I enrolled as a student in The Billy Graham School of Missions, Evangelism and Church Growth at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. While studying for my M. Div., I read

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<sup>16</sup>Thom Rainer, *Effective Evangelistic Churches: Successful Churches Reveal What Works and What Doesn't* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1996). Idem, *High Expectations: The Remarkable Secret for Keeping People in Your Church* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1999).

<sup>17</sup>In Rainer's research of effective evangelistic churches, he found that "preaching was deemed the single most important factor for evangelistic effectiveness." Rainer, *Effective Evangelistic Churches*, 50. Also worthy of note, 73.6 percent of the evangelistic churches considered their preaching to be expository/textual preaching. Ibid., 56-58. Rainer's study also highlighted the important role of prayer, missions and discipleship. Ibid. In Rainer's research of churches effective at reaching and keeping new believers, he found that pastoral leadership, expository preaching, equipping for ministry, Sunday School, prayer, and a focus on clear doctrine were all important factors in effective church assimilation. Idem, *High Expectations*.

*The Book of Church Growth*, introducing me to the Church Growth Movement as a historical movement.<sup>18</sup> I was then introduced to the thought and writings of Donald McGavran by reading *The Bridges of God* as well as *Understanding Church Growth* and several other McGavran writings. I was impressed with McGavran's passion for biblical evangelism and church multiplication.

Of particular interest to me were two paradigm shifts McGavran's thought brought about in missions thinking and practice. First, McGavran's assertion that missions be centered upon the verbal proclamation of the gospel represented a monumental shift in missions practice.<sup>19</sup> For many, missions had come to be known as any good activities done in the name of Christ. McGavran argued that missions as biblically defined must have as its primary goal the salvation of sinners through the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. McGavran's gospel-centered approach to missions contributed to a movement away from social ministry as the central thrust of missions to evangelism as the primary task of missions.<sup>20</sup>

Second, McGavran's insistence that the church be the focal point of missions stood in stark contrast to the missionary station approach of his day. The focus of missions had often become institutions other than the church, such as hospitals, schools, and other institutions with philanthropy as their primary function. The ecclesiocentricity of McGavran's missiology was of profound interest to me.

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<sup>18</sup>Rainer, *The Book of Church Growth*.

<sup>19</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, ix, 436.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 92, 426.

McGavran helped change my understanding of the nature of the Great Commission. He argued the meaning of *panta ta ethne* in Matthew 28:19 is “all the ‘people groups’” of the world.<sup>21</sup> McGavran stated, “The goal is to multiply sound churches in every people, every homogeneous unit, on earth.”<sup>22</sup> Prior to reading McGavran, I had always conceived of the word “nations” in Matthew 28:19 as referring to geopolitical boundaries because that is the common connotation of the English word. However, I became convinced the New Testament word *ethne* does not refer to geopolitical boundaries, but instead refers to distinct people groups.

After finishing my M.Div., I became the Minister of Evangelism at Valley Baptist Church in Bakersfield, California. The first year I was there the church baptized 500 people, nearly twice as many as the year before. I was involved in leading many people to the Lord, and as a result felt a strong sense of responsibility for their spiritual growth. I began to ask the question, “How does a church nurture spiritual babies in such a way that they grow to maturity as fruit-bearing disciples?” At that point, I began to seek answers as to how other pastors, missiologists, and churches answer that question, and more importantly, how the Word of God answers that question. I began searching for biblically-based curriculum designed for new believers, and to my chagrin I became convinced there is a dearth of good new believers curriculum in modern evangelicalism.

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<sup>21</sup>McGavran stated, “The Greek word translated ‘nation’ in the English Bible means exactly ‘people’ in the sense in which we are using that term. It does not mean a modern nation like France or China or Mexico. Thus the Greek means ‘disciple the peoples.’” McGavran, *The Bridges of God*, 13-14. McGavran more thoroughly defined *panta ta ethne* as “all the classes, tribes, castes, ethnic units, and economic groupings of mankind.” McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 61.

<sup>22</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 456.

In 2006 I moved to Clovis, California, and became the Senior Pastor of a church plant, Copper Springs Church. The church was made up of a few dozen Christians whose self-confessed weakness was evangelism. Several persons in the church wanted to be evangelistic, but were not sure how to do evangelism and needed someone to serve as a catalyst. I immediately began to take individuals with me and train them to do evangelism, and I began to teach an evangelism training class.

Shortly before becoming the pastor of Copper Springs Church, I had read *Simple Church*.<sup>23</sup> The book statistically outlines how churches that have a simple process for helping people grow spiritually are much more effective at winning people to the Lord. One of my first goals as the pastor of Copper Springs was to develop a process for nurturing new believers to grow into mature fruit-bearing disciples within the church. I began to ask many questions in relation to discipleship, not the least of which were: “What does a fruit-bearing disciple of Jesus Christ look like? What role does evangelism training play in the discipleship process? What role does discipleship play within the growth of a church?”

In search for answers to these questions, I began to reread some of McGavran’s books. I was surprised with the amount of time he spent dealing with the same questions in one way or another. Thus, McGavran’s thoughts upon perfecting and its role within church growth became a fitting topic for my further research and dissertation.

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<sup>23</sup>Thom Rainer and Eric Geiger, *Simple Church: Returning to God’s Process for Making Disciples* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2006).

As a result of my love and passion for perfecting and my interest with the church growth thought of Donald McGavran, I desired to explore several key issues related to McGavran's understanding of perfecting as it relates to his church growth thought, specifically:

1. What historical and missiological factors helped shape McGavran's approach to perfecting?
2. What experiences in McGavran's own life shaped his understanding of the perfecting task and motivated its incorporation into his church growth thought?
3. What was McGavran's understanding of the term "perfecting"?
4. What was McGavran's understanding concerning the nature of the relationship between "discipling" and "perfecting"?
5. What were the relevant theological factors that shaped McGavran's understanding and approach to perfecting?
6. What are the distinctive elements comprising Donald McGavran's approach to perfecting?
7. Did McGavran view the missionary or the church as the primary source of perfecting? What role did McGavran believe the missionary is to play in relation to perfecting?
8. Did McGavran's training of workers include perfecting as a peripheral issue, or was it a core element of training workers?

This dissertation addresses these questions while addressing the broader question, "How and why did McGavran incorporate perfecting into his church growth thought?"

One delimitation to this particular study needs to be stated. The analysis of the role of perfecting is limited to McGavran's writings. There is no effort to analyze the role of perfecting in the Church Growth Movement as a whole, or its role in the thinking of other church growth writers and thinkers. While such a study would be intriguing, it is beyond the scope of this work.

## **Methodology**

The primary means of research methodology for this project has been an examination of primary resources authored by Donald McGavran. I endeavored to obtain as many resources as possible written by McGavran for my own personal library. The James P. Boyce Centennial Library of Southern Seminary has been a great resource for acquiring many of McGavran's writings, particularly articles. The inter-library loan has been invaluable in securing articles written by McGavran which were not in the seminary's holdings or my own. I also made several trips to Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California, where McGavran served as the founding dean of the The School of World Mission, and found their library holdings useful. I have made several trips to the U.S. Center for World Mission, which contains many McGavran resources that proved useful in completing my research.

Because this dissertation is an examination concerning the thought of Donald McGavran, the focus of the research methodology is literary analysis of the writings of Donald McGavran; however, I also use literary analysis of secondary resources as a means of research for this work. There is a considerable number of resources including books, articles, and dissertations written about McGavran and his thinking. These resources have proven to be significant contributions in gaining a fuller understanding of McGavran's thinking on a host of issues.

I also traveled to Wheaton College and spent a substantial amount of time in the archives of the Billy Graham Center reading the papers of the Donald Anderson and Mary Elizabeth McGavran collection. McGavran kept a collection of his many correspondence letters, manuscripts, notes, lectures, and sermons, which were donated to

the Billy Graham Center. The archived information in this collection proved invaluable to my research and brought much light to bear upon the topic of this dissertation. The collection demonstrates that McGavran was a prolific and copious writer not only for publication, but also within his private and professional life.

### **Conclusion**

Donald McGavran has had a widespread impact upon missions methodology. While the focus of his writings upon church growth was “discipling,” he did address the theological and practical role of “perfecting” in relation to church growth. He was convinced that biblical perfecting teaches and leads to church growth. In order to understand the role of perfecting in McGavran’s church growth thought, it is necessary to know the historical, theological, and missiological factors that brought about his church growth thinking. Chapter 2 will address these issues.

## CHAPTER 2

### MCGAVRAN'S BACKGROUND AND CHURCH GROWTH

#### **McGavran's Background**

Donald McGavran was a third generation missionary to India who had strong missionary roots. His father, John Grafton McGavran, served as a missionary to India for twenty years beginning in 1891, eventually opening a mission station in Damoh, India. John married his wife Helen Anderson in 1892. Donald McGavran was the second of their four children, born on December 15, 1897 in Damoh, India.<sup>1</sup>

McGavran felt God's call to missions and attended Butler University in Indianapolis, where he earned his B.A., followed by Yale Divinity School where he earned his Bachelor of Divinity. McGavran then attended the College of Mission in

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<sup>1</sup>For an excellent biographical dissertation on Donald McGavran's life and thought, see Vernon James Middleton, "The Development of a Missiologist: The Life and Thought of Donald Anderson McGavran, 1897-1965" (Ph.D. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1990). For an overview of McGavran's life and ministry, see Gary McIntosh, "The Life and Ministry of Donald A. McGavran: A Short Overview" (paper presented to the ASCG Annual Meeting, November 2005); McIntosh focuses upon McGavran's life from 1965 to his death at age ninety-two years on July 10, 1990. McGavran himself also provided some biographical data on his life and thought; Donald McGavran, *Effective Evangelism: A Theological Mandate* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company 1988), 53-101; idem, *The Satnami Story: A Thrilling Drama of Religious Change* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1990); idem, "My Pilgrimage in Mission," in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 20, no. 2 (April 1986): 53-54, 56-58. See also Kenneth Mulholland, "Donald McGavran's Legacy to Evangelical Missions," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 27 (January 1991): 64-70.



Indianapolis, earning a Master of Arts. He then became a missionary to India with the United Christian Missionary Society (Disciples of Christ) in 1923 where he focused primarily upon education.<sup>2</sup> After several years on the mission field, McGavran went to Columbia University where he completed a Ph.D. in education. By his mid-thirties he returned to India as the field secretary in charge of administrating his denomination's mission work in India.

McGavran's interest in church growth began when he helped Bishop J. Waskom Pickett study people movements and their effects in India. McGavran said of Pickett, "He kindled my concern that the church grow. I lit my candle at his fire."<sup>3</sup> In their study they found that of the 145 mission works in India, only nine were experiencing church growth while 134 were growing at a rate slower than the general population. McGavran also discovered that in Harda, where he and seven other missionaries served for six years, not one baptism from outside the church had taken place in the previous thirty-six years.<sup>4</sup> McGavran had assumed the churches were not growing due to a non-receptive environment—an assumption that was disproven by the growth of other churches in the same environment. As a result, McGavran concluded missionary methods were hindering growth.

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<sup>2</sup>The United Christian Missionary Society of the Christian Church was a missionary society of the Disciples of Christ denomination.

<sup>3</sup>Donald McGavran, "The Discovery of Church Growth," in *Church Growth: Strategies that Work*, by Donald A. McGavran and George G. Hunter III (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980), 15.

<sup>4</sup>Donald McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1980), 46.

McGavran was compelled to discover the reasons why some churches were growing and some were not. Pickett's research along with his own convinced McGavran that the primary way by which non-Western persons come to Christ and the church grows is through people movements. According to McGavran,

A people movement results from the joint decision of a number of individuals—all from the same people, which enables them to become Christians without social dislocation, while remaining in full contact with their non-Christian relatives, thus enabling other groups of that people, across the years, after suitable instruction, to come to similar decisions and form Christian churches made up exclusively of members of that people.<sup>5</sup>

McGavran concluded a Western individualistic approach of doing evangelism was not as effective in much of the unreached world. He stated, “Among those who think corporately only a rebel would strike out alone, without consultation and without companions. The individual does not think of himself as a self-sufficient unit, but as a part of the group.”<sup>6</sup> McGavran affirmed that each individual must exercise personal faith in Christ, but thought these individual decisions are strengthened when made as part of a sociological unit.

Church planting is at the core of the people movement approach. McGavran stated, “People movements, in fact, *are* indigenous churches *par excellence*. . . . a properly shepherded people movement is a cluster of thoroughly indigenous

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<sup>5</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 335.

<sup>6</sup>Donald McGavran, *The Bridges of God: A Study in the Strategy of Missions* (London: World Dominion Press, 1955), 11.

congregations” (McGavran’s emphasis).<sup>7</sup> People movements take place when a number of individuals from a particular people come to faith in Christ and are incorporated into newly planted indigenous churches.

The beginning of the Church Growth Movement would later be dated to 1955 with the publication of *The Bridges of God*. In it McGavran argued for a “people movement” approach as opposed to a “mission station” approach to missions strategy.<sup>8</sup> The book was the most read book on mission theory in 1956, and it put McGavran on the map as a prominent missiologist.<sup>9</sup>

In January of 1961, McGavran founded The Institute of Church Growth at Northwest Christian College in Eugene, Oregon. In the next four years, fifty-seven

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<sup>7</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 386. For the totality of this dissertation, any underlined or italicized statement within a direct quote of McGavran is McGavran’s emphasis.

<sup>8</sup>McGavran gave a description of a “missionary station” approach to missions in *The Bridges of God*. McGavran stated, “They acquired a piece of land, often with great difficulty. They built residences suitable for white men. Then they added churches, schools, quarters in which to house helpers, hospitals, leprosy homes, orphanages and printing establishments. The mission station was usually at some centre [*sic*] of communication. From it extensive tours were made into the surrounding countryside. It was home to the missionary staff and all the activities of the mission took place around the station.” McGavran, *The Bridges of God*, 45. McGavran preferred the phrase “people movement” to the common phrase at the time “mass movements.” He stated, “We shall not use the term ‘mass movement’ and urge others not to use it. It is misleading. It does give some idea of the numbers involved, but fails completely to indicate that the movement (a) is not one of mere mass, but always of a people (tribe, caste, or clan); (b) usually enlarges by the conversion of small, well-instructed groups; and (c) achieves large numbers only over a period of years.” Donald McGavran et al., *Church Growth and Group Conversion*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (Pasadena: William Carrey Library, 1973), 4.

<sup>9</sup>McIntosh, “The Life and Ministry of Donald A. McGavran,” 17.

missionaries studied at the institute while they were on furlough.<sup>10</sup> During this time, McGavran honed his missiological ideas, gave lectures, and began to develop case studies. In 1964 the publication of *Church Growth Bulletin*, a sixteen page bimonthly periodical McGavran edited, began.<sup>11</sup>

In September of 1965, at the age of sixty-seven, McGavran became the founding dean of the School of World Mission at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California.<sup>12</sup> The school soon became the intellectual center of the Church Growth Movement. McGavran served as the dean of the school for the next seven years,

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 18.

<sup>11</sup>Thom Rainer states concerning the *Church Growth Bulletin*, “The response was so strong that it soon had more subscribers than the well-known *International Review of Missions*. These early publication ventures gave the Church Growth Movement high visibility and influence and raised the stature of the Institute of Church Growth.” Thom Rainer, *The Book of Church Growth: History, Theology, and Principles* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers 1993), 37.

<sup>12</sup>At this point, McGavran conceived of the Church Growth Movement as an international missions movement. Gary McIntosh states, “When McGavran became dean of the Fuller School of World Mission, he deliberately excluded pastors from North America. As a career missionary, his primary concern was international missions, and he desired to share his insights with those who would take the gospel to people who had never heard of Jesus Christ. Thus, the entrance requirements to the School of World Mission required three years of cross-cultural experience validated by fluency in a second language, which effectively eliminated most church leaders in North America.” McIntosh, “The Life and Ministry of Donald A. McGavran,” 41-42. McGavran’s writings did not focus upon American church growth but rather church growth in the rest of the world. McGavran, however, did make three contributions to American Church Growth. First, in 1970 he published *Understanding Church Growth* in which he stated his mature thinking on church growth. Second, in 1972 he taught a course with Peter Wagner designed specifically to apply church growth principles within an American context. Third, in 1973 he coauthored *How to Grow a Church* in which many church growth principles were applied to an American context. Rainer, *The Book of Church Growth*, 38-44.

assembling a faculty of world renown missiologists.<sup>13</sup>

In 1970 McGavran wrote his magnum opus, *Understanding Church Growth*. The book is a comprehensive exposition of his church growth thought. McGavran continued to teach, research and write upon church growth, and speak around the world until his death on July 10, 1990, at the age of ninety-two.

### **McGavran's Theological Shift**

McGavran's professors at Yale Divinity School convinced him of the fallibility of the Bible.<sup>14</sup> He later served as a missionary in India for years, never questioning what he was taught at Yale. His liberal understanding of the Bible was reinforced when he studied at Columbia University for his Ph.D. However, an event took place in his ministry that changed his theological position concerning the Bible and provided the necessary theological foundation for his church growth thought.

In 1932, McGavran became the field secretary of his denomination's India missionary enterprise. One of his duties included teaching a men's Sunday School class in Jubbulpore, his mission's headquarters. The man who taught the class for the previous seven years was, according to McGavran, a "flaming liberal."<sup>15</sup> McGavran asked this

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<sup>13</sup>The faculty included Donald McGavran, Edwin Orr, Ralph Winter, Alan Tippett, Charles Kraft, Arthur Glasser, and Peter Wagner. Ralph Winter credited McGavran with "virtually creating the scholarly field of evangelical missiology." "Missiologist Donald McGavran," *Christianity Today*, 34 August 1990, 47.

<sup>14</sup>McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 55.

<sup>15</sup>McGavran stated, "My predecessor, Dr. William McDougall, had been a flaming liberal, a graduate of Chicago Divinity School. He had taught this Bible class for the previous seven years." *Ibid.*

class the question, “When you read a biblical passage such as we are studying this morning, what is the first question you ask?” The immediate response was, “What is there in this passage that we cannot believe?”

McGavran was shocked when confronted with the blunt implications this liberal view of Scripture had for ordinary Christians. He later wrote, “I began at that moment to sense that it could not be the truth . . . . I began to feel my way back toward convictions concerning the Bible as infallible revelation. It is God’s Word. It is entirely dependable. It is the rule of faith and practice of every true Christian.”<sup>16</sup>

McGavran learned that the mission of the church must be understood according to biblical revelation and in light of the gospel.<sup>17</sup> The Bible is the basis for any real missionary movement, and if it is rejected, effective evangelism is replaced with some other objective that does not demand people repent of their sins and turn in faith to Jesus Christ.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, McGavran was convinced that without a strong belief in the authority and infallibility of the Bible, church growth would fall by the wayside. In

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 56.

<sup>17</sup>Donald McGavran, "Church Growth Strategy Continued," *International Review of Mission* 57 (1968): 335.

<sup>18</sup>McGavran stated, “Missions is the very heart of the Christian Faith. Telling people about Jesus is the heart of Christianity. Missions grows right out of the Bible—The Bible requires us to propagate the gospel. The Bible is the infallible, authoritative, utterly reliable truth about God and man and God’s plan of salvation for man . . . . To those who do not believe the Bible, missions are unnecessary and even an arrogant imposing of our beliefs on others. To those who believe the Bible, missions are a vital necessary part of Christian life.” Donald McGavran, “Address notes to Twin Oaks Christian Church” (30 August 1972) Folder 3, Box 83, Collection 178, Papers of Donald Anderson and Mary Elizabeth McGavran 1906-1991, 2000. Archives of the Billy Graham Center, Wheaton, Illinois.

reference to biblical authority McGavran stated, “This is the only theological position that makes the communication of the gospel, the discipling of *panta ta ethne*, the multiplication of congregations in every segment of all societies, essential.”<sup>19</sup>

McGavran’s belief in the Bible as God’s Word continued for the rest of his life. As a result, as dean of the School of World Missions at Fuller Theological Seminary, he expressed in a letter to president Hubbard his desire that only evangelicals serve as faculty members:

The next men on the faculty must be straight Conservative Evangelicals – openly and unashamedly in favor of winning men to Christ, salvation as eternal salvation, the Bible as a unified, authoritative revelation by God, rather than a conglomerate of how men in various cultures have perceived God . . . . We want able men, but must not gamble that mature men of 35-45 will be converted to the Conservative Evangelical position after they come here.<sup>20</sup>

McGavran’s acceptance of biblical authority thus shaped his understanding of soteriology.<sup>21</sup> He believed the Bible teaches that faith in Christ is essential for salvation. He held that “The growth of the church is seldom the result of just one factor; however, the fantastic growth of the early church was powerfully influenced by one unshakable conviction, that belief in Jesus Christ was essential for salvation.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 57.

<sup>20</sup>McGavran, letter to Dean Glasser and President Hubbard, 14 October 1974, Filing Cabinet 3, Drawer 1, The Donald McGavran Collection, The Latourette Library of the U.S. Center for World Missions, Pasadena, California.

<sup>21</sup>McGavran’s theological shift concerning the nature of Scripture led him to a conservative understanding of the atonement of Christ. McGavran stated, “I rejected the moral theory of the atonement, which had been taught at Yale Divinity School. I accepted the substitutionary view of the atonement, which the Bible so clearly expresses.” McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 57.

<sup>22</sup>Donald A. McGavran and Win Arn, *Back to Basics in Church Growth*

Those who do not believe in God's plan of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ do not feel the same urgency for the church to grow among the lost peoples of the world.<sup>23</sup> They become occupied with social work and maintaining Christian institutions rather than carrying out biblical missions through church growth.<sup>24</sup> McGavran, however, believed "Evangelization is not optional. It is mandatory."<sup>25</sup> If God's plan is salvation through faith in Christ, evangelism and church multiplication must take precedence over humanitarian work as the primary focus and chief aim of missions.<sup>26</sup>

McGavran's shift concerning biblical authority thus shaped his understanding of the missionary task and was foundational to his church growth thought. To restate, his position became clear:

My renewed conviction concerning biblical authority also motivated my concepts concerning missionary labors of all kinds. I saw clearly that unless the Bible was accepted as God's authoritative, infallible revelation, there was no reason at all for missionary labors. Instead, let the people of each great religion move forward at their own pace, reforming their own religion, and gradually growing into a unified world society. I came to see that any real missionary movement must depend upon an authoritative Word of God made known in the Bible and manifested by our Lord

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(Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 1981), 22.

<sup>23</sup>McGavran stated, "Why should anybody seek to win his unbelieving neighbors or go to a foreign land and learn a foreign language unless it is indeed true that He to whom all authority in heaven and earth is given has commanded us to *matheteusate panta ta ethne* (disciple all the peoples)?" McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 57.

<sup>24</sup>Donald McGavran, "Missiology Faces the Lion," *Missiology* 17 (1989): 337-39.

<sup>25</sup>McGavran and Arn, *Back to Basics in Church Growth*, 118.

<sup>26</sup>Donald A. McGavran, "Theological Bed Rock in Mission," *Religion in Life* 30 (1961): 604.



and Savior Jesus Christ. . . . This is the theological conviction underlying the church growth movement.<sup>27</sup>

### **McGavran's Missiological Milieu**

The popular approach to missions in McGavran's context was "mission stations." Missionaries won converts to the Lord and incorporated them into the life of the mission station. Often new believers became ostracized by their tribesmen due to their newfound faith, leaving them no way to provide for themselves. They then would be employed by the mission station. Their identity was tied more to involvement in the mission station than in the church. The result was new believers were often dislocated from their family and friends, left their people and culture, and joined the culture of the mission station people.

In McGavran's day, missions was often defined as any good work done by a missionary regardless of whether it led to the proclamation of the gospel and persons coming to faith in Christ and incorporated into local churches.<sup>28</sup> Church growth was replaced with good works as the goal of missions. McGavran stated, "The word *mission* has been redefined. It used to mean 'the proclamation of the good news to the non-Christian world,' but now *mission* is held to be any activity of the church which God

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<sup>27</sup>McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 57.

<sup>28</sup>In speaking about many denominational missionary societies, McGavran stated, "Indeed, many of their spokesmen go out of their way . . . to define the program of mission in non-evangelistic terms. To some denominational missionary societies, in their new identity as 'The Church Carrying Out Its Worldwide Mission,' gospel proclamation and church growth are minor objectives." Donald McGavran, "Crisis of Identity for Some Missionary Societies," *Christianity Today*, 8 May 1970, 12.

desires.”<sup>29</sup> Within this context, McGavran argued mission must be defined evangelistically.<sup>30</sup>

“Mission stations” often included a church, but the church was often not the focus. The philanthropic institutions required much manpower and a vast amount of financial resources, which siphoned resources away from the church.<sup>31</sup> In many ways, the mission stations became the proverbial “tail that wagged the dog.” In this context, McGavran argued evangelism that incorporates believers into local churches is the “chief purpose of Christian mission.”<sup>32</sup> For McGavran, to define missions apart from church growth was a fundamental misunderstanding of “the real meaning of the Christian faith, salvation and sanctification.”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 10.

<sup>30</sup>McGavran stated, “Helping older churches as well as helping younger churches is to be considered mission. From this new angle, *mission* ceases being gospel proclamation to non-Christians and becomes inter-church aid or good work done anywhere.” Ibid., 11.

<sup>31</sup>Donald McGavran, “Missiology Faces the Lion,” *Missiology* 17 (1989): 336.

<sup>32</sup>Donald McGavran, “Principles and Procedures in Church Growth,” (Class Lecture Notes) Folder 5, Box 35, Collection 178, Papers of Donald Anderson and Mary Elizabeth McGavran 1906-1991, 2000. Archives of the Billy Graham Center, Wheaton, Illinois.

<sup>33</sup>Donald McGavran, letter to Vergil Sly, 28 February 1943, Folder 16, Box 1, Collection 178, Papers of Donald Anderson and Mary Elizabeth McGavran 1906-1991, 2000. Archives of the Billy Graham Center, Wheaton, Illinois. McGavran believed liberal theology had influenced missions strategy to be understood in non-church growth terms.<sup>33</sup> In a letter to J. O. Percy, McGavran said that liberal church leaders in New York had nearly kept *Bridges of God* from being published because they had said “it was the wrong book, that it talked too much about conversion and insisted that the multiplication of the Church of Jesus Christ is the central aim of mission.” Donald McGavran, letter to J. O. Percy, 30 April 1955, Folder 22, Box 1, Collection 178, Papers of Donald Anderson

McGavran argued for a church-centered missions strategy, one in which those who are saved are brought into the fellowship of a local church where they can be perfected.<sup>34</sup> He believed mission stations had replaced churches as the milieu of perfecting.<sup>35</sup> Instead, he argued, “The multiplication of churches nourished on the Bible and full of the Holy Spirit is a *sine qua non* in carrying out the purposes of God. Conversely, would-be disciples must be joyfully built into His Body—they must not wander alone in the wilderness.”<sup>36</sup>

### McGavran’s Church Growth

There was confusion in McGavran’s day as to the mission of the church. As noted, many were defining missions in vague terms which did not require the growth of

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and Mary Elizabeth McGavran 1906-1991, 2000. Archives of the Billy Graham Center, Wheaton, Illinois.

<sup>34</sup>McGavran said perfecting is the second stage in the establishment of a Christian civilization and broadly defined it as “teaching them all things.” McGavran, *The Bridges of God*, 15.

<sup>35</sup>McGavran said concerning mission stations, “Any visitor to the mission field is likely to come away with the idea that mission work consists in schools, hospitals, leper asylums, agricultural institutes, printing presses and the mission compounds from which these multifarious activities are carried on. The churches would seem to be a small part of the whole and subservient to the mission station. This impression would be largely correct.” Ibid., 58-59.

<sup>36</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 6. McGavran stated, “The New Testament is full of passages that indicate the steady purpose of the Triune God to make the gospel known throughout the entire world and to institute a new kind of life based on complete obedience to Him, a complete surrender of self to Christ, and a mighty multiplication of Christian congregations.” McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 14.

the church. McGavran argued that the goal of missions is church growth—i.e., bringing populations to Christ and into His church.<sup>37</sup> Thus he defined “church growth” as

a process of spiritual reproduction whereby new congregations are formed. The Church in New Testament times grew in this fashion. New congregations by the score sprang up where there had been none before. In our use of the term, a Church “grows” when it multiplies its membership and its congregations and then with ever-increasing power takes into itself converts in a widening stream.<sup>38</sup>

Three essential aspects of McGavran’s understanding of church growth are evident in this definition: conversion multiplication, church membership, and congregation reproduction. These are the focus of the next section of this chapter.

### **Conversion Multiplication**

McGavran defined church growth as conversion growth, that is people being saved.<sup>39</sup> The church grows as converts are multiplied within a population. McGavran’s burning passion was to see the lost come to faith in Christ. He stated, “no amount of

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<sup>37</sup>McGavran stated in a letter in 1955, “the reinforcement of church growth and multiplication is missions.” Donald McGavran to Don Baker, 21 August 1955, Letter, Folder 2, Box 2, Collection 178, Papers of Donald Anderson and Mary Elizabeth McGavran 1906-1991, 2000. Archives of Billy Graham Center, Wheaton, Illinois.

<sup>38</sup>McGavran et al., *Church Growth and Group Conversion*, 98.

<sup>39</sup>McGavran believed church growth is God’s desire and God’s plan for accomplishing the Great Commission. He stated, “It was no mere gimmick to get more people and money into the church. *Its foundation was theological*. It was based on a biblical judgment that men and women without Jesus Christ are truly lost and God wants them found. So, church growth is faithfulness to God.” McGavran, “The Discovery of Church Growth,” 19. John Crabtree has persuasively argued that divergent streams of the Church Growth Movement have lost McGavran’s core theological commitment to evangelistic or conversionary church growth. John Albert Crabtree Jr., “The Divergence of Donald McGavran’s Church Growth Movement in North America, 1955-2000” (Ph.D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2003).

biological growth and transfer growth will carry out the Great Commission.”<sup>40</sup>

McGavran later started using the phrase “effective evangelism” as a synonym for “church growth” in part to emphasize the conversionary nature of church growth.<sup>41</sup> McGavran was concerned that without this necessary clarification, church growth would incorrectly be thought of as numerical increase apart from actual evangelistic or conversion growth taking place.

One of the arguments McGavran encountered from those defining missions in non-evangelistic terms was that Christians and missionaries should not be interested in numbers.<sup>42</sup> McGavran clarified, “No one is advocating adding ‘mere numbers.’ Effective evangelism never brings in merely an additional warm body.”<sup>43</sup> McGavran held that the goal of missions is not numbers, but people being saved and added to the church; however, McGavran also understood that people coming to Christ and into his church would lead to numerical increase.<sup>44</sup> He refused to back down from the

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<sup>40</sup>Donald McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 43. Biological growth as defined by McGavran, is the children of Christians being saved— those who were born into Christian families— and transfer growth is Christians coming from another congregation and joining a church.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 7, 31, 89.

<sup>42</sup>Donald McGavran, “Church Growth” (Lecture Notes, 11 September 1974) Folder 7, Box 31, Collection 178, Papers of Donald Anderson and Mary Elizabeth McGavran 1906-1991, 2000. Archives of the Billy Graham Center, Wheaton, Illinois.

<sup>43</sup>McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 125.

<sup>44</sup>McGavran stated, “The central task is the communication of the Gospel to the billions who have yet to believe. The degree to which that is being accomplished can be measured in terms of countable disciples of Christ assembling under the Word of God in His churches to praise Him and to do His work.” McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 456.

understanding that the purpose of missions is ultimately numerical increase of disciples of Jesus Christ within a population and throughout the world.

### **Church Membership**

According to McGavran, church growth is evangelism that leads to responsible church membership. The church grows as converts are brought into the life of the church.<sup>45</sup> The task of missions is not done until believers are assimilated into a local church where they can be perfected. Rainer explained McGavran's understanding of church growth as, "first, conversion of the lost; second, a church-centered strategy for discipleship."<sup>46</sup> Church growth, therefore, involves both discipling and biblical perfecting. If discipling or perfecting is not taking place, neither is church growth. McGavran stated, "Church growth is as much concerned with soundly Christian life as with finding the lost. Be assured that the lost are never truly found until they are incorporated in the flock, obey the Shepherd, walk in His way, and are filled with the Holy Spirit."<sup>47</sup>

McGavran's church growth is an ecclesiocentric approach to missions.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup>McGavran et al., *Church Growth and Group Conversion*, 98.

<sup>46</sup>Rainer, *The Book of Church Growth*, 28. Note that Rainer and McGavran use the word disciple differently. McGavran is used the term "discipling" to refer to leading people to Christ and bringing them into the church. Rainer is using the term "discipleship" to refer to the process of a local church teaching a believer the Bible and how to follow Christ, which McGavran called "perfecting."

<sup>47</sup>McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 125.

<sup>48</sup>McGavran stated, "Church growth people hold a high doctrine of the Church, believing that the folding of people into Christ's flock is an essential part of their evangelization." McGavran, "The Discovery of Church Growth," 26.

McGavran stated, “Christian mission may be regarded as the process through which God makes known to all peoples His plan of salvation and calls them from death to life and responsible membership in His Church.”<sup>49</sup> McGavran’s desire was for the local church to usurp the hospital, school, and mission station as the milieu of missions. He believed God’s center for perfecting those who have been disciplined is the local church rather than any other sphere.

Church membership is the vital link between evangelism and the growth of the church. If church ingathering and perfecting are neglected, then church growth does not take place.<sup>50</sup> Those who are not brought into the life of the church often flounder in their Christian commitment. In a letter to Bill Bright, founder and president of Campus Crusade for Christ, McGavran described this problem this way: “When men of other places receive Christ, they so very often fail to find ongoing *koinonias* in their own cultural and ethnic and linguistic units. They then – too often – fall away.”<sup>51</sup>

### **Congregation Reproduction**

Church reproduction is essential to McGavran’s church growth concept.<sup>52</sup> Church growth is much more than an isolated church or a few churches growing. McGavran’s understanding of church growth encompasses Christianity spreading

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<sup>49</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 443

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., 5-6.

<sup>51</sup>Donald McGavran, letter to Bill Bright, 12 July 1971, Filing Cabinet 8, Drawer 1, The Donald McGavran Collection, The Latourette Library of the U.S. Center for World Missions, Pasadena, California.

<sup>52</sup>McGavran et al., *Church Growth and Group Conversion*, 98.

throughout an entire population. Populations come to Christ as churches reproduce and multiply throughout a populace. The church grows best and most rapidly through planting local churches, which is the way the church grew in the New Testament.<sup>53</sup> Church planting is the pattern of missions in the early church, as well as the most effective method of church growth.<sup>54</sup>

Church growth throughout a population cannot occur apart from churches reproducing themselves. Making disciples involves incorporating converts into local churches where they can be perfected—i.e., taught the Word of God and matured in their knowledge and obedience to Christ. Large scale church planting must take place in order for a non-Christian population to come to Christ and be incorporated into churches for perfecting. McGavran stated, “Churches, since their purpose is to obey Christ and walk in the light of his revelation, are the most potent originators of the good life known to man. Let us multiply them and improve them.”<sup>55</sup> The biblical task of making disciples is incomplete apart from the multiplication of churches throughout a population.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup>Ibid.

<sup>54</sup>Donald McGavran, "How Can an *Ethnos* Be Discipled," in *Missions Now: This Generation*, ed. Roger S. Greenway, John E. Kyle, and Donald A. McGavran (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990), 74-75.

<sup>55</sup>Donald McGavran, "The Dividends We Seek," *Christianity Today*, 19 January 1973, 5.

<sup>56</sup>In a letter to Don West, McGavran describes the purpose of his book *Bridges of God*, which was originally to be titled *How Peoples Become Christian*. McGavran stated, “I am happy that you found *How Peoples Become Christian* gave some insights into the ways of Missions. It should, for it is really an attempt at a philosophy of missions in the age that lies ahead of us, based on the proposals that the business of missions is the multiplication of living growing Churches, and that the best way to do this



McGavran believed evangelism separated from church growth truncates the Great Commission. He argued that evangelism that does not intend to gather new converts into the membership of the church is not biblical evangelism. He stated, “Evangelism must not only proclaim the Gospel, but also propose becoming an open disciple of Jesus Christ in his Church. It is at this point that biblical thinking is required.”<sup>57</sup>

### **McGavran’s Church Growth Research**

As the supervisor of multiple missionaries in India, McGavran began to ask the question, “Why are some churches growing while others in similar circumstances are not growing?” He had heard of the growth of other churches, while trying to lead the churches under his care toward growth. His search for effective missions methodology was not born out of an abstract problem, but out of the real demands of managing and supervising over eighty missionaries and their work. McGavran wanted to be a good steward of the work God had given him to oversee.<sup>58</sup> More importantly, he desired the

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is to consciously use missions to assist the maximum amount of growth.” Donald McGavran, letter to Don West, 1952, Folder 25, Box 1, Collection 178, Papers of Donald Anderson and Mary Elizabeth McGavran 1906-1991, 2000. Archives of the Billy Graham Center, Wheaton, Illinois.

<sup>57</sup>McGavran, "Loose the Churches: Let Them Go! An Essential Issue in Indian Evangelism," *Missiology* 1 (1973): 81.

<sup>58</sup>McGavran stated his concern, “In the mid-thirties I was executive secretary-treasurer of the India Mission of the Disciples of Christ—one of the larger missions in India, with more than eighty missionaries at work in 1930. All the money and accounts passed through my hands. I preached in the churches, knew intimately the pastors and missionaries, and observed that this massive outlay of men and money did not result in commensurate church growth. Of our seventeen congregations not one was growing. I

eternal salvation of the lost multitudes he was trying to reach in India.

McGavran argued that careful study of those situations in which church growth was occurring and not occurring would help expose causes leading to or preventing church growth. He believed such research would lead mission agencies and their missionaries to adopt ideas and methods that led to church growth, while eliminating those ideas and methods which impeded church growth. McGavran, therefore, believed “the facts of church growth are an indispensable aid to Christian mission.”<sup>59</sup>

As McGavran began to study the causes of growth and non-growth, he observed three hindrances to growth. The first hindrance was mission agencies and missionaries who did not see church growth as the central aim of missions. As a result, little effort was put into church growth. McGavran observed,

By the early twentieth century the missionary enterprise in consequence had become a very complex undertaking. Of the men and women devoting lifetimes of service to Christian mission 50 percent more or less were in school work; 20 percent were in medicine; 10 percent were in agricultural labors of one sort or another; 10 percent were in mission administration; and 10 percent were in active evangelism. These percentages, of course, varied from mission to mission and decade to decade. Some missions required missionary evangelists to compose 50 percent of the force. However, in many such cases the evangelistic missionary had many other tasks. He was frequently the station treasurer, the preacher in established congregations, the teacher in educational institutions, and the administrator of the mission station.<sup>60</sup>

McGavran argued that good but aimless church and mission work is the enemy of Christian mission: “The Great Enemy . . . is good inherited mission programs . . . .

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wondered why. We had only two thousand communicant members after more than fifty years of work.” McGavran, “The Discovery of Church Growth,” 15.

<sup>59</sup>Donald McGavran, "Conclusion," in *Church Growth and Christian Mission*, ed. Donald McGavran (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 243.

<sup>60</sup>McGavran, "Missiology Faces the Lion," 336.

This church and mission were doing other things than propagating the faith. Good works- of course! Multiplying churches- no.”<sup>61</sup> The good had become the enemy of the best. McGavran argued once Christians understood that Christianity spreads as churches are multiplied throughout a population, missionary labors would be redirected away from other good missionary work and toward church planting. The facts of research would set a new course for mission agencies.

The second hindrance to church growth McGavran observed was a deficient understanding concerning how church growth most naturally occurs through people movements. Mission stations hindered church growth because they often resulted in new believers leaving their community, to the point that becoming a Christian was seen as synonymous with separating from one’s people and gathering into a compound of foreigners.<sup>62</sup> Additionally, Christians lost their opportunity to witness to their relatives and friends due to social dislocation.<sup>63</sup> In commenting upon his research on church

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<sup>61</sup>Donald McGavran, 24 August 1965, address notes, “Determined Aggressive Plans for Church Growth,” Folder 1, Box 83, Collection 178, Papers of Donald Anderson and Mary Elizabeth McGavran 1906-1991, 2000. Archives of the Billy Graham Center, Wheaton, Illinois.

<sup>62</sup>Donald McGavran, *The Bridges of God: A Study in the Strategy of Missions* (London: World Dominion Press, 1955), 46. McGavran understood the term “foreigner” not necessarily referring to an American or European missionary, but as anyone who is not a part of the people group from which an individual came. McGavran stated, “The word *foreigner* refers here, of course, and not to European missionaries, but to Christians of other tribes. To Nadar Christians in South India, for example, Syrian Christians are as ‘foreign’ as are Koreans or Germans, in dress, language, customs, everything but the land upon which they stand.” Idem, *Ethnic Realities and the Church*, 124.

<sup>63</sup>McGavran stated regarding mission stations in Mandala, Patpara, and Deori India, “Spiritually all three stations have been sterile. They have not won to Christ groups of men and women in the surrounding villages. This is not attributable to moral

growth, McGavran stated, “We have seen again and again how the central station tradition while saving individuals has lost peoples, arrested growing movements, and focused attention on procedures which do not multiply congregations.”<sup>64</sup> People movements, on the other hand, allow the gospel to spread and churches to multiply because they do not have the same cultural barriers.<sup>65</sup> They allow people to become Christian while avoiding social dislocation, thus allowing the gospel to spread through a web of relationships.

McGavran was convinced once adequate research showed that church growth was taking place among people movements while at the same time not among mission stations, the mission station approach would be replaced with a people movement approach— i.e. indigenous church planting movements. McGavran argued that Christians

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depravity or spiritual ignorance. Christians of these stations know the Christian religion, worship the Lord, and live sober and God-fearing lives. It is attributable to the fact that the group is dependent upon the Mission and is out of contact with its neighbours. They have been moulded by the orphanage-mission combination into people so different from their neighbours that they do not and probably cannot mingle with them in an effective way.” McGavran et al., *Church Growth and Group Conversion*, 42.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid., 106.

<sup>65</sup>McGavran stated, “The Christian faith – once in and abundant – flows well within each piece of the mosaic, but tends to stop at linguistic and ethnic barriers. Most existing congregations are shut up to one language, one ethnic unit, and frequently to one social or economic class. Since men like to become Christians without crossing barriers, the first task among the two billion is an evangelism designed to multiply churches in each new piece of the magnificent mosaic. Only after numerous indigenous churches exist in each piece, has spontaneous evangelism much chance of succeeding.” McGavran, “The Dimensions of World Evangelization,” 100. McGavran commented, “Mankind does not exist as one homogeneous whole, through which the Christian faith can readily run.” Ibid.

should be given the facts concerning the growth of the Church by group conversions in peoples prepared by God. The light as to how peoples become Christians should be made available in the vernacular in every non-multiplying Church where Christianization by extraction is the prevailing pattern.<sup>66</sup>

The third factor hindering church growth was that few resources were used for church growth. Most of the money given for missions was going toward humanitarian work of the mission station institutions—and hospitals and schools are not cheap, nor is humanitarian aid. McGavran observed, “In some cases less than 10 percent of the total resources of the missions and denominations was spent on effective evangelism.”<sup>67</sup> Correspondingly, he was frustrated that the majority of missionary efforts and resources were spent upon missionary methods that were inimical to church growth. McGavran stated, “The lion’s share of time, attention, prayer, budget, school and hospital opportunity is usually given to the church which cannot grow by spontaneous expansion.”<sup>68</sup> Denominations were not aiming for church growth and were consequently not experiencing it.

McGavran thought research could help missionary agencies see that while they state evangelism and multiplying churches as their main objectives, how they spend their money says something much different. In this sense, research can play an important role of accountability within the missionary enterprise. McGavran stated,

Christians, who supposed that missionary societies existed in order to preach the gospel and bring the nations to faith in Jesus Christ, suddenly find that their society has transformed itself into an agency of the mission of God, and is concerned with “many urgent duties.” Preaching the gospel is—to it—only one small part of the

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<sup>66</sup>McGavran et al., *Church Growth and Group Conversion*, 107.

<sup>67</sup>McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 61.

<sup>68</sup>McGavran et al., *Church Growth and Group Conversion*, 104.

whole. In some denominations if a Christian in some local church gives a hundred dollars to “our world mission,” he can be certain that less than twenty dollars will get out of the United States, and less than two dollars will go into any kind of preaching the gospel with the intent to persuade men to become disciples of Christ.<sup>69</sup>

McGavran claimed if the goal of missions is to make disciples, resources should be allocated with the goal in mind.<sup>70</sup> In a letter to Dale Fiers, president of the United Christian Missionary Society, McGavran stated, “A Missionary Society. . . exists to extend the Church, to multiply salvation, to bring peoples, societies, to a saving knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. The growth of the Churches must be a critical factor in the distribution of resources.”<sup>71</sup> McGavran believed that the facts of church growth

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<sup>69</sup>McGavran, "Crisis of Identity," 11.

<sup>70</sup>McGavran stated, “Churches and Christians are not free to divert to other causes the sacred resources gathered to make Christ known, loved, and obeyed everywhere.” Donald McGavran "The Dimensions of World Evangelization," in *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, International Congress on World Evangelization, Lausanne, Switzerland, ed. J. D. Douglas (Minneapolis: World Wide Publications, 1975), 95.

<sup>71</sup>Donald McGavran, letter to President Fiers, 3 November 1951, Folder 24, Box 1, Collection 178, Papers of Donald Anderson and Mary Elizabeth McGavran 1906-1991, 2000. Archives of the Billy Graham Center, Wheaton, Illinois. In the same letter, McGavran stated, “There is a pernicious error in our UC Missionary Society set up . . . The error is this: that allocations of men and money are determined quite largely on the size of the existing work, instead of on the basis of the actual or potential growth of the Church. If we have a big station in any land, a station where there are only five baptisms from among non-Christians in any decade, that station gets just as much emphasis, just as many new missionaries, just as much current expense, just as much building funds, as does a big station where hundreds are being baptized each decade from outside the Church.” Ibid. In a letter a few days earlier to “Ken,” McGavran argued for the necessity and good of the work in Takhatpur, in part based upon its financial efficiency: “Let us look at it another way, Ken. The Christians here are expensive—these hundred new families have cost quite a bit. By the time one figures in missionaries salaries, and permanent investment, and the preachers’ salaries and so on and so forth, the Mission machine which God has used to bring about this significant addition to His Church has cost let us say 200,000 rupees to run. That is, these new families have cost about 2000 rupees a piece. That looks expensive, does it not? It will continue to look expensive,

indicate there should be a drastic redistribution of resources away from mission stations and toward people movements.<sup>72</sup>

### Conclusion

Six important features of McGavran's church growth thought can be concluded from the content of this chapter. First, McGavran's belief in the authority and infallibility of the Bible as God's revelation became a foundational theological assumption of McGavran's church growth thought. Second, in McGavran's missiological context "mission stations" rather than churches had become the milieu of mission work and perfecting. Third, McGavran's church growth concept was conversion growth.<sup>73</sup> Fourth, incorporating converts into local churches was an essential facet of McGavran's church growth thought. Fifth, church growth is necessarily more than the growth of individual churches, it includes the multiplication of churches throughout a population. Sixth, research can help missionaries to avoid methods which hinder church growth and adopt methods which help produce church growth.

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until you sit down to figure out what the new families in Pendra or Bilaspur or Damoh or Mungeli have cost. In those stations new families cost about 100,000 rupees a piece." Idem, letter to Ken, 25 October 1950, Folder 22, Box 1, Collection 178, Papers of Donald Anderson and Mary Elizabeth McGavran 1906-1991, 2000. Archives of the Billy Graham Center, Wheaton, Illinois.

<sup>72</sup>MacGavran stated, "The days of great secular influence of foreign mission stations apart from great national Churches are probably over. . . . there is now a use for mission resources which will do more for nation building, more for international peace, and more the Christ than the further penetration of non-Christian faiths and cultures from the vantage point of a foreign mission station." McGavran, *The Bridges of God*, 66.

<sup>73</sup>See Donald McGavran and Win Arn, *How to Grow a Church* (Glendale, CA: Gospel Literature International 1973), 57-59; idem, *Effective Evangelism*, 42-44.

A crucial question related to the role of perfecting in McGavran's church growth thought is "How did McGavran define and use the terms "discipling" and "perfecting?" Additionally, what was McGavran's understanding concerning the nature of the relationship between "discipling" and "perfecting"? Those questions are answered in the next chapter.



## CHAPTER 3

### MCGAVRAN'S DEFINITION AND UTILIZATION OF THE TERMS "DISCIPLING" AND "PERFECTING"

In 1955, with the publication of *The Bridges of God*, McGavran began using two church growth terms to describe mission work: "discipling" and "perfecting." According to McGavran, "discipling" is the first part of church growth, and "perfecting" is "the second part of church growth."<sup>1</sup> They are the two stages of the Great Commission.<sup>2</sup> A clear understanding of McGavran's definition and use of each term, as well as their relationship to one another, is necessary to understand McGavran's church growth thought.

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<sup>1</sup>Donald McGavran and Win Arn, *How to Grow a Church* (Glendale, CA: Gospel Literature International 1973), 80. Broadly defined, "discipling" is the first stage of bringing people to Christ and baptizing them into the membership of the church, and "perfecting" is the subsequent stage of teaching them to observe all things Jesus has commanded. Donald McGavran, *The Bridges of God: A Study in the Strategy of Missions* (London: World Dominion Press, 1955), 13.

<sup>2</sup>McGavran based these two stages upon the Matthean version of the Great Commission found in Matt 28:18-20 - "And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, 'All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth, Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.' Amen."

## McGavran's Definition of Discipling

McGavran believed the Great Commission commands Christians to make disciples, and he understood the verb “to disciple” to mean the actual conversion of peoples or persons. While McGavran continued to use the term “discipling” for the entirety of his life, he defined and used it differently in his early and latter writings.

### Discipling in McGavran's Early Writings

McGavran started using the term “discipling” with the publication of *The Bridges of God*, where it referred to the process of a non-Christian people turning to faith in Christ. Missionaries are “discipling” when they are endeavoring to turn a people to initial faith in Christ.<sup>3</sup> He defined discipling to mean that within a people group,

the claim of polytheism, idolatry, fetishism or any other man made religion on its corporate loyalty is eliminated . . . its individuals feel united around Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, believe themselves to be members of His Church, and realize that our fold are Christians, our book is the Bible, and our house of worship is the church.<sup>4</sup>

Discipling, therefore, involves three important elements. First, people must turn from and eliminate old religious beliefs and practices. Second, people must believe in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. Third, people must become members of the church.

According to McGavran, “from 1953 to 1971 in church growth thinking the new technical term ‘discipling’ meant helping a people (a corporate body of men and

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<sup>3</sup>McGavran, *The Bridges of God*, 14.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

women) turn *from non-Christian Faith to Christ.*"<sup>5</sup> Discipling involved substantial numbers of one tribe or caste turning to faith in Christ as Lord and Savior and becoming baptized members of the church.<sup>6</sup> McGavran believed discipling necessarily involved repenting of and eliminating "rival religious loyalties" and the "abandonment" of all other authoritative gods and faiths.<sup>7</sup>

In his early writings McGavran did not use the verb "to disciple" to describe an individual experience of salvation, but rather as a technical term for the first turning of a people group to Christ.<sup>8</sup> The discipling of a people group involved many individual salvations. The distinction between people groups and individuals is an important one in understanding McGavran's use of the word "discipling." He did not believe that what he said about people groups turning to Christ could always be applied to individuals.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Donald McGavran, "How about that new verb 'to disciple?'" *Church Growth Bulletin*, Vol. 15 No. 5 (May 1979): 266.

<sup>6</sup>McGavran stated, "I used it first in Bridges of God and defined it carefully to mean precisely 'the winning to Christian Faith and baptizing members of substantial numbers of Animists, Hindus or Buddhists of one tribe or caste.'" Donald McGavran, 13 December 1978, "Address At Overseas Crusades Dinner," Folder 2, Box 83, Collection 178, Papers of Donald Anderson and Mary Elizabeth McGavran 1906-1991, 2000. Archives of the Billy Graham Center, Wheaton, Illinois, 4-5.

<sup>7</sup>McGavran, *The Bridges of God*, 38.

<sup>8</sup>McGavran, "How about that new verb," 266. McGavran further defined "discipling" as "the movement of a non-Christian society under the influence of the Holy Spirit such that large numbers of its members became baptized and committed Christians, and becoming a Christian no longer meant leaving the tribe or caste." *Ibid.*, 267.

<sup>9</sup>McGavran had said in *The Bridges of God* that the discipling of a people group will be followed by ethical changes. See McGavran, *The Bridges of God*, 14. McGavran later stated that if a person did not understand he was speaking exclusively of "corporate action," and not an individual conversion experience, he could misinterpret his words to mean "an individual could become a Christian without any ethical

## Discipling in McGavran's Latter Writings

Prior to 1971, McGavran used the word “to disciple” as a “people movement” term. According to McGavran, “‘to disciple’ did not speak to the normal individualistic experience of North Americans. It was a technical term for the first turning from non-Christian Faith” of a people group.<sup>10</sup> However, after 1971 “to disciple” began to be commonly used by those within an American context for the process of individuals becoming Christians, as well as the much different process of existing Christians growing in their dedication to Christ.<sup>11</sup>

McGavran recognized that multiple meanings and uses of the verb “to disciple” were leading to confusion, and he decided to clarify three separate meanings in the May 1979 issue of the *Church Growth Bulletin*.<sup>12</sup> In the lead article, McGavran gave three definitions of the verb “to disciple,” which he called D 1, D 2, and D 3.

D 1 would mean the turning of a non-Christian society for the first time to Christ. D 2 would mean the turning of any individual from non-faith to faith in Christ and his incorporation in a church. D 3 would mean teaching an existing Christian as much of the truths of the Bible as possible.<sup>13</sup>

McGavran himself began to use the term “discipling” according to these new uses when

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commitment.” McGavran, “How about that new verb,” 267.

<sup>10</sup>McGavran, “How about that new verb,” 266.

<sup>11</sup>Donald McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1980), 169-70.

<sup>12</sup>McGavran, “How about that new verb,” 265-70.

<sup>13</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 170.

writing about church growth within an American or individualistic context.<sup>14</sup> He stated, “In individualistic American society, in a land where becoming Christian did not mean ‘leaving one’s own people and joining another people,’ D 2 and D 3 were desirable processes.”<sup>15</sup>

McGavran, however, was worried that the new non-evangelistic D 3 definition given to “discipling” would lead missionaries and missionary organizations away from the task of effective evangelism. In an address to Overseas Crusades in 1978, McGavran encouraged the organization to understand its task as “bringing the unsaved to saving faith,” and to not think of “discipling” in the sense of “working with existing Christians to make them better Christians.”<sup>16</sup> In McGavran’s latter writings he preferred to use the words “effective evangelism” when referring to the salvation of individuals and their incorporation into the church.<sup>17</sup>

### **McGavran’s Definition of Perfecting**

“Discipling” is the first stage of the Great Commission, and “perfecting” is the second stage. According to McGavran, the task of church growth begins with discipling,

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<sup>14</sup>McGavran, “How about that new verb,” 267.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 267.

<sup>16</sup>McGavran, “Address At Overseas Crusades Dinner,” 4-5.

<sup>17</sup>McGavran continued to use the verb “to disciple” or “discipling” when referring to people groups. For instance, Donald McGavran, *Effective Evangelism: A Theological Mandate* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company 1988), 17-18, 29, 46-48, 53, 59, 61-62, 64, 77, 83, 84, 87, 98, 105, 116, 120, 124. Occasionally, however, McGavran did use the term “discipling” outside of the context of people groups. Ibid., 108-09.

but is incomplete without the important task of perfecting.<sup>18</sup> As was the case with the term “discipling,” McGavran used the term “perfecting” differently throughout his life.

### **Perfecting in McGavran’s Early Writings**

McGavran initially used the term “perfecting” in the context of people movements. In *The Bridges of God* he defined “perfecting” as

the bringing about of an ethical change in the disciplined group, and increasing achievement of a thoroughly Christian way of life for the community as a whole, and the conversion of the individuals making up each generation as they come to the age of decision. All that great effort of the churches in old-established “Christian” civilizations, which deals with holy living and with social, racial, and political justice is part of the process of perfecting. So also is all that prayer and labour which is dedicated to bringing millions of individuals, generation after generation, into a vital and personal relationship with Jesus Christ.<sup>19</sup>

McGavran’s definition of perfecting involved several important components. First, perfecting was subsequent to discipling. Second, perfecting brought about ethical transformation and achievement.<sup>20</sup> Third, perfecting achieved societal changes in communal life, including issues of social, racial, and political justice. Fourth, perfecting encompassed spiritual disciplines or practices dedicated to a “vital and personal

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<sup>18</sup>McGavran and Arn, *How to Grow a Church*, 80.

<sup>19</sup>McGavran, *The Bridges of God*, 15.

<sup>20</sup>McGavran believed perfecting should be based upon the nature of God. He stated, “God is a God of righteousness, truth, and mercy and that he directs and enables members of his household to manifest these virtues.” Donald McGavran, “The Great Debate in Missions,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 5 (1970): 170. Thus perfecting is initiated and enabled by God. The fruits of perfecting are not the results of human endeavors or human achievement apart from the work of God; they are the “natural outcome of the ethical life graciously given by the indwelling Holy Spirit.” *Ibid.*

relationship with Jesus Christ.” Fifth, perfecting included the conversion of individuals in subsequent generations. Sixth, perfecting was an ongoing process.<sup>21</sup>

McGavran used the new verb “perfecting” for missionary work which sought to help a people become better Christians. Missionaries were “perfecting” a people when they were trying to help a disciplined people grow in spiritual maturity and biblical obedience. Perfecting should be distinguished from discipling as a separate and subsequent stage in a people movement. In an individualistic context, perfecting often takes place as a slow trickle of converts enter the church. However, in a people movement there is such a vast ingathering of new converts that on a practical level, perfecting cannot easily take place as the converts enter the church. Most perfecting takes place as the whole of the new disciplined people grow in biblical knowledge and obedience, rather than through a one-by-one process. In commenting upon people movements, McGavran stated, “They move as social wholes. So the church has always been faced with great ingatherings- much greater than the church in that area can possibly perfect as they come in.”<sup>22</sup> McGavran argued the Jerusalem church faced a similar challenge: “What a terrific problem the 3000 on Pentecost must have posed! Yet they

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<sup>21</sup>McGavran, *The Bridges of God*, 15. McGavran believed the church was always and constantly in need of more perfecting. In the context of perfecting, he stated, “Congregations as they are—so imperfectly showing forth His glories—are constantly going further.” Idem, *Understanding Church Growth*, 174.

<sup>22</sup>Donald McGavran, letter to Erik W Nielsen, 26 June 1955, Folder 1, Box 2, Collection 178, Papers of Donald Anderson and Mary Elizabeth McGavran 1906-1991, 2000. Archives of the Billy Graham Center, Wheaton, Illinois.

were all baptized on that day, and the liars and selfish and covetous amongst them were dealt with as a problem of church life.”<sup>23</sup>

The degree to which perfecting is taking place should be carefully documented to assist in making wise decisions concerning missions strategy, according to McGavran. Missionary statisticians were to be appointed within each major community and should “record data as to growth in grace and knowledge of the Lord, as well as figures concerning membership, baptisms, confirmations, transfers, reversions, exclusions and the like.”<sup>24</sup> The data would help missionaries better understand those areas of sanctification which were lacking and needed more attention. For instance, if missionaries knew the percentage of illiteracy among a people group, they would be in a better position to formulate a strategy for teaching Christians to read the Bible.

### **Perfecting in McGavran’s Latter Writings**

In McGavran’s latter writings, he began to apply the term “perfecting” to an American individualistic context. McGavran used the term to refer to the complex process whereby a people or person grows in grace.<sup>25</sup> Prior to 1971, McGavran had used the term “perfecting” exclusively in reference to societies or peoples, but after 1971 he

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

<sup>24</sup>Donald McGavran, "God's Royal Power in Zaire: An Evaluation of the State of the Church," *Missiology* 6 (1978): 89.

<sup>25</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 169.



began to also use the term to describe individuals growing in their dedication to Christ.<sup>26</sup> He defined perfecting as “making sure that the baptized believers become biblical Christians, that their lives are irradiated by the knowledge of the Bible, and that they have a deep personal relationship with Jesus Christ.”<sup>27</sup>

McGavran began using the term “perfecting” synonymously with D 3, his third definition of “discipling.”<sup>28</sup> He defined D 3 as, “the process by which an individual Christian becomes an informed, illuminated, thoroughly dedicated follower of Jesus Christ.”<sup>29</sup> McGavran similarly defined D 3 as, “teaching an existing Christian as much of the truths of the Bible as possible.”<sup>30</sup>

### **McGavran’s Choice of the Terms Discipling and Perfecting**

In a letter McGavran wrote in 1952 to Gay, he outlined his reasons for why he chose to use the terms “discipling” and “perfecting.” First, he wanted to differentiate between the initial coming of a people to faith in Christ and their subsequent spiritual growth. He thought the “Christianization-Sanctification issue” should be clearly

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<sup>26</sup>McGavran stated, “In short, from 1953 to 1971 in church growth thinking. . . ‘perfecting’ meant the whole complex process of growth in grace of *societies* including the conversion of individuals in that first and succeeding generation.” McGavran, “How about that new verb,” 266. After 1971 McGavran began using the words “discipling” and “perfecting” differently in order to apply them to an American individualistic context. See *ibid.*, 266-68.

<sup>27</sup>McGavran and Arn, *How to Grow Church*, 80.

<sup>28</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 170.

<sup>29</sup>McGavran, “How about that new verb,” 267.

<sup>30</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 170.

understood and differentiated.<sup>31</sup> He needed two terms in order to name these two distinct stages in missionary work among a people group.

Second, he wanted to use terms that would allow for the immediate baptism of those who profess faith in Christ. There were several readers of *The Bridges of God* manuscript prior to its publication who opposed it because “they did not approve of baptizing people merely on their statement that they accepted the Lord Jesus Christ.”<sup>32</sup> According to McGavran, they wanted to wait until persons had clearly demonstrated they have a “vital relationship to Jesus Christ.”<sup>33</sup> McGavran believed the initial step of coming to Christ should involve baptism into the church, and sanctification should be considered a subsequent step. He stated, “We cannot use any name for that initial step which will not permit (according to orthodox theology) baptism immediately.”<sup>34</sup> He chose discipling because it was a term that would necessarily involve baptism, and perfecting because it would necessarily be subsequent to baptism.

Third, he wanted to use biblical terms. He stated, “Disciple is patently Biblical and Great Commission (I quote the reference where I define the term, so that I get off to an authorized start.)”<sup>35</sup> He chose both of the terms from the King James Version of the

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<sup>31</sup>Donald McGavran, letter to Gay, 27 October, 1952, Folder 25, Box 1, Collection 178, Papers of Donald Anderson and Mary Elizabeth McGavran 1906-1991, 2000. Archives of the Billy Graham Center, Wheaton, Illinois.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid.

Bible where discipling is “the Greek verb in Matthew 28:19” and perfecting comes from the word meaning mature.<sup>36</sup> McGavran was concerned that if he used words that were not clearly biblical words he would be accused of being unbiblical. He stated, “If you induct folk, or commit them or initiate them, the conservative wings will maintain that is not Christian at all. That McGavran is a dangerous innovator . . . . They cannot object to discipling, because it is there in Matt. 28:19.”<sup>37</sup>

Fourth, McGavran chose discipling and perfecting because he believed they were better than the alternatives. He did not want to use non-biblical words because he believed they are easily misunderstood and misinterpreted. He gave serious thought to using the word “Christianization” rather than the word “disciple.”<sup>38</sup> However, McGavran chose to use the word “Christianization” to refer to “the task of discipling plus perfecting.” Thus discipling and perfecting are the two stages which make up Christianization.<sup>39</sup>

### **McGavran’s Rationale Concerning the Prominence of Discipling over Perfecting**

The primary focus of McGavran’s attention as a missiologist was discipling. He gave perfecting much consideration, but it was not his preeminent focus. He focused on discipling because he thought missionary agencies were neglecting discipling in the

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<sup>36</sup>Ibid.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid.

<sup>39</sup>See McGavran, *The Bridges of God*, 13-16.

midst of great opportunities. Many people groups were receptive to the gospel, and there were few serving as an advocate for their discipling. Perfecting, on the other hand, had many advocates. In a letter in 1955 he laid out his reasoning,

I have received quite a strong criticism from a friend in New York to the effect that mine is a very partisan presentation, that I leave out so much which has to do with the welfare and development of the churches, etc., etc. It is somewhat like your sentence in the third paragraph raised to the 10<sup>th</sup> degree. Now if that sort of thing comes to your attention there, I wish you would assure such critics that I am perfectly aware of the many issues and tasks and problems bound up with the perfecting of the churches. I do not deal with them precisely because they are dealt with by others quite adequately; while I find that the opportunities for discipling have practically no one to speak for them. Thus we are overwhelmed with perfecting in a day when great discipling is possible. We are grinding flour, when we should be reaping grain. The rains will come soon and what grain rots in the fields will never make flour. It is extraordinary what vigorous demands for breadth of vision the flour grinders make of one who is stressing reaping, though reaping is scarcely included in their field of vision at all.<sup>40</sup>

McGavran's greater focus upon discipling was not due to a lack of desire or concern for perfecting, but was a conscious attempt to bring a greater balance to missions thinking and strategy. He did not see there being an imminent danger of discipling eclipsing perfecting. He did, however, see there being a danger of focusing upon perfecting to the detriment and complete neglect of discipling. Therefore, he chose to work at combatting the latter instead of the former.

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<sup>40</sup>Donald McGavran, letter to George W. Carpenter, 1 June 1955, Folder 1, Box 2, Collection 178, Papers of Donald Anderson and Mary Elizabeth McGavran 1906-1991, 2000. Archives of the Billy Graham Center, Wheaton, Illinois. McGavran expressed a similar sentiment in a letter he wrote later that same month. He stated, "Please do not misunderstand me. My position in not that only numbers are important; but rather that, since the important field of growth in grace (largely covered by your competent questionnaire) is a subject of such universal concern, and since for many reasons the important field of numerical increase is a subject of such universal neglect, therefore, at the risk of seeming 'hipped' on the subject, I stress the need for including 'conversion increase' in any serious study of life and growth. Let us get a well rounded study out of the inquiry." Idem, letter to Erik W Nielsen, June 26, 1955.

McGavran thought the natural tendency to neglect reaching others and focus on helping self is a reason many churches were negligent in the area of outreach: “It is easier to serve one’s self than it is to serve other people.”<sup>41</sup> McGavran believed this tendency is a hindrance to church growth and needed to be consciously recognized and resisted. He stated, “Unless conscious effort is made to disciple, Christian mission tends to devote itself to serving or perfecting. . . . unless special attention is paid to discipling, ample evidence from many lands proves that it is consistently neglected.”<sup>42</sup>

### **McGavran’s Understanding of the Relationship between Discipling and Perfecting**

McGavran saw the tasks of “discipling” and “perfecting” as complementing one another, rather than existing as opposing tasks of the church. Discipling and perfecting are inseparably and intricately connected. McGavran stated, “It is historically and theologically demonstrable that rapid growth of the church and the perfecting of the saints are rightfully inseparable sides of the same coin.”<sup>43</sup>

#### **Discipling Precedes Perfecting**

Discipling precedes perfecting within a people group or an individual’s life. McGavran’s church growth thought emphasized the necessity of conversion in order for

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<sup>41</sup>McGavran and Arn, *How to Grow a Church*, 165.

<sup>42</sup>Donald McGavran, "Conclusion," in *Church Growth and Christian Mission*, ed. Donald A. McGavran (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 235-36.

<sup>43</sup>Donald McGavran, “Principles and Procedures in Church Growth,” (Class Lecture Notes) Folder 5, Box 35, Collection 178, Papers of Donald Anderson and Mary Elizabeth McGavran 1906-1991, 2000. Archives of the Billy Graham Center, Wheaton, Illinois.

there to be a true transformation of character. A person must repent of his or her sins and put faith in Jesus Christ before perfecting can take place.<sup>44</sup> Only after a person's heart is changed by the Holy Spirit can there be a true and lasting transformation of character.<sup>45</sup> Therefore, McGavran thought that if discipling declines or is neglected, eventually the decline of perfecting follows suit. McGavran stated, "Aftercare is, of course, crucially important; but the refinement does not vitiate the statement: 'No baptisms: no growth.' The Church through salvations and baptisms must obtain new Christians before it can care for them properly. It is also true to say 'No baptisms: no aftercare!'"<sup>46</sup>

Perfecting should be the outcome of discipling. At conversion the Holy Spirit produces a fundamental spiritual change within a people or person, indwells him, and begins to mold and shape his worldview and behavior.<sup>47</sup> According to McGavran, the Holy Spirit moves people to take those "steps which at that time are most essential to them— to renounce all other gods, believe on Jesus Christ as Savior, and accept the Bible as sole Scripture."<sup>48</sup> He believed once these first fundamental changes had taken place

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<sup>44</sup>McGavran stated, "The idea that in the midst of spiritually hungry multitudes, there can be 'spiritual' growth permanently divorced from conversion increase, seems deficient to us." McGavran et al., *Church Growth and Group Conversion*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (Pasadena: William Carrey Library, 1973), 97-98.

<sup>45</sup>For example, McGavran stated, "When the population of the world has become more Christian, it will hear almighty God's command to treat other men fairly and to obey that command more faithfully. It is useless to expect that non-Christians will be as interested as Christians in treating all men as God's children." McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 103.

<sup>46</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 102.

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*, 288.

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*, 194-95.

and converts had been baptized and gathered into churches, “other advances will follow as the day the night.”<sup>49</sup> He stated, “Once Christ is placed at the centre of the life of any community, once He is enthroned in the hearts of the persons who make it up, once the Bible is accepted as the Word of God, ethical and spiritual changes of a high order will inevitably follow.”<sup>50</sup>

McGavran pointed out that the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit is a process that takes time. Not all the changes will take place immediately, and some may take a long time to come to fruition. Spiritual transformation is “a fruit of the Spirit [and] . . . fruit often takes a long time to mature.”<sup>51</sup>

On the mission field, if Christian leaders waited for perfecting to occur before continuing to disciple a people group, discipling would never take place because the perfecting process of existing believers is never complete. Therefore, if perfecting is required before continuing to disciple, it destroys discipling. McGavran stated, the “second stage overlaps the first, but it cannot precede it without destroying it.”<sup>52</sup>

Missionaries and churches requiring a degree of perfecting before baptizing converts into the church often create a double standard. McGavran argued they were at times requiring “evidence of an ethical change or dedication to Jesus Christ which some

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<sup>49</sup>Ibid.

<sup>50</sup>McGavran, *The Bridges of God*, 14.

<sup>51</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 230.

<sup>52</sup>McGavran, *The Bridges of God*, 16.

Christians in the older Churches have not yet achieved.”<sup>53</sup> McGavran noted all Christians are “at best, only partially obedient to God’s revelation.”<sup>54</sup> He went on to say, “No so-called Christian nation has ever lived a national life completely or even largely pleasing to God.”<sup>55</sup>

McGavran argued that missionaries who require ethical achievement in advance of discipling (a profession of faith and baptism into the membership of the church) are functioning “as if we were saved by our works.”<sup>56</sup> McGavran noted three examples of churches wrongly requiring perfecting before discipling. The first example was a church that would not baptize illiterates because they could not read the Bible. McGavran likened this to refusing someone baptism because he has bad eyesight. He stated, “The intelligent leader of fifty years of age whose eyes are weak literally cannot become a Christian.”<sup>57</sup> The second example was a church that would baptize only those who gave up drinking banana beer.<sup>58</sup> The third example was the church that would not

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<sup>53</sup>McGavran, “Discipling Precedes Perfecting,” 167.

<sup>54</sup>Donald McGavran, “The Future of the Christian Religion: The Place of Christianity in a World of Many Religions,” in *Religion and Future: Essays in Honour of Prof G. C. Oosthuizen*, ed. Gerald J. Pillay (Pretoria: HSRC Publishers, 1992), 116.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid.

<sup>56</sup>Donald McGavran, “Discipling Precedes Perfecting,” *Church Growth Bulletin*, 2 (1966): 167.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., 168.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid.



allow a polygamist to be “instructed in the Way, or permitted to attend catechumen classes!!”<sup>59</sup> McGavran argued,

All this is legalism. We are saved by faith in Jesus Christ, not by our own deeds. Christ in us, His grace, and His Holy Spirit, cleanse our hearts. Then we are able to see what God requires. Righteousness is the work of the Holy Spirit—how can we demand it as a prerequisite to Christian decision! How can it come before the church and its members are well instructed in the Law, born again of the Spirit, and have become a worshipping, Bible-obeying community, which regularly receives the means of grace?<sup>60</sup>

McGavran argued that as long as a people group demonstrates great receptivity to the gospel, proper mission strategy is to focus upon the first stage of discipling. After the people group has initially come to faith in Christ, perfecting should follow. Often opportunities to see great ingatherings were lost because once a small number of people converted, discipling was replaced with perfecting. He stated, “The Church which stands on the edge of a great Discipling One (D 1) where tens of thousands of its kindred are friendly to the idea of becoming Christians, has a God-given duty to disciple.”<sup>61</sup> In order to seize the opportunity of such a situation (a potential people movement), “any perfecting done must above all inculcate that mind of Christ which sought—and seeks—

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<sup>59</sup>Ibid. McGavran believed developing a biblical theology and practice of marriage properly belonged to the second stage of perfecting. He was opposed to polygamy, but did not think monogamy is “one of the marks of the Church and one of the conditions of baptism.” Donald McGavran, review of *Polygamy Reconsidered: African Plural Marriage and the Christian Churches*, by Eugene Hillman, *Missiology* 4, no. 4 (1976): 508-09. In the same review, however, McGavran argued that monogamy should be taught as the biblical approach to marriage and the church should work toward the eventual elimination of polygamy.

<sup>60</sup>McGavran, “Discipling Precedes Perfecting,” 168.

<sup>61</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 170.

the salvation of all men.”<sup>62</sup> After a people have been disciplined, an individualistic approach to perfecting which perfects persons as they “trickle” in is a more suitable missions policy.<sup>63</sup>

### **Discipling Strengthens Perfecting**

McGavran also believed discipling strengthens perfecting. He stated, “D 3 is best carried on in growing Churches, not in static defeated ones.”<sup>64</sup> Active participation in spreading the gospel improves the spiritual life of the church. McGavran stated, “I know of nothing which would vivify the church and the school more, which would make our Christian schools more Christian than to be pervaded with an intense longing to spread the great salvation of God, now.”<sup>65</sup>

Discipling augments other functions of the church often associated with perfecting. For example, discipling produces a close fellowship among believers who participate in it. McGavran gave the example of a men’s group: “One of the closest fellowships I ever saw in a church was in a men’s group determined that it was going to reach its town for Christ. . . . In this meaningful work they had much good fellowship and came to know each other very intimately.”<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>62</sup>Ibid., 170.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid.

<sup>64</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 171.

<sup>65</sup>Donald McGavran, letter to Members of Refresher Course, 16 April 1935, Folder 8, Box 1, Collection 178, Papers of Donald Anderson and Mary Elizabeth McGavran 1906-1991, 2000. Archives of the Billy Graham Center, Wheaton, Illinois.

<sup>66</sup>McGavran and Arn, *How to Grow a Church*, 166.

Christians grow best when they are discipling. McGavran stated,

There is no better way to increase conviction, knowledge of the Bible, and Christian character than to win others to Christian faith. He who is persuading others is much more likely to take his faith seriously than he who is concentrating attention on himself. Effort devoted to discipling is addressed to the highest form of spiritual development, not diverted from it. . . . Discipling is a high form of perfecting. Resources allocated to discipling are in reality allocated to major increase of Christian quality of life.<sup>67</sup>

McGavran thought getting Christians and churches involved in discipling is a great cause of the “spiritual development of the existing Christians.”<sup>68</sup>

### **Biblical Perfecting Improves Discipling**

At the same time, McGavran saw many aspects of perfecting which help produce growth in discipling. First, an intense faith that overcomes fear helps Christians to be bold witnesses.<sup>69</sup> Second, the prayer life of the church fuels the growth of the church.<sup>70</sup> Third, the faithfulness of the church in teaching the Bible is a determining factor in the growth of churches. According to McGavran, “the Bible must be taught

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<sup>67</sup>Donald McGavran, *How Churches Grow: The New Frontiers of Mission* (London: World Dominion Press, 1959), 98.

<sup>68</sup>*Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>69</sup>McGavran stated, “we’ve discovered that generally faith is best communicated when there is fervent faith to communicate. When we believe that the most important thing a man can do is to get right with God, that there is no loss compared to eternal loss and no gain compared to eternal gain, then God abundantly blesses.” McGavran and Arn, *How to Grow a Church*, 120.

<sup>70</sup>McGavran stated, “Fervent faith and ardent prayer are as necessary to growth of the Church as sunshine is to the growth of grain.” McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 125.

(and often translated), the Word must be proclaimed.”<sup>71</sup> Fourth, consecration and devotion in one’s relationship with Christ results in a desire to tell others about Jesus.<sup>72</sup> Fifth, Christian love causes Christians “to persuade their intimates and relatives that it is a wonderful thing to become a follower of the Lord of Life.”<sup>73</sup>

Biblical perfecting reinforces and improves discipling by addressing sin issues. Sin brings the discipling task of a church to a halt. Sin must be confessed and removed for discipling to move forward. McGavran stated, “Sometimes indifference and sin stain a congregation. Until these are cleared out of the way, confessed and purged, nothing much is going to happen in the way of growth.”<sup>74</sup> Sin and worldliness keep churches from growing.

McGavran believed sin destroys the spiritual foundation necessary for a church to grow. He gave two biblical examples: “Thyatira fell into sin. A church cannot grow on that kind of a foundation. The church must be a pure church. . . . The sin in Corinth—the jealousy, strife and sexual immorality Paul saw there—no doubt damaged the church.”<sup>75</sup> McGavran went on to say, though, that a church should never wait to disciple

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<sup>71</sup>Ibid., 236.

<sup>72</sup>McGavran stated, “One of the chief reasons why churches grow anywhere is that some person has become a flaming Christian, living his life in joyful, obedient relationship to Jesus Christ.” Ibid., 125. McGavran also stated another cause of church growth is “individuals whose conversion was so deep and whose knowledge of Christ so warm and vivid that they could not help but tell others of their Savior.” Ibid., 160.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid., 236.

<sup>74</sup>McGavran and Arn, *How to Grow a Church*, 8.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid., 28.

until it is free of sin since it is impossible to be completely free of sin, and to not disciple is a sin itself. The church is to biblically deal with sin in the church, while continually preaching Christ.<sup>76</sup>

As believers grow in the grace of God, they become more like Jesus, and in so doing, they “make bringing salvation to men a chief purpose of their lives. . . . They seek to win men to Christ. The good life they now enjoy they ardently wish others to experience.”<sup>77</sup> Quality thus produces a desire for quantity.<sup>78</sup>

On the other hand, McGavran stated, “I disagree profoundly when anyone says quality, not quantity . . . is more important than evangelism. As soon as we separate quality from the passion to win men to Christ, it ceases to be Christian quality.”<sup>79</sup> McGavran believed the church must work for and desire quality among its members without allowing that desire to “lead us away from propagating the Gospel and multiplying churches at home and abroad.”<sup>80</sup> Churches that are not right with God become indifferent to the task of making disciples.

McGavran believed discipling and the church growth that results are products of being fully biblical and spiritual. He lamented that many who are somewhat biblical

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<sup>76</sup>Ibid., 29.

<sup>77</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 192.

<sup>78</sup>See McGavran and Arn, *How to Grow Church*, 83.

<sup>79</sup>Donald McGavran, “Growth: The Crucial Contemporary Issue Before the Church” (Address notes) Folder 4, Box 83, Collection 178, Papers of Donald Anderson and Mary Elizabeth McGavran 1906-1991, 2000. Archives of the Billy Graham Center, Wheaton, Illinois.

<sup>80</sup>Ibid.

and spiritual in other areas of the Christian life are so often not biblical and spiritual in the task of discipling. In one example McGavran stated concerning a Mennonite church,

Had the rural Mennonite congregation been fully biblical and spiritually renewed, they would have made every effort to multiply Mennonite congregations in the cities. . . They not only would have shepherded scattered Mennonites but also would have won many of the secular nominally Christian and indeed pagan women and men living in the cities of North America and brought them to fervent belief in the Lord. The Mennonites were not biblically sound enough or spiritually filled enough to do this.<sup>81</sup>

Discipling is accomplished by those who love Christ and are willing to make sacrifices to follow him. Apart from purity of devotion to Christ—i.e., what is produced through perfecting—church growth does not take place. McGavran noted, “Churches do not multiply and spread across a land or through a city unless among the multitudes who hear there are many who obey and—loving Christ more than father or mother—deny themselves, take up their cross daily, and follow Him.”<sup>82</sup>

### **Discipling is a Goal of Perfecting**

One purpose in biblical perfecting is producing believers who are discipling. If discipling does not hold a place of preeminence for believers, then a central aspect of perfecting is lost. McGavran stated,

In relation to the complex process which is missiology, the actual communication of the Christian Faith is the *sine quo non*. It is that for which all other parts exist. Missions do many things. They heal sickness. They impart education. They train pastors. They preach sermons. They feed the house orphans. They promote international friendship. They revolutionize social structures. They elevate the status of women. They ban the slave trade. They multiply churches. They promote

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<sup>81</sup>McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 36.

<sup>82</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 5.

peace. But they do all these things to communicate faith in Christ and responsible membership in His Body the Church.<sup>83</sup>

Every various aspect and ministry of the church should have discipling as one of its goals and functions. Each organization and ministry of the church must see itself as a means for bringing people to Christ. As shown earlier, one example McGavran gave is men's ministry. He stated, "The men get together, have a good time, come to know each other, and study the Bible. But the men's organization must not stop there. The men's organization, if properly understood, is also a means for reaching other men."<sup>84</sup>

McGavran also applied this dual function of perfecting and discipling to the Sunday School ministry of the church as well as all the ministry organizations of the church. He stated, "it is so very important that all the organizations of the church see themselves in a double light."<sup>85</sup>

Again, a goal of biblical perfecting is to produce within believers a desire to see others disciplined and perfected.<sup>86</sup> McGavran stated, "Christians must, of course, be concerned to lead thoroughly Christian lives. They must also realize that any such life must devote a large part of its thoughts, labors, and prayers to winning men and women

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<sup>83</sup>Donald McGavran, "Advanced Church Growth" (Lecture Notes, Winter 1978) Folder 5, Box 85, Collection 178, Papers of Donald Anderson and Mary Elizabeth McGavran 1906-1991, 2000. Archives of the Billy Graham Center, Wheaton, Illinois.

<sup>84</sup>McGavran and Arn, *How to Grow a Church*, 165.

<sup>85</sup>Ibid.

<sup>86</sup>McGavran stated, "if one is to be a biblically sound Christian, he must aim at effective world evangelization at home and abroad." McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 83.

to Christ and multiplying churches.”<sup>87</sup> A passion to win people to Christ should be a normal part of the Christian life; in fact, “nothing is more spiritual than the reconciliation of countable lost to God.”<sup>88</sup>

### **Biblical Perfecting Continually Disciples**

McGavran argued the New Testament pattern is for the church to continually go forward with discipling while continually perfecting those who have been discipled. When asked, “Should we wait until a church is free from sin before we think about growing?,” McGavran responded by saying,

No, I don’t think we can. That’s not the New Testament model either. The New Testament church rebuked sin—in some cases excommunicated those who had sinned and refused to repent. In other cases it led sinners to repentance and brought them back into the right way, but throughout it all, the church simply went on preaching Christ. As Paul says so effectively, “We preach Christ who, despite a degree of imperfection in our achievements, does bring men and women to new life in Him.” (See 2 Cor. 4:5.) That is what the gospel is all about.<sup>89</sup>

McGavran cited four biblical examples showing that discipling should continue even in light of spiritual and moral problems within the church. First, the early church evangelized even as “they were so racially biased that they ‘spoke the Word to

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<sup>87</sup>Ibid., 54.

<sup>88</sup>Donald McGavran, "The God Who Finds and His Mission," *International Review of Mission* 51 (1962): 310. McGavran stated, “In his thirty-fourth chapter Ezekiel says some hard words about shepherds who substitute other activities for finding the lost, scattered and countable sheep and bringing them home. . . . The shepherd with ninety-nine lost sheep who finds one and stays at home feeding or caring for it should not expect commendation.” Ibid. See McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 84.

<sup>89</sup>McGavran and Arn, *How to Grow a Church*, 29. See McGavran, *Ethnic Realities*, 233-34.



none but Jews' (Acts 11:19)."<sup>90</sup> Second, they evangelized even while Ananais and Saphira were members of the church.<sup>91</sup> Third, they evangelized Gentiles even as there were some in the church who were saying only Gentiles who became Jews could be saved.<sup>92</sup> Fourth, Paul did not wait until the churches he founded were perfected before leaving and discipling in other places.<sup>93</sup>

McGavran once received a letter describing a situation in which a people movement had taken place so that most of the people professed to be Christian, yet there was a general lack of ethical transformation. He was asked for a Church Growth approach to the problem.<sup>94</sup> McGavran responded by saying one ought to thank God for the great growth of the church and stated, "My answer is simple. Keep on baptizing as

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<sup>90</sup>Donald McGavran, November-December 1980, address notes, "Growth: A Normal Characteristic of a Living Church," Folder 2, Box 83, Collection 178, Papers of Donald Anderson and Mary Elizabeth McGavran 1906-1991, 2000. Archives of the Billy Graham Center, Wheaton, Illinois.

<sup>91</sup>Ibid.

<sup>92</sup>Ibid.

<sup>93</sup>McGavran stated, "Perhaps the greatest danger in the action we have been advocating is that some church leaders and missionaries, feeling that the existing churches are too backward, sub-Christian and nominal, would want to divert new resources (made available for church extension in responsive populations) to the use of the already established congregations. They would feel this was the correct thing to do. Had they stepped into the church in Corinth— there in the house of Justus— they would have felt that Paul should remain on for years and indeed be reinforced by other missionaries, so that the existing Christians might more fully know the mind of Christ and more truly live as twice-born men and women." Donald McGavran, "After the First Flush of Success," *International Review of Mission* 48 (1959): 271.

<sup>94</sup>Otto Dirhs, letter to Donald McGavran, 2 March 1975, Folder 4, Box 85, Collection 178, Papers of Donald Anderson and Mary Elizabeth McGavran 1906-1991, 2000. Archives of the Billy Graham Center, Wheaton, Illinois.

many as possible and teaching them all things whatsoever the Lord commanded as vigorously as possible.”<sup>95</sup>

McGavran went on to state what he believed to be wrong answers to such a situation. He stated, “The Wrong answers are (1) to be so offended at the alleged lack of Christian quality as to bemoan the fact that all these people became Christian. Or, (2) in the midst of a people movement, to stop it and consolidate.”<sup>96</sup> He believed the biblical approach to such a situation was not to stop discipling, but to work for as much perfecting as possible while faithfully continuing to disciple.

McGavran believed the Bible teaches the church must grow both numerically and spiritually. God desires for people to be saved through Christ and for those who are saved to grow in love, knowledge, and obedience. McGavran stated the Church must “seek to be ever growing in numbers as well as in the grace and knowledge of her Lord.”<sup>97</sup>

### **Balancing Discipling and Perfecting**

Perfecting is essential to lasting church growth. When perfecting is neglected, discipling loses its long term impact and churches do not grow. McGavran stated,

Faithfulness in “folding and feeding”—which unfortunately has come to be called by such a dry, superficial term as follow-up—is essential to lasting church expansion. When existing Christians march obediently under the Lord’s command and filled with His compassion, fold the wanderers and feed the flock, then churches

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<sup>95</sup>Ibid.

<sup>96</sup>Ibid. McGavran stated, “It is better to have people loving the Lord than to have them worshipping idols or following atheistic ideologies. This is true, even if they are ethically far from what our Lord wants them to be.” Ibid.

<sup>97</sup>McGavran, "Conclusion," 244.

multiply; but when they indolently permit men and women who have made costly decisions for Christ to drift back into the world, then indeed churches do not grow. Faithfulness in proclamation and finding is not enough. There must be faithful aftercare. Among the found, also, there must be fidelity in feeding on the Word.<sup>98</sup>

McGavran was convinced biblical perfecting produces Christians who are obedient to the Great Commission tasks of both discipling and perfecting.

McGavran never proposed that people movements not be perfected. Rather, he saw the perfecting stage as a vital and necessary aspect of any lasting people movement. He stated, "*People movements must be most carefully shepherded. Careless mass accessions, later neglected, are exactly what I am not suggesting. Nor do I advocate movements of castes or individuals toward some syncretistic faith. No!*"<sup>99</sup>

Those who are saved and brought into the fellowship of the church must be taught to live differently than the world. Churches can and should contextualize to the culture of which they are a part, but they must never compromise their obedience to God's call to be set apart and to be a light in the world (Matt 5:13-16). McGavran lamented, "Some American churches also have made such a thorough adjustment to pagan and secular cultures that they no longer think of themselves as a people apart, as God's household commissioned to be light in a dark world. They have become not only *in but of* this world."<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>98</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 5-6.

<sup>99</sup>McGavran, *Ethnic Realities*, 232.

<sup>100</sup>Donald A. McGavran, "Missions Today and Tomorrow," in *Contemporary Christian Trends: Perspectives on the Present*, ed. William M. Pinson Jr. and Clyde E. Fant Jr. (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1972), 96-97.

While the neglect of discipling is much more common, McGavran cautioned against the opposite problem of neglecting perfecting. He believed that the church must work toward the constant perfecting of its members. The church must press on in its task of perfecting without forgetting that on one level the church exists to win men to Christ, and perfecting is only accomplished after the foundation of discipling is laid. McGavran succinctly summed up his understanding of how to maintain a balance between the two tasks:

For both theological and practical reasons, the constant improvement of the existing Church- D3- is mandatory on all Christians. God commands it and the Church will languish without it. No one should minimize the importance of perfecting. At the same time, all should be certain that undisciplined pagan multitudes must be “added to the Lord’ before they can be perfected. The Church exists not for herself but for the world. She has been saved in order to save others. She always has a twofold task: winning men to Christ and growing in grace. While these tasks overlap, they are distinct. Neither should be slighted.<sup>101</sup>

### **Evaluation**

McGavran’s use of the terms discipling and perfecting—while important—nevertheless became problematic for three reasons. First, McGavran did not use the word “discipling” according to its fullest meaning in Matthew 28:19-20.<sup>102</sup> McGavran defined “discipling” as bringing people to faith in Christ and baptizing them into the church. He defined “perfecting” as teaching all things Jesus has commanded. However, Matthew 28:19-20 subsumes the “teaching of all things” under the main verb of “making

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<sup>101</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 170.

<sup>102</sup>McGavran, “How about that new verb,” 266.

disciples” since the word “teaching” is a subordinate participle.<sup>103</sup> Since the participles for “baptizing” and “teaching” are not connected to each other or the main verb “make disciples” by καί or a particle, “they must be viewed as depending upon one another or depending in differing ways on the chief verb.”<sup>104</sup> The grammar of the text does not allow for “teaching” to be separated from making disciples.<sup>105</sup> Therefore, McGavran defined “discipling” in a way that is incongruent with its use in Matthew 28:19-20.

It is important to note, however, the third definition of “discipling” as being the “teaching of all things” (the more contemporary way of understanding discipling) also does not use the word “discipling” according to its fullest meaning in Matthew 28:19-20. While the word translated “make disciples” includes within it “teaching all things,” it also includes going and baptizing. The use of the word “discipling” apart from going and baptizing creates the same problem McGavran’s initial use of the word created— namely, the word “discipling” is used differently than how it is in Matthew 28:19-20. If the word “discipling” is to be defined and used in the same way as it is used in Matthew 28:19-20, it must include within its meaning both baptizing and teaching.

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<sup>103</sup>Craig Blomberg stated, “The truly subordinate participles in v. 19 explain what making disciples involves: ‘baptizing’ them and ‘teaching’ them obedience to all of Jesus’ commandments. The first of these will be a once-for-all, decisive initiation into Christian community. The second proves a perennially incomplete, life-long task.” Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, The New American Commentary, vol. 22 (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 431.

<sup>104</sup>G.R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1962), 89.

<sup>105</sup>D. A. Carson has stated, “it would certainly misconstrue the text to absolutize the division between discipleship and baptism-instruction.” D. A. Carson, *Matthew*, in vol. 8 of *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. by Frank E. Gaebelin and J.D. Douglas (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, Regency Reference Library, 1984), 597.

Second, McGavran's initial definitions for discipling and perfecting did not clearly distinguish between the two stages. According to McGavran, discipling is the initial coming to faith in Christ among a people group, and perfecting is the subsequent growth in grace. Yet, he included in his definition of perfecting, "all that prayer and labour which is dedicated to bringing millions of individuals, generation after generation, into a vital and personal relationship with Jesus Christ."<sup>106</sup> McGavran's initial definition of perfecting was ambiguous as to when discipling ceases to be discipling and becomes perfecting since both involve the conversion of individuals in the first generation.<sup>107</sup>

Third, McGavran's definition and use of the term "discipling" simply did not translate well into a Western individualistic context. In the United States "discipling" began to be used, according to McGavran, "for the later stages of the process by which an individual Christian becomes an informed, illuminated, thoroughly dedicated follower of Jesus Christ."<sup>108</sup> The new meanings eventually caused McGavran to define "discipling" in three different ways, one of which was synonymous with "perfecting." Using the word "discipling" and "perfecting" in the same sense added to confusion as to the meaning and

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<sup>106</sup>McGavran, *The Bridges of God*, 15.

<sup>107</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 169.

<sup>108</sup>McGavran, "How about that new verb," 267. McGavran credited this change of meaning to a dissertation written by Dennis Oliver. He stated, "Dennis Oliver wrote a doctoral dissertation maintaining on the basis of the last few verses of Matthew, that a person was disciplined when he was taught all things and baptized. A disciplined individual was like a college graduate, he had been through the entire course and passed all his examinations. He was a complete Christian." Ibid. See Dennis Oliver, "Make Disciples! The Nature and Scope of the Great Commission" (Ph.D. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1973).

use of the terms. McGavran eventually lamented the confusion and conflict these three meanings brought:

Using the one term “discipling” in three senses without pausing to define which one is under discussion has caused a tremendous amount of wasted motion and confusion. Much ado about nothing has resulted. Cannons have been trained on mirages, and fired with great satisfaction— and little effect.<sup>109</sup>

McGavran’s choice of “discipling” and “perfecting” as terms to describe two stages of the Great Commission has not been helpful. Perhaps a better choice would have been to refer to the first stage of the Great Commission as “evangelizing” and the second stage as “maturing.” Evangelizing is the going of a Christian to a people group or person to share the gospel. Maturing is the subsequent teaching of the people group or person to observe all things Jesus has commanded, beginning with baptism into the church. “Discipling” then could be used to refer to the entire process of bringing people groups or persons to salvation and through the process of sanctification, a process that is “characterized by baptism and instruction.”<sup>110</sup> Such a definition of discipling would be consistent with the use of the word in Matthew 28:19-20.<sup>111</sup> “Evangelizing” and “maturing” more easily transfer to an individualistic context without confusing the two stages in the process.

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<sup>109</sup>Ibid., 268.

<sup>110</sup>D. A. Carson, *Matthew*, 597.

<sup>111</sup>R. T. France stated, “The command to ‘make disciples’ in 28:19 offers a useful summary of what Matthew understands discipleship to involve. The imperative μαθητεύσατε . . . its meaning is ‘unpacked’ in the two following participial clauses: a disciple is one who is ‘baptised into the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit’, and one whose responsibility it is to ‘observe all that Jesus has commanded.’” R.T. France, *Matthew: Evangelist and Teacher* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 261.

## Conclusion

McGavran did not bifurcate discipling and perfecting, but rather saw them as symbiotically working together to accomplish the same goal—producing passionate and obedient disciples of Jesus Christ. Discipling and perfecting are not an either/or dichotomy, but a both/and symbiosis. McGavran stated, “It is a mistake to emphasize that ‘tension.’ It is not either evangelism or Christian education, it is rather *both* evangelism *and* Christian education.”<sup>112</sup> McGavran’s understanding of the relationship of discipling and perfecting is best summed up in his own words, “The Church lives faithful to her Master when she disciplines and perfects in a single continuous motion—the discipling helping the perfecting and the perfecting helping the discipling.”<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>112</sup>McGavran and Arn, *How to Grow a Church*, 163-64.

<sup>113</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 172.



## CHAPTER 4

### MCGAVRAN'S CONVICTION THAT PERFECTING LEADS TO CHURCH GROWTH

It is hard to discern whether the primary contribution of Donald McGavran's thinking was a movement toward evangelism and away from other activities, or if it was a movement toward church planting and church-centered activities and away from non-church undertakings. The reality is the Church Growth Movement would not have taken place had either paradigm shift been absent. Therefore, it is better not to bifurcate either emphasis, but to understand their relationship being symbiotically necessary and fundamental elements of church growth. Both emphases shaped McGavran's thinking on perfecting and led him to adopt a gospel-centered and ecclesiocentric approach to perfecting.

#### **Gospel-centered Perfecting**

Donald McGavran was convinced the gospel was revealed to bring men to faith and obedience. McGavran said, "*God* wants men saved. *He* commands bringing the nations to faith and obedience. St Paul in Romans 16:25 ff. tells us that the Gospel was revealed to this very end."<sup>1</sup> The gospel, then, has the dual purpose of discipling the

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<sup>1</sup>Donald McGavran, "Church Growth Strategy Continued," *International Review of Mission* 57 (1968): 335. Romans 16:25-26 says, "Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the

nations and perfecting them. The purpose of the gospel is not simply to save individuals and leave them as they are, but to bring about God's sanctifying purposes within their lives.<sup>2</sup> According to McGavran, all of Christianity is a "call to perfection."<sup>3</sup>

Effective evangelism should begin with correct and complete doctrinal instruction concerning the gospel. McGavran stated, "How does a church start evangelizing? . . . The first step may be preaching a series of sermons explaining what the Bible says about the Gospel, the lostness of people without Christ, the absolute necessity of belief in Christ, the normalcy of witness, and the joy of sharing Christ."<sup>4</sup> Perfecting, then, must inculcate a doctrinal understanding of the gospel and its implications for how Christians live their lives.

For example, correctly teaching the atonement of Christ promotes evangelism. McGavran stated that if the atonement is "correctly understood as atonement for those who believe, age after age, among all people everywhere, then the doctrine of the

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revelation of the mystery kept secret since the world began but now made manifest, and by the prophetic Scriptures made known to all nations, according to the commandment of the everlasting God, for obedience to the faith." See also idem, *Effective Evangelism: A Theological Mandate* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company 1988), 14-15.

<sup>2</sup>See Donald A. McGavran, "Missions Today and Tomorrow," in *Contemporary Christian Trends: Perspectives on the Present*, ed. William M. Pinson Jr. and Clyde E. Fant Jr. (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1972), 103.

<sup>3</sup>Donald McGavran, letter to Geoffrey Maw, 23 March 1934, Folder 7, Box 1, Collection 178, Papers of Donald Anderson and Mary Elizabeth McGavran 1906-1991, 2000. Archives of the Billy Graham Center, Wheaton, Illinois.

<sup>4</sup>Donald McGavran, "Training the Laity for Church Growth," in *Church Growth: Strategies that Work*, by Donald A. McGavran and George G. Hunter III (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980), 65.

atonement itself impels us toward effective evangelization . . . . Consequently, we must say that true *and complete* doctrinal correctness will promote church growth.”<sup>5</sup>

McGavran was convinced that incomplete doctrinal instruction concerning God’s redemptive plan in the gospel produces non-evangelistic churches and denominations.<sup>6</sup>

McGavran, therefore, argued for a gospel-centered approach to perfecting. Gospel-centered perfecting clearly teaches the gospel and its implications for the mission of the church and personal evangelism. Additionally, McGavran believed that gospel-centered perfecting teaches and produces church growth— i.e. effective evangelism.

### **Perfecting that Teaches the Salvation of Sinners as the Primary Mission of the Church**

McGavran thought the mission of the church must be defined in terms of Jesus’ mission to save sinners. Jesus is the Head of the church; therefore, the church as his body must understand Jesus’ mission in order to carry it out. McGavran stated, “Jesus Christ, our Lord, came to seek and to save the countable lost.”<sup>7</sup> The church submits to and obeys the rule of Christ by proclaiming the gospel and bringing peoples and persons to faith in Christ. The church’s mission is to reconcile men to God in Christ. McGavran argued,

Mission is not beautiful, inclusive statements about mission. Mission is not a quiet Christian influence in the world. Mission is not simply bearing witness to the Lord by word and deed. Mission is neither worshipping God according to the ancient rubrics of our church nor meeting to discuss church and mission problems. Mission is not serving our fellow men and binding up their wounds. All these are good

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<sup>5</sup>McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 29.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>McGavran, "The God Who Finds and His Mission," 312.

activities—but they can be carried on for a thousand years without reconciling anyone to God in Christ.<sup>8</sup>

The Great Commission must be understood in terms of reaching all peoples. Christians must be taught the meaning of *panta ta ethne* in Matthew 28:19 is all the “people groups” of the world.<sup>9</sup> McGavran argued the command is to make disciples of all the homogeneous units of the world.<sup>10</sup> He understood the term *ethne*, translated as “nations” in most English translations, to mean tribes, clans, or peoples rather than

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<sup>8</sup>McGavran, "Wrong Strategy," 459.

<sup>9</sup>Karl Ludwig Schmidt pointed out, “In most cases εθνος is used of men in the sense of a ‘people.’ Synon. are → φυλη (people as a national unity of common descent), → λαος (people as a political unity with a common history and constitution) and → γλωσσα (people as a linguistic unity). Εθνος is the most general and therefore weakest of these terms, having simply an ethnographical sense and denoting the natural cohesion of a people in general.” Karl Ludwig Schmidt, “εθνος, εθνικος,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Ann Arbor, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 2:369. εθνος is similarly defined as “a multitude, people, race, belonging and living together.” Spiros Zodhiates, ed., *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG International, 1992), 503.

<sup>10</sup>McGavran observed people do not like to cross cultural barriers in order to become Christians, a principle has come to be called the “homogeneous unit principle.” He understood the homogeneous unit principle to be descriptive rather than prescriptive. He argued that due to the biblical command to make disciples of each *ethne* and the observation that people like to become Christian within their own culture, each people group should be discipled as an ethnic unit. McGavran stated, “The Christian faith—once in and abundant—flows well within each piece of the mosaic, but tends to stop at linguistic and ethnic barriers. Most existing congregations are shut up to one language, one ethnic unit, and frequently to one social or economic class. Since men like to become Christians without crossing barriers, the first task among the two billion is an evangelism designed to multiply churches in each new piece of the magnificent mosaic. Only after numerous indigenous churches exist in each piece, has spontaneous evangelism much chance of succeeding.” McGavran, "The Dimensions of World Evangelization," 100.

geopolitical units.<sup>11</sup> McGavran, therefore, argued evangelism and church planting should take place “in every tongue and kindred, every tribe and nation.”<sup>12</sup>

God’s redemptive plan is clearly seen in Matthew 28:19 as well as Revelation 5:9, where “around the throne of God in heaven there will be men and women from every tribe, tongue, people and ethnos.”<sup>13</sup> Therefore, McGavran stated the mission of the church is to make “the gospel known to all nations to bring them to faith and obedience, extending grace to more and more people, to the end that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”<sup>14</sup> Consequently, McGavran stated, “Every congregation should focus its attention on one or more *ethne* at home or abroad.”<sup>15</sup> A goal of missions is for all those who have been chosen by God from every people to have an opportunity to hear the gospel and say yes to Jesus Christ.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>McGavran stated, “The Greek word translated ‘nation’ in the English Bible means exactly ‘people’ in the sense in which we are using that term. It does not mean a modern nation like France or China or Mexico. Thus the Greek means ‘disciple the peoples.’” McGavran, *The Bridges of God*, 13-14. McGavran more thoroughly defined *panta ta ethne* as “all the classes, tribes, castes, ethnic units, and economic groupings of mankind.” Idem, *Understanding Church Growth*, 61.

<sup>12</sup>McGavran, "Crisis of Identity for Some Missionary Societies," 197.

<sup>13</sup>McGavran, "The Future of the Christian Religion," 128.

<sup>14</sup>McGavran, "The Great Debate in Missions," 170.

<sup>15</sup>McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 47.

<sup>16</sup>McGavran, "The Great Debate in Missions," 169.

All Christians should be taught the Great Commission is God's plan for the church and every believer.<sup>17</sup> Believers must, therefore, understand the biblical meaning of key terms related to the Great Commission. McGavran thought there was an attempt by those who rejected biblical authority and inspiration to devalue the words "salvation, conversion, evangelism, and mission."<sup>18</sup> A biblical understanding of these words and others is an essential part of the perfecting process. If a biblical understanding of key biblical terms is lost, the work of evangelism is often ignored and missions is easily neglected.

As noted, the perfecting process involves teaching Christians the primary mission of the church is to reconcile sinners to God in Christ. Therefore, biblical missions always involves communicating the gospel.<sup>19</sup> Perfecting that does not teach the proclamation of the gospel as the mission of the church has a detrimental effect upon church growth. The great enemy of Christian mission is church work that has little connection with communicating Christ.<sup>20</sup> As a result of inadequate thinking and

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<sup>17</sup>See McGavran, "Crisis of Identity for Some Missionary Societies."

<sup>18</sup>McGavran, "Missions Today and Tomorrow," 88.

<sup>19</sup>McGavran was concerned that many people were beginning to define missions as something other than the communication of the gospel. He stated, "Protestant leaders who have captured the mainline missionary societies . . . were defining mission to mean everything but the communication of the Gospel and the increase of believers." McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 436.

<sup>20</sup>Donald McGavran, 24 August 1965, address notes, "Determined Aggressive Plans for Church Growth," Folder 1, Box 83, Collection 178, Papers of Donald Anderson and Mary Elizabeth McGavran 1906-1991, 2000. Archives of the Billy Graham Center, Wheaton, Illinois.

teaching, churches and missionary societies become no longer sure of who they are or what their task is, namely, disciples of Jesus proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ to a lost world to the end that sinners are reconciled to God through Christ.<sup>21</sup>

### **Perfecting that Teaches God's Desire to Save Sinners through the Gospel**

The gospel informs believers of God's desire to save sinners through Christ. God's desire to save men is so great that He was willing to give His only begotten Son so that persons and peoples can be saved. McGavran stated, "The cross is the measure of God's desire for the eternal salvation of countable men."<sup>22</sup> McGavran became personally involved in "church growth" because he believed God wants all people to know Jesus Christ and become his disciples.<sup>23</sup> God has given Christians and churches the opportunity and the responsibility to accomplish His redemptive purposes by proclaiming the gospel.

McGavran believed Christians should be taught God's purpose for sinners to be saved as they spread the gospel of Jesus Christ.<sup>24</sup> When people give their lives to the

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<sup>21</sup>Donald McGavran, "Advanced Church Growth" (Lecture Notes, Winter 1978) Folder 5, Box 85, Collection 178, Papers of Donald Anderson and Mary Elizabeth McGavran 1906-1991, 2000. Archives of the Billy Graham Center, Wheaton, Illinois.

<sup>22</sup>Donald McGavran, "The God Who Finds and His Mission," *International Review of Mission* 51 (1962): 312.

<sup>23</sup>Donald A. McGavran and Winfield C. Arn, *Ten Steps for Church Growth* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1977), 1. See also idem, "Church Growth Strategy Continued," 335.

<sup>24</sup>McGavran stated, "The New Testament is full of passages that indicate the steady purpose of the Triune God to make the gospel known throughout the entire world and to institute a new kind of life based on complete obedience to Him, a complete

Lord Jesus, it is important they learn and understand God's purpose for them and what God wants them to do with their lives. As believers grow in their understanding of the gospel, they grow in their desire for God's will to be accomplished through their lives by joyfully spreading the good news of salvation.

McGavran argued that God cares whether people are saved; therefore, Christians must care as well. He stated, "This is one main meaning of the Cross. Because God cares, His Church must care, too."<sup>25</sup> An understanding of God's desire to save sinners produces that same desire within those who have been saved and changed by its power.

Christians must be taught that God's purpose in the gospel is not only that the gospel be shared, but that persons actually be saved and taught to follow Christ. McGavran stated, "To *God*, as He has thus revealed Himself, the proclamation of the gospel is not the prime consideration. *That* is the salvation of persons."<sup>26</sup> Christians must be taught to do evangelism with the desire and intention of leading people to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>27</sup> McGavran argued, "The proclamation of the Gospel is a means.

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surrender of self to Christ, and mighty multiplication of Christian congregations." McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 14.

<sup>25</sup>Donald McGavran, "Conclusion," in *Church Growth and Christian Mission*, ed. Donald A. McGavran (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 245.

<sup>26</sup>McGavran, "The God Who Finds and His Mission," 312.

<sup>27</sup>McGavran stated, "Evangelism always *intends* to lead men to believe in Christ." Donald McGavran, "Wrong Strategy: The Real Crisis in Mission," in *Eye of the Storm: The Great Debate in Mission*, ed. Donald A. McGavran (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1972), 455.



It must not be confused with the end, which is that men—multitudes of men—be reconciled with God in Christ.”<sup>28</sup>

### **Perfecting that Teaches the Gospel as the Way of Salvation**

McGavran thought teaching the lostness of persons apart from Jesus is an essential part of perfecting. In speaking about church growth, McGavran said, “*Its foundation was theological*. It was based on a biblical judgment that men and women without Jesus Christ are truly lost and God wants them found.”<sup>29</sup> Christians must be taught these foundational truths of the sinfulness of man, the lostness of men without Christ, and the ability of the gospel to save sinners.<sup>30</sup>

The true God has incarnated Himself in Christ and revealed Himself in the Bible. Therefore, on the one hand, McGavran believed a rejection of the Bible as God’s infallible Word leads to a rejection of the gospel and the acceptance of deviant conceptions of salvation. On the other hand, an acceptance of the Bible as God’s Word should lead to sharing the gospel. McGavran argued “to those who believe the Bible,

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<sup>28</sup>McGavran, "The God Who Finds and His Mission," 312-13.

<sup>29</sup>Donald McGavran, "The Discovery of Church Growth," in *Church Growth: Strategies that Work*, by Donald A. McGavran and George G. Hunter III (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980), 19.

<sup>30</sup>McGavran stated, “When churches really believe that God wants lost men found, they will quit rationalizing decline in membership as ‘probably good for us,’ will stop making excuses for not finding and enfolding God’s children, and will engage in effective evangelism.” Donald McGavran, "The Dividends We Seek," *Christianity Today*, 19 January 1973, 5.

missions are a vital necessary part of Christian life” and “the Bible from beginning to end requires passing on the Good News about the Saviour- Jesus Christ our Lord.”<sup>31</sup>

McGavran believed that any teaching which contradicts the gospel as the way of salvation should be regarded as false and rejected. First, Christians must be taught to reject the heresy of universalism.<sup>32</sup> The gospel rejects the idea that all religious beliefs are ways to God. Some beliefs are in fact false and must be rejected, and universalism is to be rejected on the grounds that it contradicts the gospel.<sup>33</sup>

Second, religious relativism must be rejected because it, too, contradicts the gospel and is self-contradictory. McGavran noted that relativism “believed that there are many ways to God and that men are saved by the sincerity by which they follow whatever light they have.”<sup>34</sup> McGavran stated, “All that the concept sacrifices is truth, for if there are, in fact, many incarnations, each voices an approximation of the truth.

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<sup>31</sup>Donald McGavran, 30 August 1972, address notes, to Twin Oaks Christian Church, Folder 3, Box 83, Collection 178, Papers of Donald Anderson and Mary Elizabeth McGavran 1906-1991, 2000. Archives of the Billy Graham Center, Wheaton, Illinois.

<sup>32</sup>Universalism is the belief that all men are already saved or are going to be saved. McGavran stated, “It is easy to see how radically this new doctrine, which many of us hold to be an old heresy, affects the conviction of Christians that the gospel ought to be propagated in Asia, Africa, and Latin America as well as in our own homeland.” Donald McGavran, “The Great Debate in Missions,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 5 (1970): 169-70.

<sup>33</sup>McGavran stated, “At stake is the correct understanding of the atonement, salvation, the future life, and specially the relationship of Christianity to other religions.” *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>34</sup>McGavran, “The God Who Finds and His Mission,” 305.

Indeed, since these incarnations often voice contradictions, truth itself disappears.”<sup>35</sup>

Relativism leads to the disappearance of truth itself which erodes its credibility as an accurate view of reality. The different religions of the world make mutually exclusive religious truth claims which cannot at the same time represent the way of salvation.<sup>36</sup>

Relativism then destroys gospel witness. McGavran noted, “Relativism aggressively attacked both the doctrine that Christ is the full, final and once-for-all Revelation of God and its corollary that every Christian should proclaim Christ and persuade men to become His disciples and responsible members of His Church.”<sup>37</sup> While most missionaries outwardly rejected relativism, McGavran believed it still affected them. He stated, “To be sure, not many missionaries themselves accepted any such clearly voiced relativism; but its intellectual climate did envelop them and their supporters and influenced heavily what they thought most worth doing.”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup>Ibid.

<sup>36</sup>For instance, McGavran stated, “The error in this position is abundantly clear. For example, Hinayana Buddhism maintains that there is no God. The maker of heaven and earth could not have said to some people, ‘God is a just, loving and powerful being’ and to others that true religion consists in the belief that god does not exist. Another example is that the true and living God could not have taught men that He should be worshipped throughout the great subcontinent of India in the form, for example, of a sex symbol or one or other image, and at the same time have revealed Himself to His prophets in Israel as a God who scorned all idols and denounced and punished all those who worshipped idols. These understandings of revelation are fundamentally different and we do an injustice to each if they are too easily harmonized.” Donald McGavran, “The Future of the Christian Religion: The Place of Christianity in a World of Many Religions,” in *Religion and Future: Essays in Honour of Prof G. C. Oosthuizen*, ed. Gerald J. Pillay (Pretoria: South Africa, HSRC Publishers, 1992), 121-22.

<sup>37</sup>McGavran, “The God Who Finds and His Mission,” 305.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid.

Third, Christians should be taught to reject pluralism because it contradicts the gospel. Christian theologians and teachers must clearly teach that God rejects the false worship of idols and other gods.<sup>39</sup> God rejects the false gods who are worshipped throughout the world today just as He rejected the worship of Baal, Ashtoreth, and Dagon in the Old Testament.<sup>40</sup> Christians must be taught the doctrine of one God, which by itself refutes the idea that people can have other gods before Him or worship false gods.<sup>41</sup> Men must put their faith in Jesus Christ, who is God incarnate and the way of salvation.<sup>42</sup>

All religions other than Christianity are the result of men's own reason and imagination, and are to be rejected.<sup>43</sup> Christianity, on the other hand, is the self-

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<sup>39</sup>Donald McGavran, "A Missionary Confession of Faith," *Calvin Theological Journal* 7 (1972): 142.

<sup>40</sup>McGavran stated, "The Bible makes it clear that all the religions of the world are not God's creation. The Old Testament in its historical books recounts repeatedly that God's people lived in lands where many other gods were worshipped—Baal, Ashtoreth, Dagon, and so on. On innumerable occasions as the children of Israel turned from the worship of Jehovah to the worship of these other gods, the Israelites were time and again severely punished by God the Father Almighty." McGavran, "The Future of the Christian Religion," 115.

<sup>41</sup>McGavran, "A Missionary Confession of Faith," 142-43.

<sup>42</sup>McGavran stated, "beyond question the Bible teaches that to become God's people it is necessary for all men (descendants of Christians and non-Christians alike) to believe on Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, receive Him in their hearts, receive Him in their hearts (sic) become responsible members of His Church, and manifest the fruits of the Spirit in their lives. And this alone may rightly be called 'salvation today.'" Donald McGavran, "Salvation Today," *Church Growth Bulletin* 9, no. 1 (September 1972): 266. Similarly McGavran stated, "Because we believe in the authority of the Christian Scriptures and adhere to the doctrines there revealed, we accept the lostness of men without the Saviour and the salvation which God has provided in Jesus' death and resurrection for all who believe." Idem, "Church Growth Strategy Continued," 338.

<sup>43</sup>McGavran, "The Future of the Christian Religion," 116.

disclosure and revelation of the one true and living God.<sup>44</sup> McGavran stated,

In sharp contrast to the belief that all religions are God's revelation, the prophet Isaiah in Chapter 45 Verses 5 and 6 says unambiguously that there is no god in the world except the Lord God Almighty. The New Testament is also perfectly clear on this point. The famous verse, John 3:16, declares that all those who do not believe in Jesus Christ will perish. Those who do believe in Him will have everlasting life.<sup>45</sup>

Men must turn from these false conceptions of God to the true God who has revealed himself in the Bible and incarnated himself in Christ.

McGavran understood pluralism as a rejection of Christianity. The belief that God has been revealed in other religions undermines the gospel and leads Christians to think of gospel proclamation as an act of imperialism rather than an act of love.<sup>46</sup> Therefore, pluralism opposes church growth and impedes, if not stops, the spread of the gospel. McGavran stated, "As long as Christians believe that God revealed Himself in all religions, that all religions therefore have a considerable measure of truth, and that therefore any Christianization is in fact imperialism, there will be very little expansion of the Christian faith."<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup>Ibid.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid. Note Isa 45:5-6- "I am the Lord, and there is no other; There is no God besides Me. I will gird you, though you have not known Me, that they may know from the rising of the sun to its setting that there is none besides Me. I am the Lord, and there is no other."

<sup>46</sup>McGavran stated, "What is really at stake is the truth of the Christian religion. If Christ is the Saviour, the only Saviour, then persuading men to accept Him is in no sense open to charge of religious imperialism or of manipulating men to our own ends. But if there are many paths to God, then for Christians to persuade others to follow their path might be self-aggrandizement." McGavran, "The God Who Finds and His Mission," 311-12.

<sup>47</sup>McGavran, "The Future of the Christian Religion," 120.

McGavran believed the Bible teaches that Jesus is the way of salvation and all Christians are to share this good news with those who do not know. Specifically, faith in Jesus' atoning death, burial, and resurrection is the way of salvation. A biblical understanding of the gospel in relation to all other religious belief systems compels Christians to give themselves to the task of evangelism. McGavran argued all Christians must declare the gospel of Christ as the way of salvation to every other people and person regardless of their current religious beliefs. He declared,

The only salvation of which the apostles speak is that which comes through faith in Jesus Christ. To our own children, and to those of our Jewish, Buddhist, Marxist, Hindu, Muslim and Secularist friends alike, we declare there is "no other Name." Christ alone is the Door. He alone is the Truth. He alone has Life. As ambassadors appointed by Christ, we beseech them all (our children and theirs) to be reconciled to God and become active members of the Body of Christ.<sup>48</sup>

### **Perfecting that Teaches the Preeminence of Evangelism over Social Justice and Social Ministry**

McGavran was concerned that missions was being defined primarily in terms of social justice and ministry disconnected from effective evangelism. He pointed out that the understanding of missions as "primarily helpful activities to other people regardless of what they believe" is a fundamentally flawed understanding of missions.<sup>49</sup> He criticized missions which emphasizes such activities apart from gospel proclamation:

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<sup>48</sup>Donald McGavran, "The Dimensions of World Evangelization," in *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, International Congress on World Evangelization, Lausanne, Switzerland, ed. J. D. Douglas (Minneapolis: World Wide Publications, 1975), 95. Unfortunately, McGavran was not always consistent in his claim that faith in Jesus is necessary for salvation. He also made some statements that are problematic concerning those who have never heard about Jesus. His statements raise serious questions and difficulties concerning the exclusivity of the gospel, and are addressed in the appendix.

<sup>49</sup>McGavran, "Missiology Faces the Lion," 339.

It does not throb with Christ's passion for men's eternal redemption. It makes haste to point out that there are many kinds of redemption and appears equally in favour of all. It does not blaze with certainty that man, the immortal soul, was created in the image of God, is not in that image now and must regain it through the saving work of Christ. It does not seem to know which part of the Christian religion is centre and which is periphery.<sup>50</sup>

**The significance of salvation over temporal aims.** McGavran believed liberal theology rejected the gospel as the way of salvation; therefore, it rejected its propagation as the mission of the church.<sup>51</sup> Instead missions was seen as a way to make the world a better place.<sup>52</sup> He was convinced even many mission agencies that had rejected liberalism nevertheless had been influenced by the liberal assumption that the true end of missions "is a just society to which Christ is strictly instrumental."<sup>53</sup>

McGavran thought social justice and ministry were replacing the proclamation of the gospel because "salvation" was being redefined. He argued the aim of mission is "to further the proclamation of the Gospel to all men that they may believe and be saved," and lamented that the World Council of Churches was trying to "reinterpret the classic meaning of that aim so that 'being saved' will come to mean having more food, more justice, more clothes, more freedom, more production, less disease, more brotherhood, more peace, in short more this-worldly improvements."<sup>54</sup> He rejected the

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<sup>50</sup>McGavran "Wrong Strategy," 454.

<sup>51</sup>See McGavran, "Missiology Faces the Lion," 336-37.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid.," 337.

<sup>53</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 437.

<sup>54</sup>McGavran, "Salvation Today," 263.

meaning of salvation as “this-worldly improvements,” while at the same time affirming salvation has social effects and implications.<sup>55</sup>

Evangelicals should work toward a just and caring society without allowing social work to replace evangelism and undermine the spiritual, redemptive, and eternal meaning of salvation. McGavran stated, “The reformation of the social order (rightly emphasized) should not be substituted for salvation.”<sup>56</sup> He argued that salvation is not something man brings about through social work, but “is something which the true and living God confers on His creatures in accordance with His once-for-all revelation in Jesus Christ, God and Saviour according to the Bible.”<sup>57</sup>

Christians must be taught to put a greater emphasis upon the gospel than upon social issues in order for the gospel to be effectively understood. Social justice and alleviating poverty must not be seen by nationals as the primary reasons for the gospel, but rather as part of the perfecting process brought about by the gospel. Otherwise, people become Christians not because of their faith in Christ and a desire for forgiveness of sin, but because they want free services for themselves and their children.<sup>58</sup> McGavran

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<sup>55</sup>McGavran stated, “Disagreement lies in whether temporal improvements are salvation or a fruit of the saved life. The distinction is vitally important.” Ibid., 265.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., 266.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., 265.

<sup>58</sup>McGavran stated, “the marginal learning which has accompanied this continuous program of ‘social justice and the alleviation of all that depresses mankind’ is a strange distortion of the Gospel. Millions of Indians believe that it is a good thing to become Christian *if* by so doing their children receive free education, their sick receive free medical attention, and their status in the world is enhanced. If these social benefits are not forthcoming, if all they get is the naked Gospel, then they say, ‘Why become



lamented that social services had become the chief Christian activity in India: “It is precisely the Church that pours out rivers of aid in leprosy homes, hospitals, dispensaries, schools, colleges, and agricultural demonstration centers . . . . Salvation by faith in Christ has been hidden by salvation through social amelioration.”<sup>59</sup>

McGavran saw danger in missionaries addressing social justice issues with such force as to give the appearance that social justice is a prerequisite for becoming a Christian. Indigenous churches who did not have the resources to carry on social projects often would not appear to be Christian to the masses if Christianity were perceived as social uplift rather than a call to faith in Christ.<sup>60</sup> Missionaries should address social justice issues while doing their best not to confuse nonbelieving indigenous people about the gospel.

McGavran argued the eternal significance of salvation was being replaced with the temporal fruit of salvation, which leads to devastating consequences for the mission of the church. First, missions becomes “everything God wants done by Christians and non-Christians— which necessarily limits what God wants done to the field of ethics.”<sup>61</sup> Second, missions becomes more about changing the structures of society than

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Christian for nothing?” McGavran, *Ethnic Realities and the Church*, 37-38.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., 218.

<sup>60</sup> McGavran, *Ethnic Realities and the Church*, 218.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., 265. Social amelioration should be motivated by a desire to please God. A lack of regeneration limits one’s ability to behave ethically. See McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 288-89.

proclaiming the gospel and making disciples in the context of the church.<sup>62</sup> Third, missions becomes more about turning from “faulty social structures” to those which liberate men from oppression and racism than it is about repenting “from idols to serve the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, as revealed in the Bible.”<sup>63</sup>

Christians must be taught that social ministry cannot save anyone. When education and medicine are given great emphasis, McGavran said, churches may find they have “unintentionally been saying also, ‘What really counts is secular education and closeness to the hospital.’”<sup>64</sup> Churches must devise a perfecting strategy that clearly teaches salvation in Christ is the supreme blessing of the church and Christian life.<sup>65</sup> McGavran suggested doing so “may require revising instruction, liturgy, preaching, and perhaps most of all the casual conversation of Christian leaders.”<sup>66</sup> He thought a balanced approach is to quietly “provide lift, while laying tremendous emphasis on

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<sup>62</sup>In emphasizing the preeminence of effective evangelism over social justice and ministry, McGavran asked the question, “If God were to place you face to face with a thousand families in your field, and say to you: ‘In the next ten years you can satisfy all their social economic educational needs or you can make them devout Christians. You can do one or the other, but you can’t do both.’ Which would you do?” Donald McGavran, “Principles and Procedures in Church Growth,” (Class Lecture Notes) Folder 5, Box 35, Collection 178, Papers of Donald Anderson and Mary Elizabeth McGavran 1906-1991, 2000. Archives of the Billy Graham Center, Wheaton, Illinois.

<sup>63</sup>McGavran, “Salvation Today,” 265.

<sup>64</sup>McGavran, *Ethnic Realities and the Church*, 218.

<sup>65</sup>*Ibid.*, 302-303.

<sup>66</sup>*Ibid.*, 303.

redemption.”<sup>67</sup>

**The necessity of evangelism in achieving a just society.** McGavran gave three reasons why evangelism is necessary to achieving a just society. First, the gospel provides the biblical worldview which “requires justice for the common man” because “God the Son died for each man.”<sup>68</sup> Each person, having been created in the image of God, is of infinite worth.<sup>69</sup> Second, God through the Holy Spirit, “gives those who love

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<sup>67</sup>Ibid. McGavran thought “lift” is often the result of church or missionary activity, and described in the following way. He stated, “The congregation and its members have the great benefit of medicine, education, loving friendship, and protection. . . . If these are illiterate, they are taught to read. Their children, attending church and mission schools— or, increasingly, tax-supported schools— become grade-school, high-school, and college graduates. Perhaps they go to Christian vocational schools and become mechanics, radio technicians, or artisans. Girls, sent to nurses’ or teachers’ training schools, are snapped up by the rapidly expanding government health and education programs and get good salaries. Able men and women rise to positions of international note in the Churches. A few or many, depending on the country, enter government service and hold positions of influence. The wealth of Christians rises. They become middle-class people. Members of the Christian community who have not personally done so well, nevertheless share in the general sense of well-being. All this I am calling ‘lift.’” McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 297.

<sup>68</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 288.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid. McGavran argued the ethnic divisions of society were best eroded by discipling and perfecting a population. He stated, “Only the multiplication of congregations of Bible-believing Christians in hundreds of ethnic groups (castes) has any likelihood of eroding the theological foundations of caste. The best way to win the battle for brotherhood in India is to win a hundred million or more of the ordinary citizens of that great land to ardent, biblical faith.” Donald McGavran, “The Hottest Race Issue in the World,” *Transformation*, 2 no. 2 1985: 18.

and obey Him power to treat other men justly.”<sup>70</sup> Third, the gospel produces just men “who can build a just society.”<sup>71</sup>

A just society springs out of hearts that have been changed by the gospel and lives that strive to be godly.<sup>72</sup> Apart from Christ, human depravity thwarts any attempt at social justice. McGavran stated, “the creation of a godly society—just, peaceful, brotherly—cannot happen—repeat, cannot happen—until all men believe in God the Father Almighty and Jesus Christ His Son, our Saviour.”<sup>73</sup> Social ministry cannot “make bad men into good men.”<sup>74</sup> Neither can social ministry produce the fruit of the Spirit

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<sup>70</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 288.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid. McGavran stated, “To be sure, implicit in the gospel is the assurance that as *ethnos* after *ethnos* is disciplined, as society after society is Christianized, tremendous advances in justice, brotherhood, peace, and good living will be practicable and will be achieved. If we want human improvement, nothing we can do will secure it as rapidly and as effectively as disciplining *panta ta ethne*. The colossal error of some misguided Christians is to believe that we can have a just and egalitarian society without men and women becoming believing Christians. The Bible gives no grounds for any such hope. Nor, for that matter, does human history. Clear-eyed vision indicates that until men and women are reborn, no great moral advance is likely to occur.” McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 20.

<sup>72</sup>McGavran stated, “It is useless to expect that non-Christians will be as interested as Christians as treating all men as God’s children. If we want mercy, justice, and righteousness to spread throughout the earth, we can take no more effective action than to multiply congregations of the redeemed in every segment of society. No one will act more justly toward his or her fellows than those who live in Christ and whose lives are guided by the Holy Spirit.” McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 103.

<sup>73</sup>McGavran, “The Future of the Christian Religion,” 127.

<sup>74</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 289.

within a person's life or within a society.<sup>75</sup> Social justice must be sought out of the overflow of the Christian life because an unregenerate man cannot of himself do justly.<sup>76</sup>

Social justice and ministry are brought about by God, and God's means for bringing them about is the perfecting of those who have accepted His Son and His revelation. McGavran argued,

Before the great ethical goals can be achieved, *first there must be many churches*. Only churches which exist can be perfected. Only babies who have been born can be educated. Only where practicing Christians form sizable minorities of their societies can they expect their presence seriously to influence the social, economic, and political structures. The Church must, indeed, "teach them all things," but first she must have at least some Christians and some congregations. What she must totally reject is the naïve idea that God will act in and through those who reject His Son and His revelation so much better than He will through those who accept His Son and His revelation that she should cease at once from planned church planting and try to create a vague community of justice and goodwill among all men.<sup>77</sup>

The church must resist the temptation to "teach them all things" before they have made them into disciples of Christ. The biblical order of discipling and then perfecting must be the strategic order related to social justice and ministry. Social justice apart from discipling and perfecting is inevitably doomed to fail. As a result, when

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<sup>75</sup>Speaking of the Satnamis people group of Central Provinces, India, McGavran stated, "The Satnamis . . . began to realize that seats in the assembly, help in getting an education, a share of jobs, and other exterior changes, while good, do not constitute a long step in the direction of justice. These things do not rebuke sin nor call sinners to repentance. They do not make bad men into good men. They neither increase kindness, gentleness, goodness, and self-control nor hold out promise of eternal life." Ibid.

<sup>76</sup>McGavran stated, "Because man is a sinner and cannot of himself do justly, God's mission maintains that man's chief need is not justice but forgiveness and a clear heart within. The just order he strives for will disappear as he fashions it, unless he strives as a godly person. He is to be more concerned with *being just* than receiving justice." Ibid., 288.

<sup>77</sup>Ibid., 440.

churches and missionary agencies put their primary focus upon social change, they accomplish little church growth and little social change.

According to McGavran, effective evangelism is thus the most effective way to achieve a just society.<sup>78</sup> Church growth is the most efficient way to solve the social problems plaguing societies. McGavran stated,

The Lord Jesus put it succinctly when He said, "Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things shall be added to you." He spoke of food and clothing, the simplest necessities of life, but the passage will bear much added freight: safety, health, education, comfort, production- even justice, peace, and brotherhood. As we try to help men to achieve these, the longest first step we can lead them to take is to believe in Christ as Lord and Savior and become dependable members of His Church. Enormous liberation of the human spirit and extension of righteousness among men will become possible as sound churches of Christ are multiplied among the three billion who now yield Him no allegiance. Such liberated persons and congregations will become in their own cultures and communities the most effective and permanent sources of "good works" as well as of true cooperation toward solving the bitter practical problems of the world.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup>McGavran stated, "Working for a just human order must never take the place of effective evangelism. There is no better way of securing a just, brotherly and moral world than to increase the number of practising Christians." McGavran, "The Future of the Christian Religion," 127. McGavran argued, "The Christian base for a just social order is enormously superior to all atheistic ideologies, which of necessity advocate justice on the shaky ground that- fortunately- it is not only a good but an eternally valid invention of man, and pays off in this life. . . . The revolution to establish the rights of man will be lost in area after area simply because those into whose hands power falls will themselves be sinful man who have no belief in a righteous and almighty God, who has shown the way in which they and other men can become inwardly righteous." McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 331-32. McGavran believed social justice is the application of Christian principles to society. He stated, "There should be no tension between mission and the advocates of social action. There is the most urgent need for *both* extension of the benefits of the Gospel to all communities and countrysides where there are no Evangelical Christians at all, *and*, where Christians are found, the application of Christian principles to all of life." *Ibid.*, 296.

<sup>79</sup>*Ibid.*, 44. Note Matt 6:33.

Social ministry, therefore, should be used as a platform to share the gospel and plant churches.<sup>80</sup> Social ministry that does not have church growth as its primary aim is misguided.<sup>81</sup> Any and all social work should be done with the primary intention of leading people to faith in Christ and planting churches where they can be perfected.

Needless to say, a person must first be right with God before he can begin to think and act right toward his fellow man.<sup>82</sup> Social justice and ministry should lead to discipling, and teaching new believers to do social ministry should be a part of perfecting.

### **Perfecting that Teaches Evangelistic Obedience to Christ**

Previous discussions in this dissertation have stressed that perfecting should have as an intended purpose producing followers who are obedient in the task of evangelism. Those believers who love the Lord Jesus and are obedient to His Word will diligently give themselves to obeying His command to proclaim the gospel.<sup>83</sup> Perfecting

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<sup>80</sup>McGavran credited evangelistic social ministry as a reason for the growth of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in China. He stated, “The Bible School instituted a new form of training for evangelists. They were taught evangelism *and* agriculture. They went out able to teach peasants not only the way of salvation but also ways to increase their yields of rice and pigs. Wherever these evangelists went, small rural churches sprang up.” *Ibid.*, 146.

<sup>81</sup>McGavran, “Advanced Church Growth.”

<sup>82</sup>McGavran stated, “Salvation is a vertical relationship (of man with God) which issues in horizontal relationships (of man with men). The vertical must not be displaced by the horizontal.” McGavran, “Salvation Today,” 266.

<sup>83</sup>McGavran stated, “The missionary . . . should sincerely believe that if one is to be a biblically sound Christian, he must aim at effective world evangelization at home and abroad.” McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 83.

should seek to instill within a believer more and more of the heart and mind of Christ.

McGavran stated,

The only way in which one can really share the mind of Christ is by getting actively involved in searching for the lost. Our Lord said on numerous occasions that He came to seek and save those who are lost. If we would really “perfect” Christians—if we would make them real servants of the Saviour—we must get them involved in the saving process, that is, in searching for and finding the lost.<sup>84</sup>

Christians who are disobedient concerning the task of evangelism do not have the mind of Christ and are not being biblically faithful.

The heart of Christ produces compassion within the life of a believer, and compassion considers the helpless estate of those who are without Christ. Perfecting that does not produce a passion for evangelism is incomplete and fails to produce spiritual quality and maturity. McGavran argued,

As soon as we separate quality from the passion to win men to Christ, it ceases to be Christian quality. To fight for brotherhood is good: but to proclaim brotherhood more important than salvation is bad. If we lead Christians who whine with a high polish, have much quality, but care nothing whether men are saved or not, their vaunted quality turns to ashes.<sup>85</sup>

Christians must be taught to make evangelistic obedience a priority in their life. They must not allow competing priorities to crowd out the task of sharing the gospel, said McGavran.<sup>86</sup> There are many important practices to teach new believers, but

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<sup>84</sup>McGavran and Arn, *How to Grow a Church*, 81-82.

<sup>85</sup>Donald McGavran, address notes, “Growth The Crucial Contemporary Issue Before the Church,” Folder 4, Box 83, Collection 178, Papers of Donald Anderson and Mary Elizabeth McGavran 1906-1991, 2000. Archives of the Billy Graham Center, Wheaton, Illinois. Additionally, McGavran stated, “The thought that we can be really good Christians while not caring about the people all around about us who do not know Christ is a pernicious device of Satan.” McGavran and Arn, *How to Grow a Church*, 81.

<sup>86</sup>McGavran stated, “The first step is to emphasize that evangelism is a



none of them should ever take the place of evangelism.<sup>87</sup> They should be taught to prioritize the eternal more than the temporal and the spiritual more than the physical. When believers become more like Christ, bringing the lost to Christ becomes the overarching purpose of their lives.<sup>88</sup>

As believers grow in the Lord through biblical perfecting, the transforming power of Christ and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit produce within a believer's life a bold witness. McGavran argued biblical and spiritual renewal movements must urge Christians to a "deeper and more genuine Christian life," but they must also teach that evangelism is an essential part of a "genuine Christian life."<sup>89</sup> He stated,

If anyone is really in Christ, if Christ does dwell in his heart through faith, he like Christ will seek the lost. . . . No one can be *fully* biblically sound and spiritually renewed without being tremendously concerned about the multitudes of unreached men and women and, indeed, of unreached segments of society. It is impossible for anybody to be really in Christ, really full of the Holy Spirit, without doing what the 120 did on the day of Pentecost. They rushed out and told everyone they met about Jesus and urged them to become His followers.<sup>90</sup>

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thoroughly biblical activity. In the midst of hundreds of good things to do, Christians should be clear that a chief and irreplaceable task is always that of bringing unbelievers to saving faith in Christ and membership in his Church." McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 426.

<sup>87</sup>McGavran stated, "The housekeeping tasks of administration and the nurture and education of existing Christians must not shut out the greatest service Christians can render to their non-Christian friends, i.e. telling them about the Saviour and persuading them to become His disciples." McGavran, *Ethnic Realities and the Church*, 206.

<sup>88</sup>See McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 192.

<sup>89</sup>McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 37.

<sup>90</sup>*Ibid.*

## **Ecclesiocentric Perfecting**

McGavran's approach to perfecting was ecclesiocentric in that he believed perfecting is best accomplished within the context of the local church. Those who are won to Christ must be gathered into churches and perfected. He thought churches are uniquely qualified and capable to carry out the task of perfecting. McGavran's ecclesiocentric approach to perfecting led him in part to the conviction that the biblical result of evangelism is church growth.<sup>91</sup> Gary McIntosh has stated, "McGavran's understanding of church growth was winning people to Christ and adding them to a local church so that they could be taught to obey all things Jesus commanded."<sup>92</sup>

### **The Imperative of Ecclesiocentric Perfecting**

McGavran thought the biblical result of evangelism should be that new believers become responsible members of the church. He stated,

Respecting biblical principles means that we hold the church to be a necessary part of God's plan for the salvation and discipling of men and nations. They must not only believe in Jesus Christ but must become responsible members of his church. The Bible requires that. If we take the Bible seriously, we cannot hold any other viewpoint. . . . The saved become part of the redeemed community. They live in the community, mutually supporting, encouraging, and helping others in the Body.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>91</sup>McGavran was asked, "The great commission commands us to go into all the world. Do you see the church as a basis for evangelism in the world?" To which McGavran responded, "Yes, and I see practically no other basis. The church, or rather the Christians, are the very ones who are evangelizing the world. Para-church organizations—like interdenominational missionary societies—rest on the church. . . . evangelization will be complete when in every part of every country a church is established in every community." McGavran and Arn, *How to Grow a Church*, 38.

<sup>92</sup>Gary McIntosh, Interview by author, Phone Interview, Bakersfield, CA, 8 March, 2012.

<sup>93</sup>McGavran and Arn, *Ten Steps for Church Growth*, 30-31.

Obedience to God thus involves becoming a member of a specific congregation and learning to obey Christ within that context.<sup>94</sup> God never intended for the Christian life to be lived in isolation, but to be lived out with other believers in the church.<sup>95</sup> For this reason, McGavran believed in a “high doctrine of the Church and the necessity for membership in it.”<sup>96</sup>

Responsible church membership is an essential aspect of perfecting believers. God has specified that believers grow to maturity within the fellowship and ministry of a church. McGavran listed four components of responsible church membership,

(1) the Christian’s own relationship to Jesus Christ, the Head of the Body; (2) his sharing in the life and work of the local church; (3) his consciously discovering and using the gifts God gives him so that the church grows; and (4) his endeavoring to change what is displeasing to God and bring peace, justice, love, and brotherhood into the world.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>94</sup>Donald McGavran, "Loose the Churches: Let Them Go! An Essential Issue in Indian Evangelism," *Missiology* 1 (1973): 84. McGavran stated, “What counts is being *in Christ*—living in strict obedience to his revelation in the Bible . . . and being open baptized members of a Christian congregation.” *Ibid.*, 86. McGavran also stated, “Certainly there is an existing Church of about a billion living persons. But does any one really join *that*? To be sure, the Church is one. Yet what each Christian actually joins is a specific congregation which, so to speak, wears *one* of thousands of different costumes.” *Ibid.*, 84. The link between evangelism and ecclesiocentric perfecting was so strong in McGavran’s thinking that he stated, “Believers must become part of the church; otherwise the reality of their belief is in question.” McGavran and Arn, *Ten Steps for Church Growth*, 31.

<sup>95</sup>McGavran stated, “Church growth is as much concerned with soundly Christian life as with finding the lost. Be assured that the lost are never truly found until they are incorporated in the flock, obey the Shepherd, walk in His way, and are filled with the Holy Spirit.” McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 125.

<sup>96</sup>Donald McGavran, "The Discovery of Church Growth," in *Church Growth: Strategies that Work*, by Donald A. McGavran and George G. Hunter III (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980), 24.

<sup>97</sup>McGavran and Arn, *Ten Steps for Church Growth*, 52.

Evangelism and church membership are inseparable because the Great Commission involves perfecting those who have come to know Christ, and God's design for perfecting is for it to be carried out within the local church. McGavran stated,

Unless the individual believer forms part of the church, he soon tends to lose his effectiveness. He grows cold and like a coal separated from the fire, soon turns black. The individual Christian separated from the church soon ceases to be an effective Christian. So the church, it seems to me, is an essential part of God's plan of salvation for the world. But in God's plan of redemption, is the emphasis on the individual or on the church? Both! God unquestionably calls individuals to believe on Him and be saved, but as soon as they do believe, it is His evident purpose that they be organized into churches and function as churches. It is only in churches that we see the Word of God growing and multiplying.<sup>98</sup>

All members of the church must understand the perfecting task as part of their faithfulness to God. God has given the responsibility to perfect to leaders as well as the "rank and file" members of the church.<sup>99</sup> Perfecting will not be accomplished until church members understand their responsibility to win new converts to the Lord and help them become responsible fruit-bearing members of the church.

Any approach to missions must, of course, begin with and come into line with what the Bible teaches concerning the church.<sup>100</sup> The New Testament establishes the pattern for how Christians are to accomplish the Great Commission. In Acts the apostle Paul won converts to Christ and then established churches into which the new converts were gathered and in which they matured. In speaking of Paul, McGavran wrote, "He

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<sup>98</sup>McGavran and Arn, *How to Grow a Church*, 21-22.

<sup>99</sup>McGavran, *The Bridges of God*, 91-92.

<sup>100</sup>The church exists to glorify God. Therefore, an adequate theological foundation concerning the church is what compels people to engage in the work of Christ and his church. McGavran and Arn, *How to Grow a Church*, 6.

builds no buildings. He founds no school. . . . Paul is content to *establish the churches and let them grow with the power which is from Christ.*”<sup>101</sup>

An ecclesiocentric approach to perfecting requires a church planting missions strategy.<sup>102</sup> McGavran would not separate evangelism from the task of incorporating new believers into churches where they could be perfected.<sup>103</sup> Leading an unreached population to Christ apart from church planting leads to a churchless Christianity, and it eventually leads to no Christianity at all due to a lack of biblical perfecting. He stated, “The multiplication of churches nourished on the Bible and full of the Holy Spirit is a *sine qua non* in carrying out the purposes of God. Conversely, would-be disciples must be joyfully built into His Body— they must not wander alone in the wilderness.”<sup>104</sup>

Church planting is necessary to carry out the perfecting task among unchurched populations. McGavran stated, “before the great ethical goals can be

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<sup>101</sup>McGavran, *The Bridges of God*, 135. McGavran is not suggesting that once churches are planted they should be completely left alone. Leaders should then be developed. See *ibid.* McGavran’s view of the role of missionaries, pastors, and layleaders in perfecting is discussed in chapter 5 of this dissertation.

<sup>102</sup>McGavran stated, “Nothing will advance the cause of world evangelization more than for church leaders and missionaries to cease thinking exclusively in terms of good work of one kind or another and begin thinking *of the central task* in terms of incorporating responsible converts in ongoing congregations and multiplying these in natural social units. The goal is to multiply sound churches in every people, every homogeneous unit, on earth. The central task is the communication of the Gospel to the billions who have yet to believe. The degree to which that is being accomplished can be measured in terms of countable disciples of Christ assembling under the Word of God in His churches to praise Him and to do His work.” McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 456.

<sup>103</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 265.

<sup>104</sup>*Ibid.*, 6.

achieved, *first there must be many churches*. Only churches which exist can be perfected.”<sup>105</sup> Making disciples must be followed by baptizing new believers into churches; only then can biblical perfecting take place. Individual Christians are unable to mature as God intends apart from being folded into functioning churches, which cannot take place without the planting of new churches. For this reason, McGavran argued that even in America, “The huge unchurched populations demand millions more Christians. For these we shall need all the present churches and thousands of new churches.”<sup>106</sup>

### **The Superiority of Ecclesiocentric Perfecting**

McGavran argued that church-centered perfecting is pragmatically superior to the common “mission station” approach of his day.<sup>107</sup> Mission stations had served a purpose, but were inferior at producing Christians both in terms of quality and quantity. McGavran, therefore, argued for an ecclesiocentric “people movement” approach to missions.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>105</sup>Ibid., 439.

<sup>106</sup>Donald McGavran, “Reaching People through New Congregations,” in *Church Growth: Strategies that Work*, by Donald A. McGavran and George G. Hunter III (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980), 101. See also *ibid.*, 99, 104.

<sup>107</sup>It is important to note the primary reason McGavran believed ecclesiocentric perfecting was pragmatically more effective is because God had designed it to be and it had God’s blessing upon it.

<sup>108</sup>As a reminder, McGavran described a people movement as: “A people movement results from the joint decision of a number of individuals- whether five or five hundred- all from the same people, which enables them to become Christians without social dislocation, while remaining in full contact with their non-Christian relatives, thus enabling other groups of that people, across the years, after suitable instruction, to come to similar decisions and form Christian churches made up exclusively of members of that

McGavran acknowledged a poorly shepherded “people movement” is disastrous, but insisted well shepherded “people movements” have a “soundly Christian character.”<sup>109</sup> He argued,

The Karens, disciplined through a People Movement, and now in the process of perfecting, are not under the delusion that a nominal Christianity is worth anything to God. The thousands of churches scattered across the country contain a normal proportion of earnest Spirit-filled Christians. They are “reborn Baptists” who will compare favorably with the reborn Baptists of any land. We stress this because it is a mistake to assume that People Movement Christians, merely because they have come to the Christian faith in chains of families, must inevitably be nominal Christians. Such an assumption is usually based on prejudice, not fact. All churches face the problem of how to avoid creating nominal Christians. Even Western churches, made up of only those individual converts who testify to regeneration, soon come to have a second and third generation who easily grow up to be nominal Christians. The policies of the churches may vary in their ability to produce Christians vividly conscious of their own salvation. People Movements in themselves do not encourage the production of nominal Christians.<sup>110</sup>

McGavran pointed out that people movements often resulted in a higher level of perfecting.<sup>111</sup> Referring to Pickett’s study of people movements in India, McGavran said, “group conversions were found to improve social attitudes, produce a new scale of values for women, dissolve ancient enmities, and revolutionize ethical concepts.”<sup>112</sup>

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people.” McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 335. McGavran’s approach to “people movements” was ecclesiocentric. He argued, “a properly shepherded people movement is a cluster of thoroughly indigenous congregations.” *Ibid.*, 386.

<sup>109</sup>*Ibid.*, 350.

<sup>110</sup>McGavran, *The Bridges of God*, 70-71.

<sup>111</sup>See *ibid.*, 122-25.

<sup>112</sup>*Ibid.*, 123. McGavran later rejected the phrase “group conversions,” thinking that it distorted the reality of what is really happening in a people movement. He stated, “Do people movements rest on ‘group conversion?’ The answer is No. There is no such thing as group conversion. A group has no body and no mind. It cannot decide anything whatever. The phrase ‘group conversion’ is simply an easy, inexact

Simply put, churches more fundamentally help people to live as sanctified children of God than do the schools and hospitals often associated with the mission station approach.<sup>113</sup>

**Spiritual Emphasis.** McGavran thought churches are better at perfecting than “mission stations” for three reasons. First, churches put a greater emphasis on spiritual priorities.<sup>114</sup> The disparity in perfecting effectiveness between churches and other institutions stems from having different purposes. Philanthropic institutions are specifically designed to improve people’s physical quality of life, whereas churches are specifically designed to improve people’s spiritual quality of life. McGavran did not completely separate the two, recognizing they are at times connected; however, he saw the distinction as important and telling.

Churches could more adequately focus upon discipling and perfecting since these are their chief aims, whereas other institutions by their very nature put their primary focus upon other objectives. McGavran stated, “Churches, since their purpose is to obey Christ and walk in the light of his revelation, are the most potent originators of the good life known to man. Let us multiply them and improve them.”<sup>115</sup> Churches allow leaders

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description of what really happens. What really happens is multi-individual, mutually interdependent conversion, which is a very different thing. These exact terms are important. One should learn to use them correctly and easily.” McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 340.

<sup>113</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 350.

<sup>114</sup>Ibid., 346.

<sup>115</sup>McGavran, "The Dividends We Seek," 5.



to give their full attention to discipling and perfecting while avoiding some of the distractions of non-church centered perfecting.

Second, McGavran believed churches produce Christians who are more reliant upon the Holy Spirit and the transforming power of God than do mission stations. McGavran argued “mission station” Christians often have a distorted view of the Christian life. He stated, “Many would grant that it was Christian education which had lifted them . . . . But on such experiences as the power of the Spirit, the forgiveness of sins and the blessedness of faith, many mission station Christians are likely to have a weak witness.”<sup>116</sup> New converts often viewed the Christian life as a means to improving socioeconomic position rather than a dynamic relationship with God, which inevitably hampered and distorted perfecting.<sup>117</sup> Church centered perfecting helps to eliminate such distortions, and if properly shepherded, results in more Christocentric Christians.<sup>118</sup>

McGavran further believed continued outside subsidy could hurt the perfecting process by causing Christians to depend upon outside aid instead of depending upon the

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<sup>116</sup>McGavran, *The Bridges of God*, 57. McGavran thought the reason “mission stations” Christians were likely to have a weak witness is because mission stations put more of a focus upon school education and less of a focus upon the blessings of salvation and a relationship with God. Therefore, converts were less committed and effective in evangelism. See *ibid.*

<sup>117</sup>McGavran stated, “The institutionalized mission station is like an inverted pyramid, with huge accumulation of service organizations dominating the little congregation. This inevitably creates the idea that to be a Christian is to receive aid from institutions rather than to live a Spirit-filled life. . . . The mission station becomes an end in itself, instead of a means to the discipling of peoples.” *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>118</sup>McGavran stated, “These new units of peace and justice, where life revolves around Jesus Christ and his Word, are essential to the formation of that just world all Christians deeply want.” McGavran, “The Discovery of Church Growth,” 15.

Lord. He noted, “Then becoming Christian means being richly served by a wealthy foreign organization called ‘the Church,’ an understanding which is fatal to healthy growth.”<sup>119</sup> Even new churches should move toward self-reliance as soon as possible, and in the process learn that the Lord Himself will sustain them.<sup>120</sup> McGavran went so far as to say a shortage of funds can at times be good. He said,

There is a beneficial aspect, however, to the chronic shortage of funds in growing church missions. There is no pampering of Christians. They early learn that discipling does not include getting them land, making them loans, giving them jobs and getting them out of scrapes.<sup>121</sup>

Third, McGavran argued churches more faithfully follow those spiritual practices which contribute to perfecting than do mission stations. Churches engage in corporate worship and give of their substance on a more regular basis than mission stations.<sup>122</sup> McGavran noted, “In well-cared-for movements, new Christians build a meeting house and covenant to assemble there, hear and learn the Bible, send their children for regular instruction, commit hymns and Scripture passages to memory, and give to the Church.”<sup>123</sup> McGavran stated,

Christians become “people with churches, who worship God” rather than “people with hospitals who know medicine,” or “people with schools who get good jobs.” The health of the Christian movement requires that the normal pattern be well

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<sup>119</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 326.

<sup>120</sup>*Ibid.*, 374.

<sup>121</sup>McGavran, *The Bridges of God*, 78.

<sup>122</sup>*Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>123</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 351-52.

known, not merely to the non-Christian peoples, but to the leaders of church and mission and to the rank and file of members.<sup>124</sup>

Churches are more focused on gospel witness and see it as their primary purpose.<sup>125</sup> Mission stations often would employ new believers due to social dislocation. As a result, mission stations often developed the mentality that they existed in order to provide livelihoods to those whom they employed. The reason for giving to the mission station became maintaining the institutions of the mission station and providing income for their large staffs. Inevitably the focus shifted from discipling the peoples to perpetuating the mission station.<sup>126</sup> Resources were guarded in order to keep people employed rather than spent to grow the church. Often church growth was discouraged

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<sup>124</sup>McGavran, *The Bridges of God*, 92.

<sup>125</sup> McGavran stated concerning “gathered colony missions,” a phrase he used synonymously for mission stations, “As a result of the small response, gathered colony missions were easily diverted to secondary aims. Sometimes when a famine occurred the mission cared for thousands of orphans and became for the next twenty years in effect a vast orphanage. The evangelistic work was still called the central task, but the orphanages claimed the lion’s share of the budget. Around the orphanages were built great institutions. Missionaries, permanently located, were the heads of the orphanages. . . . When it became apparent that the people of the land were not espousing Christianity in any but the smallest numbers, the institutional work appeared as more solid, more tangible, more rewarding.” Ibid., 50-51.

<sup>126</sup>McGavran stated, “The large staff employed regard institutionalized philanthropy as the means to livelihood- which it is; and their continued support as the reason for the institutions— which it is not . . . . The focus is taken away from discipling the peoples and fixed on ‘maintaining institutions of excellent quality.’” McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 346.

because it would take resources away from the mission station.<sup>127</sup> McGavran argued churches are better at producing evangelistic Christians because they do not have the same institutional distractions.

**Indigenous Christians.** McGavran believed mission stations are not indigenous; therefore, by their very nature they cause social dislocation.<sup>128</sup> Those who come to Christ would often leave their tribesmen and became disconnected from their people altogether.<sup>129</sup> Mission stations with their Western institutions, buildings, leadership, and education often gave the impression that to become Christian was to neglect the cultural obligations one has to his or her people and adopt a markedly Western way of life.

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<sup>127</sup>McGavran expressed his frustration with the mission station mentality in a letter to Dr. Yocum: “The claims of the established work, a balanced mission, and the votes of people in static work, geared to static work, and afraid of growth and baptisms and problems, rule the day. One Mission Secretary said to Bishop Pickett ‘What a crime it would be to baptize people and leave them to rot in their little villages. Only if we can give them jobs and get them out of the villages into a decent kind of life should we baptize them.’ Pickett was shocked and amazed. Another Mission secretary of ours said dubiously to me, ‘But Don, suppose all these people did become Christian, what a dislocation to all our work would ensue.’ Bless my soul! I was so dumbfounded at the question, that all I could do was to stutter. But perhaps nothing could better illustrate what I mean than just that remark. Imagine, ‘But listen Eisenhower, suppose we did break through into Europe, a victory of such vast proportions would certainly upset the admirable disposition of troops which we have now achieved.’ Bless my soul!!” Donald McGavran, letter to C. M. Yocum, 19 August 1949, Folder 22, Box 1, Collection 178, Papers of Donald Anderson and Mary Elizabeth McGavran 1906-1991, 2000. Archives of the Billy Graham Center, Wheaton, Illinois.

<sup>128</sup>In referring to the mission station approach McGavran stated, “To be a Christian was to come out and be separate. . . . To gather a compound full of Christians out of a non-Christian population seemed a good way to proceed.” McGavran, *The Bridges of God*, 46.

<sup>129</sup>McGavran, "How Can an *Ethnos* Be Discipled," 72.

Indigenous churches, on the other hand, are not reliant upon foreign cultural expressions or support for them to function properly. Therefore, McGavran argued a goal of missions is to produce indigenous churches.<sup>130</sup> Church-centered perfecting can be done indigenously without new believers abandoning their tribesmen.

Indigenous churches allow for social cohesion, which enhances Christian convictions. McGavran stated, “Conviction is buttressed by social cohesion. When all my relatives are Christian and renouncing the Christian faith means breaking with my dearest, my love of the Lord is reinforced by my love for my brethren.”<sup>131</sup> Additionally, clusters of indigenous churches are able to diminish the negative effects of ostracism: “Ostracism is very effective against one person. But ostracism is weak indeed when exercised against a group of a dozen. And when exercised against two hundred it has practically no force at all.”<sup>132</sup> Church planting among a people group more readily facilitates Christians remaining within their people while practicing biblical Christianity.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>130</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 386. McGavran made a distinction between indigenous church principles and nationalization. He stated concerning Western missionaries, “Indigenous church principles are often confused with nationalization. They should not be, for they deal with the way in which self-propagating churches are planted, whereas nationalization has to do with turning authority over to the African church leaders.” *Ibid.*, 373.

<sup>131</sup>*Ibid.*, 337.

<sup>132</sup>McGavran, “A Church in Every People: Plain Talk about a Difficult Subject.” In *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*. 4<sup>th</sup> ed., ed. Ralph D. Winter and Steven Hawthorne (Pasadena, CA: Paternoster Press, 1981), 620.

<sup>133</sup>McGavran stated, “Each segment of society, each tribe, each caste and each nation will continue to speak its own language and, with one exception, follow its own culture. The one exception is that wherever the culture requires conduct unsuitable to

Fully indigenous churches are also facilitated through the use of tribal dialects. Churches can more easily be planted in each and every people group in which the tribal language of a people group is used, and teaching the Bible in one's tribal language contributes to better comprehension of biblical truth. Mission stations were often in urban areas in which there were multiple people groups to which they were ministering, often making it necessary to communicate in the national language.<sup>134</sup> McGavran argued that teaching in a person's native dialect contributes to more effective perfecting. He stated, "If you are to be understood, you must speak the language of your listener."<sup>135</sup> McGavran lamented congregations "where the praying, preaching, and singing are all done in the 'national language.'<sup>136</sup> He went on to say, "It means that many, if not most Christians have to worship God and hear His Word in a language which they imperfectly understand."<sup>137</sup>

If equally equipped as non-indigenous leaders, indigenous leadership is better prepared to evaluate the effectiveness of perfecting within their cultural context.

McGavran believed judging missions by such external matters as socioeconomic status or

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born-again Christians, that conduct will be renounced, or changed to make it genuinely Christian. In short, as the world becomes increasingly Christian, it will nevertheless maintain its rich diversity of peoples and cultures." McGavran, "The Future of the Christian Religion," 125.

<sup>134</sup>McGavran used "tribal language" to describe the dialect of a people group, and "national language" to describe the official or majority language of a geopolitical country. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 327.

<sup>135</sup>McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 20.

<sup>136</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 327.

<sup>137</sup>Ibid.

educational achievement is ethnocentric and at times imperialistic. He argued, “The church growth movement urges that people become sincere practicing Christians while remaining ethnically, culturally, and economically themselves. . . . They can become good Christians no matter what their culture, tongue, education, or political power happens to be.”<sup>138</sup> Their indigenous leaders would be best equipped to evaluate their growth as “good Christians.”

**Loving Tribesmen.** McGavran thought ecclesiocentric perfecting is more efficient at teaching believers to love their tribesmen or “people.” Mission stations often had the opposite effect. Mission stations often caused Christians to become more Westernized and affluent than their people group. As a result, they began to downplay their ethnic and cultural heritage and became ashamed of their people group. Rather than creating Christian love within the heart of believers, mission stations created arrogance. McGavran lamented this development because he believed it did harm to the spread of the gospel. He stated, “for them to hide the fact that they were ever in the same community drastically diminishes effective presentation of the Gospel.”<sup>139</sup>

McGavran argued Christian love should make believers better members of their society. He said,

The goal that should dominate all worship and Christian training is, of course, first that it be *thoroughly biblical and Christian*. . . . Christians should be *better tribals* than non-Christians: more concerned for the tribal good, more intelligent in seeking

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<sup>138</sup> McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 59.

<sup>139</sup> McGavran, *Ethnic Realities and the Church*, 195.

it, more honest in handling tribal money, more generous in aiding the needy of the tribe.<sup>140</sup>

Rather than making believers better members of their tribe, though, the social dislocation caused by mission stations often resulted in dereliction of tribal duties and responsibilities.

McGavran thought churches are better at teaching believers to love their people in such a way as to desire their salvation and actively witness to their relatives and friends. Christians must become all things to all men in order to win some (1 Cor 9:22-23).<sup>141</sup> New believers must be taught through perfecting to keep as many ties to their relatives and friends as possible in order to share the gospel with them.

Becoming a Christian should not mean a person loves his neighbor less, but that he loves them more than before.<sup>142</sup> Love must play itself out in the life of the new believer. McGavran believed the ideal is the new believer “continues to love his people, identify with them, serve them, spend as much time with them as possible, proving to them that though he has become a Christian he is still a good member of his society—indeed, a better member than he was before.”<sup>143</sup>

New converts should, in fact, be taught to love their relatives and people even when being wrongfully treated. Part of perfecting new believers is teaching them how to respond to persecution. McGavran stated,

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<sup>140</sup>Ibid., 136.

<sup>141</sup>McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 20.

<sup>142</sup>McGavran, *Ethnic Realities and the Church*, 96.

<sup>143</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 236.



All converts should be encouraged to bear cheerfully the exclusion, the oppression and the persecution that they are likely to encounter from their people. When anyone becomes a follower of a new way of life, he is likely to meet some disfavor from his loved ones. Maybe it's mild; maybe it's severe. He should bear such disfavor patiently. He should say on all occasions, 'I am a better son than I was before; I am a better father than I was before; I am a better husband than I was before; and I love you more than I used to do. You can hate me, but I will not hate you. You can exclude me, but I will not exclude you. You can force me out of our ancestral house, but I will live on its veranda. Or I will get a house just across the street. I am still one of you; I am more one of you than I ever was before.'<sup>144</sup>

McGavran believed it is hard to teach new believers to love their kinsmen as Christ loves them if becoming a Christian is "equated with traitorously abandoning one's own people."<sup>145</sup>

**Church discipline.** Church discipline is also a necessary and important part of perfecting. McGavran stated that effective discipline can even lead to church growth:

some Churches excommunicate or disfellowship a considerable number of those who are baptized, and the results of this church discipline are often favorable. Many of the disciplined repent, beg forgiveness, and are restored to the Church. Bishop Azariah of Dornakal, when he first came to the diocese, excommunicated more than six hundred, chiefly for open adultery. Since the Anglicans were taking in thousands, far from stopping growth, his disciplinary actions stimulated it. Many of the excommunicated repented and were restored.<sup>146</sup>

Churches led by indigenous leadership are often more effective at administering disciplinary actions. McGavran stated, "Discipline, too, can be more effective and more indigenous. . . . The people-movement congregation knows how to

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<sup>144</sup>McGavran, "A Church in Every People," 619-20.

<sup>145</sup>McGavran, "Loose the Churches," 93.

<sup>146</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 102-103.

keep its members in line. It will enforce whatever it really believes in.”<sup>147</sup> McGavran thought missionaries should permit “discipline to arise from the conscience of the new church rather than to be imposed according to the conscience of the missionary.”<sup>148</sup> Giving churches autonomy concerning church discipline helps them to consider discipline as being governed by the Word of God rather than foreign fiat. Discipline enforced by a foreigner could potentially confuse believers because it was hard for them to discern between what is the church’s displeasure or the foreigner’s displeasure.<sup>149</sup>

### **The Multiplication of Ecclesiocentric Perfecting**

Ecclesiocentric perfecting creates an environment and pattern in which exponential growth can occur because churches are self-propagating. Mission stations were not self-propagating because they were reliant upon foreign funds for the perfecting process to grow. Ecclesiocentric perfecting allows the process of discipling and perfecting to grow by multiplication rather than addition. McGavran believed church planting movements allow for the “spontaneous expansion of the Church.” According to McGavran, churches are “fully equipped with all spiritual authority to multiply themselves without any necessary reference to the foreign missionaries.”<sup>150</sup>

Mission stations were ineffective at bringing large numbers of people to Christ

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<sup>147</sup>Ibid., 337.

<sup>148</sup>McGavran, *The Bridges of God*, 135.

<sup>149</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 337.

<sup>150</sup>McGavran, *The Bridges of God*, 88.

and into the church for perfecting. However, churches have the ability to rapidly reproduce themselves and reach large numbers of people since they do not require outside resources. Mission stations often did not want more nationals to become Christians since more Christians would drain valuable resources. According to McGavran, they reasoned, “if more people become Christians, the resources of the mission will be spread thinner and there will be less for each of the existing Christians. Cases have occurred where they have actually discouraged possible converts from becoming Christian.”<sup>151</sup> Churches do not have the same need for foreign finances in order to rapidly expand, thus allowing churches to produce people movements when mission stations could not. As a result, McGavran argued, “As your churches multiply, lay more and more emphasis on the indefinitely reproducible spiritual benefits of the Christian life and less and less on those which require mission subsidy.”<sup>152</sup>

McGavran saw the missionary enterprise as an interconnected cyclical process. Missionaries win converts to the Lord and bring them into the membership of churches where they are perfected. Perfected believers go out winning more lost persons to the Lord and bringing them into the membership of new and existing churches. The process can exponentially grow because of its ability to continually repeat itself.

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<sup>151</sup>Ibid., 57-58.

<sup>152</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 346.

## Conclusion

McGavran taught biblical perfecting teaches Christians obedience to Christ's command to share the gospel with the lost.<sup>153</sup> Biblical perfecting instills within believers an understanding that God's purpose in the gospel is to save sinners in Christ. Perfecting teaches believers that God has saved them and given them the purpose of bringing others to Jesus by sharing the gospel.

One of the greatest dangers of the Christian life is to not proclaim the gospel outside of the confines of the church.<sup>154</sup> The idea that perfecting can take place apart from passionate and active evangelism was oxymoronic to McGavran.<sup>155</sup> True Christ-like spiritual maturity yields the fruits of evangelistic passion and obedience.

McGavran believed the Bible teaches that the task of perfecting involves gathering converts into local churches where they can be taught the Word of God and matured in their knowledge and obedience to Christ. The result of actually making disciples and adding them to the church for perfecting is church growth. Biblical perfecting in the church teaches Christians evangelistic obedience and membership

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<sup>153</sup>McGavran stated, "A *full* infilling of the Holy Spirit and *full* biblical obedience will always be deeply concerned that the unsaved hear and obey the gospel. If we are to be biblically sound, we must reach out to the unsaved." McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 41.

<sup>154</sup>McGavran stated, "We must recognize that the greatest danger facing practicing Christians is to practice their Christianity among themselves, to tell the good news only to those who come to their church, and to be unconcerned about those who do not." *Ibid.*

<sup>155</sup>McGavran stated, "Paul declares that he has been commissioned by God to call all the peoples of the world to the obedience that comes from faith, That is God's command. Doing that is essential Christian conduct. No one can be a good Christian who does not engage in this enterprise." *Ibid.*, 14.

responsibility. Therefore, McGavran believed that a key aspect of biblical perfecting is teaching and producing church growth—i.e., evangelism that leads to responsible church membership.<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>156</sup>McGavran believed, “the duty of every Christian is to press forward fervently proclaiming Jesus Christ as God and only Savior, and persuading men and women to become His disciples and responsible members of His Church.” McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 449.

## CHAPTER 5

### MCGAVRAN'S PERFECTING STRATEGY INTENDED FOR CHURCH GROWTH

McGavran taught that perfecting should be designed to teach and produce church growth—i.e., effective evangelism.<sup>1</sup> Church growth should be built into the perfecting of every believer; otherwise, church growth will fall by the wayside. McGavran thought the training of the laity “must be *for church growth*. The goal must be crystal clear. It must be defended against multitudinous good things which obscure it.”<sup>2</sup> Church growth must be a vital part of a church’s plan for perfecting.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, McGavran observed that the assumption perfecting will automatically lead to church growth often does not play itself out in experience. He saw it as a false assumption often used as a rationalization for not growing.

Another common rationalization was “If we were only better Christians, if we only loved the Lord more, prayed more, and forgave each other more, we would grow.” I

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<sup>1</sup>McGavran defined church growth or effective evangelism as evangelism that “finds the lost, folds those found, feeds them on the Word of God, and incorporates them in multitudes of new and old congregations.” Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1980), 265.

<sup>2</sup>Donald McGavran, "Training the Laity for Church Growth," in *Church Growth: Strategies that Work*, by Donald A. McGavran and George G. Hunter III (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980), 79.

<sup>3</sup>See Donald McGavran, *How Churches Grow: The New Frontiers of Mission* (London: World Dominion Press, 1959), 98.

didn't buy that either; my colleagues, Indians and Americans, were good Christians. They were none better! Of course, we had faults, but faults were not the reason for the slight growth of our churches.<sup>4</sup>

McGavran concluded the reason so much of perfecting does not lead to growth is because it does not emphasize effective evangelism.<sup>5</sup> As a result, it is deficient in an essential aspect of biblical perfecting.<sup>6</sup> McGavran's approach to perfecting sought to remedy this malady. He believed that biblical perfecting leads to church growth because it intentionally teaches effective evangelism.<sup>7</sup> He taught that a perfecting methodology should be designed with the explicit purpose of producing evangelistic Christians who labor for church growth.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Donald A. McGavran and Winfield C. Arn, *Ten Steps for Church Growth*, (New York: Harper & Row Publishers 1977), 2. Similarly, McGavran stated, "We must not kid ourselves into thinking that if we are good Christians in a general sense, and have wonderful fellowship with each other, somehow or other as a result, the church will magically start to grow." Donald McGavran & Win Arn, *How to Grow a Church* (Glendale, CA: Gospel Literature International 1973), 83.

<sup>5</sup>In speaking about growth of denominations, specifically the Conservative Baptist denominations, McGavran said, "If they will make five courses in effective evangelism required in all their theological training schools, they will experience a tremendous burst of growth." Donald McGavran, *Effective Evangelism: A Theological Mandate* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1988), 121.

<sup>6</sup>McGavran stated, "God's command to His church to evangelize the world must be heard and carried out by all components of the church. World evangelization must not be limited to missionary societies and professional evangelists. These commands are laid upon every Christian. 'Imitate me' was not written to Paul's fellow evangelists. It was written to the Christian fellowship in Corinth, to all its members, men and women alike. The entire body of Christ needs to hear and obey the imperative to world evangelization." Ibid., 22.

<sup>7</sup>McGavran state, "the most important reason for failure to grow is that unfortunately the best of Christians frequently never hear God's command to disciple all the segments of humankind." Ibid., 28.

<sup>8</sup>See Ibid., 136-37.

Much of the perfecting McGavran encountered sought to make believers into followers of Christ without making them fishers of men. Much perfecting sought to make men knowledgeable of the commandments of Christ without producing obedience to the command of Christ to make disciples. He rejected perfecting that sought to teach the knowledge of Christ and His Word without teaching obedience to Christ and His Word. McGavran stated,

We must not become keepers of the aquarium. We are “fishers of men”. . . . Let us *do* theology and transmit our good words and good intentions into millions of responsible disciples setting their shoulders to the wheel and lifting our churches into positions of social power, devout living, fervent praise, and contagious witness.<sup>9</sup>

### **Theological Training**

McGavran believed that church growth—i.e., effective evangelism—must be taught as a theological mandate.<sup>10</sup> He stressed that theology matters; correct belief leads to correct behavior. Right doctrine then leads to church growth.<sup>11</sup> McGavran stated,

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<sup>9</sup>Donald McGavran, "The Discovery of Church Growth," in *Church Growth: Strategies that Work*, by Donald A. McGavran and George G. Hunter III (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980), 27.

<sup>10</sup>For an overview of McGavran's thoughts concerning the prioritizing of effective evangelism in theological education, see McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*. For an excellent analysis of McGavran's views of theological education, see John Albert Crabtree Jr., "Donald Anderson McGavran's Theology of Evangelism and Church Growth as a Basis for Theological Education" (Th.M. thesis, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1997). Crabtree argues that “the unifying theme of McGavran's theology is effective evangelism, which prompted him to say that effective evangelism must be the essential priority of theological education. Effective evangelism should never be divorced from theological education.” *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>11</sup>McGavran recognized the cause and effect relationship between true and complete theological training and church growth is a general one with exceptions. For instance, McGavran stated, “The church growth movement acknowledges that even the



“Though we might be tempted to separate theological education from evangelism, we are reminded of our eternal God’s command to disciple all the peoples of the earth and His promise that in Abraham all the peoples of the world would be blessed.”<sup>12</sup> Biblical perfecting teaches Christians the theological foundations necessary for effective evangelism.<sup>13</sup>

When theological training does not lead to church growth, it may be because it is doctrinally incomplete. McGavran stated,

Let me assure you that full doctrinal correctness will certainly lead to effective evangelism. It must, however, be correctness in regard to *all* doctrines. We cannot omit the doctrines commanding that the body of Christ and all its separate parts continuously engage in finding lost sons and daughters and bringing them back to the Father’s house. This view of essential Christian conduct and essential Christian obedience is, to be sure, implied in many doctrines. For example, the doctrine of the atonement is not limited to existing Christians. It does not state that Christ died to save only members of the existing churches. If it is correctly understood as atonement for those who believe, age after age, among all people everywhere, then the doctrine of the atonement itself impels us toward effective evangelization. The same is true of many other doctrines. Consequently, we must say that true *and complete* doctrinal correctness will promote church growth. However, the very

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most ardent evangelists, most concerned to carry out the Great Commission, do often find themselves in resistant populations where, no matter how well the gospel is proclaimed, few are baptized.” Ibid., 108. McGavran, however, argued that within receptive fields right doctrine will produce faithful evangelistic Christians who will see people saved and incorporated into the church. He stated, “A common objection is that since we are not commanded to be successful, but only to be faithful, we do not do well to emphasize that right doctrine will produce church growth. In reply we grant at once that when the servant is sent to sow a field, the Master does not expect the servant to come back the same day bearing sheaves. But when the servant is sent into a ripe harvest field, *faithfulness* means bringing out many sheaves.” Idem, "Making Doctrines Missionarily Effective and Biblically Correct," in *Contemporary Theologies of Missions*, by Arthur F. Glasser and Donald A. McGavran (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), 133.

<sup>12</sup>McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 1.

<sup>13</sup>In speaking about the church, McGavran said, “As one gets back to a biblical base, and sees these things the way God sees them, he builds a theological foundation on which church growth can take place.” McGavran and Arn, *How to Grow a Church*, 6.

common incomplete doctrinal correctness taught by so many Bible colleges and seminaries unfortunately does create static congregations and denominations.<sup>14</sup>

Correct and complete theological training produces evangelistic Christians. It teaches God's command to make disciples. McGavran lamented what he considered to be "unsound" theology that produces indifference toward church growth.<sup>15</sup> In response to a dearth of church growth theological training, McGavran proposed that "each denomination (each branch of the true church) ought to construct a theology that *demand*s church growth in keeping with its particular theological emphasis."<sup>16</sup>

Leaders and laymen alike must be taught the theological doctrines of church growth.<sup>17</sup> First, Christians must be taught the inspiration, authority, and infallibility of

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<sup>14</sup>McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 29.

<sup>15</sup>McGavran observed that "many congregations, denominations, Bible schools and seminaries . . . are theologically sound in regard to many doctrines, but in regard to eternal God's command to proclaim the gospel to all segments of society throughout the entire world, leading people to faith and obedience, they are quite unsound." *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 108. McGavran was not suggesting that theology is manmade, but rather was arguing that denominations more thoroughly teach those biblical doctrines related to God's eternal command to evangelize the lost and incorporate them into the church. McGavran stated, "The reader should now turn to the statement of faith used by his or her denomination and reframe each doctrine so that it is biblically true and missionarily effective. It should be remembered that in most cases these doctrines were framed in the past by people who were not flamingly mission-minded. They were correcting the doctrines of the Church of Rome, it may be, or of some other branch of the church. They were not looking intently at the three billion perishing in a famine of the Word of God (Amos 8:11-12). They were not asking themselves how the doctrines should be framed so that this appalling hunger might be met and people everywhere might feast on the Bread of Heaven." McGavran, "Making Doctrines Missionarily Effective and Biblically Correct," 129.

<sup>17</sup>The following list of five theological doctrines is not meant to be a comprehensive list of the theological doctrines of church growth, but an overview of those doctrinal themes most prevalent in McGavran's writings concerning theological training. A more comprehensive list would include the doctrines of human depravity and

Scripture. Believers must be taught that the Bible is God's instruction manual for their life. When Christians come to know, trust, and obey the Bible, they have a deep concern for those who do not live according to it and a desire to see them live their lives by it.<sup>18</sup>

Second, Christians must be taught faith in Jesus as the God-given way of salvation.<sup>19</sup> McGavran believed the necessity of faith in Jesus is a corollary to the doctrine of the authority of Scripture.<sup>20</sup> He thought effective evangelism was dependent

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sinfulness, human lostness, damnation, eternality of the soul, God's holiness and justice, substitutionary atonement, Jesus as the only Savior, the church, sanctification, and the Second Coming of Christ; all of which point to the priority and necessity of evangelism that leads to fruit-bearing disciples in the local church.

<sup>18</sup>McGavran stated, "A major reason for today's vast indifference to church growth, i.e., to effective evangelism, is a prevalent low view of the Bible . . . . Wherever Christians have come to hold a low opinion of the Bible—whether that described above or any other—eternal God's command to proclaim the gospel to *panta ta ethne*, leading them to obedience of faith, is greatly damaged, if not destroyed. However, where a high view of the Bible obtains, where it is held to be the inspired and utterly dependable Word of God, the ultimate authority for human life, the only infallible rule of faith and practice, God's Word to all people—there tremendous concern for the unsaved, for those who do not live according to God's Word, is certain to mark the true church. There the urgency of winning the lost will be felt by seminary professors, ministers, and lay people alike. There the church will come alive." McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 31.

<sup>19</sup>McGavran stated, "The first step may be preaching a series of sermons explaining . . . the absolute necessity of belief in Christ." McGavran, "Training the Laity for Church Growth," 65. Additionally, McGavran stated, "lay leaders need biblical convictions about man's salvation. They must believe that men are lost without Christ, that God desires all men to be saved, and that the simple God-given way of salvation (repentance and faith in Christ) has been clearly revealed through Christ in the Bible." McGavran and Arn, *How to Grow a Church*, 83. Again, though, McGavran was inconsistent in his view of the salvation of those who have never heard of Jesus. See the appendix for this information.

<sup>20</sup>McGavran said, "Because we believe in the authority of the Christian Scriptures and adhere to the doctrines there revealed, we accept the lostness of men without the Saviour and the salvation which God has provided in Jesus' death and resurrection for all who believe." Donald McGavran, "Church Growth Strategy Continued," *International Review of Mission* 57 (1968): 338.

upon believing that “belief in Jesus is necessary for salvation.”<sup>21</sup> If Christians do not believe in the necessity of faith in Jesus for salvation, they will lack the necessary motivation for carrying on the Great Commission.<sup>22</sup> For Christians to be diligent in church growth, McGavran said, “They must believe that salvation is by faith in Jesus Christ alone and acceptance of His Word as the only rule of faith and practice.”<sup>23</sup> Salvation must be taught as “the greatest thing in life.”<sup>24</sup>

Third, theological training should teach God’s express purpose to glorify himself through saving sinners, and his desire for believers to carry out the ministry of reconciliation.<sup>25</sup> McGavran stated,

Christians often conclude that the church exists only for their benefit. However, that is not what the Bible teaches. The church exists to glorify God. The church exists to

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<sup>21</sup>Donald McGavran, "Crisis of Identity for Some Missionary Societies," *Christianity Today*, 8 May 1970, 12.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

<sup>23</sup>Donald A. McGavran, *Ethnic Realities and the Church: Lessons from India*. (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1979), 65.

<sup>24</sup>McGavran stated, “The Christian believes that until a person know Jesus Christ, until he has the joy of sins forgiven, until he is really a follower of Christ and has a personal experience with Him, he is missing the greatest thing in life. This conviction leads us to speak to others, to win them to Christ, to incorporate them into the church, to give them responsibilities, to train them as leaders, and to send them out in turn to win others. We need much Bible study along this line so that our entire church-growth effort will be done for Christian motive and in obedience to God father than as a restless search for success.” McGavran and Arn, *How to Grow a Church*, 128.

<sup>25</sup>McGavran argued that if people understand God’s purpose in saving sinners, they will feel that giving their time to evangelism is a matter of great significance and will be committed to church growth. He stated, “If people feel their time is being well spent, that they are not wasting it, you have a weighty moral factor on your side . . . . Committed is the key word in that heading. Members are committed to Christ not only in general, but to Christ’s specific purpose—to bring men and women to believe on Himself and thus to find eternal life.” Ibid., 102.

preach the Gospel of Christ. The church exists to win the lost to salvation. As one gets back to a biblical base, and sees these things the way God sees them, he builds a theological foundation on which church growth can take place.<sup>26</sup>

Additionally, theological training should explain God's purpose to save sinners from each people group of the world. McGavran stated, "True biblical theology of mission must be constructed in view of the unswerving purpose of God to call out His church from among all the peoples of earth."<sup>27</sup>

Fourth, Christians must be taught the work of the Holy Spirit in empowering them to share the gospel with others.<sup>28</sup> They must learn of their dependence upon the Holy Spirit as they work toward church growth.<sup>29</sup> Christians who are unaware of their dependence upon the Holy Spirit are unprepared for the spiritual ministry of church growth. McGavran explained, "The Holy Spirit will do in a day what of ourselves we cannot do in a year."<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 6.

<sup>27</sup>Donald McGavran, "Making Doctrines Missionarily Effective and Biblically Correct," 127. Also *ibid.*, 128.

<sup>28</sup>Donald McGavran, "Principles and Procedures in Church Growth" (Class Lecture Notes) Folder 5, Box 35, Collection 178, Papers of Donald Anderson and Mary Elizabeth McGavran 1906-1991, 2000. Archives of the Billy Graham Center, Wheaton, Illinois.

<sup>29</sup>McGavran stated about the church in Zaire, "No error could be more devastating than regarding the growth of the Church in Zaire as a merely human enterprise to be achieved by clever manipulation of man and women." Donald McGavran, "God's Royal Power in Zaire: An Evaluation of the State of the Church," *Missiology* 6 (1978): 90.

<sup>30</sup>Donald McGavran, "The Dividends We Seek," *Christianity Today*, 19 January 1973, 5.

McGavran was troubled that theological education put a great deal of focus on the being of the Holy Spirit, but often neglected the work of the Holy Spirit in producing church growth. He stated, “When attention is focused exclusively on the *being* of the Holy Spirit and nothing is said as to His tremendous concern that evangelization be carried out at home and abroad, the church merely repeats the doctrine; it is not thrust out into mission.”<sup>31</sup> The doctrine of the Holy Spirit compels Christians to do evangelism.

Church growth is a sovereign act of God. The Holy Spirit prepares the hearts of peoples to become Christians. McGavran stated, “There is no magic formula by which churches start growing. Only God can produce the people-wide readiness to leave the land of bondage which is essential to any considerable people movement church.”<sup>32</sup> The Holy Spirit brings about church growth, but he uses believers to do his work. McGavran emphasized that “while the Holy Spirit converts, He operates in most instances through Christians.”<sup>33</sup>

A full teaching of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit must also include his work of world evangelization. McGavran stated, “It was the Holy Spirit who said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul.’ It was the Holy Spirit who sent them out on their mission. It was the Holy Spirit who directed their way.”<sup>34</sup> As Christians come to a full

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<sup>31</sup>McGavran, "Making Doctrines Missionarily Effective and Biblically Correct," 135.

<sup>32</sup>Donald McGavran et al., *Church Growth and Group Conversion*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (Pasadena, CA: William Carrey Library, 1973), 105.

<sup>33</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 417.

<sup>34</sup>McGavran, "Making Doctrines Missionarily Effective and Biblically Correct," 135.

understanding of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, they desire for the Holy Spirit to bring people to Christ through them. McGavran said, “A *full* infilling of the Holy Spirit and *full* biblical obedience will always be deeply concerned that the unsaved hear and obey the gospel.”<sup>35</sup>

Fifth, Christians should be taught the doctrine of the church as the body of Christ. McGavran stated, “Any truly evangelical theology of mission must set forth a high doctrine of the church, Christ’s body. For by its presence, witness, and growth, the church is a central component in God’s redemptive plan.”<sup>36</sup> Christians must understand God’s plan to incorporate believers into churches where they are taught to follow Jesus. McGavran stated, “It is God’s clear command that all *ethne* (peoples) are to be disciplined—baptized, added to the church, and taught to observe all things commanded by the Lord.”<sup>37</sup> A proper understanding of the doctrine of the church leads to Christians being engaged in multiplying churches “among every segment of the world’s population.”<sup>38</sup> It leads Christians to lead people to the Lord, plant churches, and incorporate new believers into those churches.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup>McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 41.

<sup>36</sup>Donald McGavran, "Contemporary Evangelical Theology of Mission," in *Contemporary Theologies of Missions*, by Arthur F. Glasser and Donald A. McGavran (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), 104.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid.

<sup>39</sup>McGavran said, “A theology which focuses on the actual communication of the Good News of Christ and on the multiplication of cells of His baptized believers among the three billion still unreached must be seen as *a paramount concern of God.*” Donald McGavran, "What is Mission?," in *Contemporary Theologies of Missions*, by

McGavran believed correct and full theological training prepares Christians to do effective evangelism. He taught that new believers should receive theological training. He stated, “Immediately following such conversion, much verbalized theological education should be provided in prebaptismal and post-baptismal courses. The original decision is made more meaningful by conscious instruction in the Bible.”<sup>40</sup> He was convinced that proper biblical and theological beliefs would produce evangelistic Christians who work for church growth. He stated churches need to “get a sound biblical conscience on finding the lost. Biblical convictions direct believers to work for the growth of the church.”<sup>41</sup>

### **Practical Training**

McGavran thought the goal of biblical perfecting is more than orthodoxy; it is orthopraxy.<sup>42</sup> To be sure perfecting begins with orthodoxy, but it does not end there.

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Arthur F. Glasser and Donald A. McGavran (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), 19.

<sup>40</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 344.

<sup>41</sup>McGavran and Arn, *How to Grow a Church*, 9, 12.

<sup>42</sup>McGavran stated, “Let us *do* theology and transmit our good words and good intentions into millions of responsible disciples setting their shoulders to the wheel and lifting our churches into positions of social power, devout living, fervent praise, and contagious witness.” Donald McGavran, “The Discovery of Church Growth,” in *Religion and Future: Essays in Honour of Prof G. C. Oosthuizen*, ed. Gerald J. Pillay (Pretoria: HSRC Publishers, 1992), 27. Similarly McGavran stated, “Are we producing leaders who fold multitudes of the lost and multiply congregations? The goal must not be mere academic excellence. It must be Christian Effectiveness.” Idem, “Beyond the Maintenance Mentality,” *Christianity Today*, 3 February 1989, 29.



Biblical perfecting teaches more than knowledge— it teaches obedience.<sup>43</sup> Perfecting that teaches knowledge without obedience does not carry out the Great Commission fully, as Jesus said, “teach them to observe all things I have commanded you.”<sup>44</sup> Perfecting, therefore, necessarily involves practical training.<sup>45</sup>

McGavran believed the Great Commission is about church growth. Therefore, he said, “church growth is really just obedience to the Lord.”<sup>46</sup> If Christians are not taught to obey the Great Commission, they probably will not.<sup>47</sup> Instead, they will focus on other aspects of the Christian life to the exclusion of effective evangelism.

McGavran stated, “Church growth is faithfulness. Only where Christians constrained by love obediently press on, telling men the good news of the Savior, does

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<sup>43</sup>McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 41. McGavran explained that obedience in evangelism helps a sick church “regain health and vigor.” McGavran and Arn, *How to Grow a Church*, 120.

<sup>44</sup>Matthew 28:20

<sup>45</sup>McGavran stated, “One secret of New Testament church growth was that leaders were trained in and by the church *in action*. It trained as it went forward. This remains a secret of church growth today. Trainees who come out of victorious churches, and have been trained by men who are themselves multipliers of churches, are generally effective.” McGavran and Arn, *How to Grow a Church*, 79.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, 75. Similarly McGavran stated, “It is quite useless, of course, to transmit rubber convictions to lay Christians and expect them to produce anything by way of church growth . . . . Mind you, I know the Old Testament repeatedly shows that when God’s people disobey God’s commands, *they do not survive*.” McGavran “Training the Laity,” 61.

<sup>47</sup>McGavran stated, “The church doesn’t grow by carrying on good youth meetings, a Sunday School, good preaching or a good choir unless these are inspired by a desire to see persons become disciples of Jesus Christ and responsible members of His church.” McGavran and Arn, *How to Grow a Church*, 170.

the Church spread and increase.”<sup>48</sup> Churches desiring to faithfully obey Jesus’ perfecting directive should thus devise a perfecting strategy that gets Christians involved in the task of church growth. McGavran stated,

A good plan ought to integrate the individual into an organized churchwide effort. Mere organization, however, will accomplish little. The real measure of a good plan is that it mediates a deepened experience of Christ, and gets ordinary Christians gladly bearing witness to what Christ has done for them and persuading their fellows to become disciples of Christ.<sup>49</sup>

### **The Role of Seminaries and Mission Agencies**

Perfecting is dependent upon the development of leaders who are competent in shepherding the church.<sup>50</sup> New pastors must be perfected and taught the practical aspects of shepherding, such as ministering to the sick, teaching the Bible, and administering baptism and the Lord’s Supper.<sup>51</sup> As soon as possible, new pastors should be trained, and the spiritual care of new churches be put in their hands. McGavran stated, “movements have far more chance of issuing in great church growth if . . . leaders from among the new converts are discovered and trained.”<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>48</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 5.

<sup>49</sup>Donald McGavran, "Why Neglect Gospel-Ready Masses?," *Christianity Today*, 29 April 1966, 18.

<sup>50</sup>McGavran observed that one of the factors contributing to church growth in the Philippines was “neglected Christians began to receive highly competent pastoring.” McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 9.

<sup>51</sup>Donald McGavran, "After the First Flush of Success," *International Review of Mission* 48 (1959): 270.

<sup>52</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 202.

Pastors and missionaries should be trained in church growth throughout a population. For example, McGavran commented on pastoral training in North America, “Every minister in training therefore ought to have instruction as to how churches may be *multiplied* in the great receptive populations of Canada and the United States.”<sup>53</sup>

Seminaries have an important role in the training of pastors and missionaries. A goal of seminaries must be to prepare pastors in effective evangelism.<sup>54</sup> In order to do so, McGavran believed seminaries and training schools must have faculty “who can teach their students—pastors in training—to become multipliers of churches.”<sup>55</sup> In order to teach others to do evangelism, both professors and pastors must be committed to personal evangelism in their own lives. McGavran stated, “Every school that prepares pastors and ministers should teach all students how to train laywomen and laymen to be effective evangelists. This will not be done by professors or pastors who have never won anybody to Christ.”<sup>56</sup>

Seminaries must also design courses and curriculum that specifically train pastors in church growth. McGavran stated,

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<sup>53</sup>Ibid., 262.

<sup>54</sup>McGavran stated, “Students must be prepared to start and maintain effective evangelism in congregation after congregation, city after city, rural district after rural district.” McGavran, “Beyond the Maintenance Mentality,” 29.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid. McGavran stated, “Soon seminaries and missionary training institutions will have professors of ‘New Testament Missions’, teaching as their major contribution the vast knowledge of how an infectious Christianity spreads across a countryside, leaving a multitude of sound, indigenous, reproductive churches behind it.” Donald McGavran, “The Institute of Church Growth,” *International Review of Mission* 50 (1961): 434.

<sup>56</sup>McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 50.

All seminaries, divinity schools, Bible colleges, and Bible schools should devote a substantial part of their curriculum to teaching future pastors and preachers how to bring these multitudes of unbelievers to Christian faith. Of the 36 courses required for a master of divinity degree, 5 of those courses (of at least four hours each) should be on effective evangelism.<sup>57</sup>

McGavran proposed one of the five evangelism courses seminaries require “would teach ministers how to make laymen and laywomen effective disciplers of the unchurched.”<sup>58</sup>

Perfecting is a reproducing process, and training pastors and missionaries to teach the laity how to do evangelism is an important part of that process. Seminaries can help with that process.

At the same time, future leaders should be raised up from those who are converted and trained on the field.<sup>59</sup> Highly trained professional pastors and missionaries will not be the norm in parts of the world that are economically depressed and where Christianity is rapidly expanding. McGavran said, “The American emphasis on a highly trained professional leadership cannot, to advantage, be exported to countries of differing economic and educational potential and may not be the best pattern in the United States.”<sup>60</sup> McGavran did not think formal academic training was necessary for church growth. He observed that church growth often takes place among “men of very little

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<sup>57</sup>McGavran, "Beyond the Maintenance Mentality," 28. See McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 4-7.

<sup>58</sup>McGavran, “Beyond the Maintenance Mentality,” 28.

<sup>59</sup>McGavran observed, “Paul used indigenous church methods. He never appointed paid agents. He always appointed unpaid elders from among the new Christians.” McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 377.

<sup>60</sup>Donald A. McGavran, "Missions Today and Tomorrow," in *Contemporary Christian Trends: Perspectives on the Present*, ed. William M. Pinson Jr. and Clyde E. Fant Jr. (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1972), 98.

formal education.”<sup>61</sup> McGavran thought new methods of training pastors and missionaries needed to be developed in order to train missionaries and pastors from the undeveloped world.<sup>62</sup> Many of the pastors and missionaries of the future would be bi-vocational or nonpaid pastors and missionaries, and educational and leadership training would need to adjust to fit this reality.

When large numbers of a people group come to Christ, missionaries must especially labor in the task of perfecting. McGavran stated, “These present-day movements from illiterate spirit or idol worshippers need education. . . . Adequate spiritual nurture after baptism is essential. A somewhat more lengthy residence of the missionary often seems advisable.”<sup>63</sup>

Mission agencies and missionaries would have an important role in perfecting through the development of a system of Bible teaching for pastors, which they could use to teach the Bible to their congregations. McGavran suggested one strategy that would be designed to be taught over a thirteen-month period and should include twelve to thirteen Bible stories and application to people’s lives. He described it as follows:

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<sup>61</sup>McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 132.

<sup>62</sup>In speaking about missionaries of the future, McGavran stated, “They will be more like the medieval missionary orders composed of men and women pledged to obedience, devotion and poverty. We shall see thousands of barefoot missionaries in the years ahead-and some of them may well come from Eurica. Training systems and books to prepare these to communicate Christ and multiply churches are needed.” Donald McGavran, "Basics of Effective Missions Anywhere," in *Indigenous Missions of India*, ed. R.E. Hedlund and F. Hrangkhuma (Madras, India: Church Growth Research Centre, 1980), 47.

<sup>63</sup>Donald McGavran, *The Bridges of God: A Study in the Strategy of Missions* (London: World Dominion Press, 1955), 135.

Consequently CCMI (Chinese Christian Mission, Inc.) should name one missionary whose chief task it would be to prepare the kind of Bible program which slightly literate, slightly trained village Elders could administer. It might be well to choose 12 Bible accounts (stories) which would be taught—TAUGHT, each for a month, till everyone in the congregation knew them, could tell them, knew what they taught, and its bearing on their lives. The Creation, the Fall, Christ’s Birth, Lord’s Prayer, Four Miracles of Healing, Beatitudes, Crucifixion, Resurrection, Great Commission, Coming Again, would be a good beginning for 13 months.<sup>64</sup>

McGavran taught the biblical milieu of perfecting is the local church and within the church, pastors are ultimately responsible to perfect members by teaching them to obey God’s Word. However, McGavran thought mission agencies and missionaries should come alongside churches and help in the perfecting process through providing training, literacy education, and curriculum designed to augment and guide the perfecting process within the local church. Thus missionaries must devise strategies to help new converts grow into servants within the local church.<sup>65</sup>

### **The Role of Pastors**

The task of pastors is a reflection of the twofold mission of the church: to lead the church in discipling and perfecting. Pastors are to find and fold the lost and care for the flock. Every pastor must both feed the sheep and at the same time deeply care for the one lost sheep and actively seek to bring it into the fold. McGavran stated, “The fundamental—repeat, *fundamental*—task of every minister must be seen as *both* caring

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<sup>64</sup>Donald McGavran, letter to James C. Smith, 30 September 1981, Folder 2, Box 83, Collection 178, Papers of Donald Anderson and Mary Elizabeth McGavran 1906-1991, 2000. Archives of the Billy Graham Center, Wheaton, Illinois.

<sup>65</sup>McGavran gave the example of the expansion of the Methodist Church in South India being credited “to a thorough system of training layleaders.” McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 351.

for the flock and finding and folding the lost.”<sup>66</sup> The perfecting task of the pastor has two goals: helping Christians to “become more moral and devout, *and they must become more effective harvesters.*”<sup>67</sup>

Members of the church need to be taught that the work of evangelism belongs to every believer within the church, and not solely the pastor. Churches that think evangelism is solely the work of the pastor do not grow.<sup>68</sup> McGavran stated, “Churches which are not growing are usually churches in which the responsibility for growth is all loaded onto one person, usually the minister. . . . a church where everybody is working for growth . . . that is a church which grows.”<sup>69</sup>

Moreover, pastors should not rely on their sermons alone to win people to the Lord. The main purpose of a pastor’s sermons is typically perfecting. McGavran stated, “The minister must think about his sermon as perfecting those who are already

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<sup>66</sup>McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 10.

<sup>67</sup>*Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>68</sup>McGavran stated, “If we were to select the right people in each congregation, train them, work with them, encourage them, pray with them, and help them, we would beyond doubt be able to turn many nongrowing churches around. . . . On the other hand, in some congregations, no matter how much we tried, we could not find the right people. . . . Possibly this would be due to decades of belief that all such work is the work of the pastor. He is paid to do it. Why should we do it?” McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 134. Similarly, McGavran said, “Any form of clericalism, any limiting of evangelism to paid leaders, works heavily against church growth. In a receptive situation, growth occurs in the church that mobilizes its laymen for continuous propagation of the Good News. Conversely, even in a highly receptive population, a church in which evangelism is an activity chiefly of missionaries or paid nationals does not grow.” *Idem*, “Why Neglect Gospel-Ready Masses?,” 18.

<sup>69</sup>McGavran and Arn, *How to Grow a Church*, 12-13.

Christians.”<sup>70</sup> On the other hand, people are won to the Lord for the most part as believers witness to them.

One of the main tasks, then, of the pastor who leads perfecting is to train the members of the church to do evangelism. McGavran specified, “Paid leaders must say to themselves, ‘It is not primarily what *we do*, it is primarily what we get *others to do* that counts.’”<sup>71</sup> Pastors and missionaries must be personally evangelistic; that is their task as a Christian. However, their task as leaders is to teach others to be evangelistic. McGavran stated, “The minister in our churches must not do the evangelism by himself. His duty is rather to train other Christians to do it.”<sup>72</sup> A pastor teaches the members of the church to do evangelism first by being an example of faithfulness in personal evangelism, and second by taking persons, one-by-one, and letting them learn evangelism by doing it.<sup>73</sup>

### **The Ministry of Perfecting in the Local Church**

Perfecting believers within local churches is essential to church growth. McGavran stressed the need to perfect the entire congregation. He stated that a factor contributing to church growth is that “as much biblical training as possible is given to entire congregations.”<sup>74</sup> Many explosions in church growth come to a grounding halt

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<sup>70</sup>Ibid., 86.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid., 114.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid., 86.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid.

<sup>74</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 202.



because of a lack of proper perfecting. McGavran described the importance of perfecting new congregations:

The quality of people-movement Churches is uniquely dependent on postbaptismal care. In these movements relatively large numbers of converts form new churches quickly. If they are neglected, or if it is assumed that the same amount and kind of care that new Christians received back in California will be sufficient for them here, a starved and nominal membership can be confidently expected. If, on the contrary, new congregations are nurtured with imagination and faithfulness, in ways which lead their members to a genuine advance in Christian living, solid congregations of sound Christians will result. Much of the failure in people movements is wrongly ascribed to the multi-individual way in which they have decided for Christ. It should be ascribed rather to the poor shepherding they have received, both before and after baptism.<sup>75</sup>

McGavran maintained the more church growth occurs, the more perfecting is necessary for it to continue. McGavran stated, “numerical increase presupposes and necessitates good spiritual care.”<sup>76</sup>

**Perfecting new believers.** McGavran also believed the most productive perfecting in a believer’s life takes place in the months immediately following conversion. He stated, “During the first months after conversion, Christians are highly teachable. They eagerly learn the Christian way. Of course, if neglected for the first few years, they become accustomed to a mere nominal Christianity. It is then more difficult.”<sup>77</sup> One cause to which McGavran attributed church growth is that new believers were given “prolonged postbaptismal training, as well as their children and

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<sup>75</sup>Ibid., 364.

<sup>76</sup>Donald McGavran, *How Churches Grow: The New Frontiers of Mission* (London: World Dominion Press, 1959), 34.

<sup>77</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 352.

grandchildren.<sup>78</sup>

As soon as people come to faith in Christ, they should be taught to share the good news of salvation with their loved ones.<sup>79</sup> McGavran stated, “*Constantly speak about evangelism as a normal Christian activity.*”<sup>80</sup> New believers should be taught that evangelism is a top priority of the Christian life. McGavran gave an example of what should be said to new believers:

Since Jesus Christ is the Savior, the pearl of great price which you have found, and since you are a loyal member of your family, you do not want to enjoy salvation secretly all by yourself. The first thing you want to do is to share your new-found treasure with your loved ones. The person who loves the Lord most will try most to bring his intimates to Him. Andrew went and found his brother Simon. You do the same.<sup>81</sup>

**Perfecting lay leaders.** Training laymen is another key factor in church growth.<sup>82</sup> McGavran argued the best way for a denomination or congregation to achieve church growth is to “inspire and organize a substantial number of its men and women to become ardent and well trained lay evangelists.”<sup>83</sup> He considered training new converts

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<sup>78</sup>Ibid., 163.

<sup>79</sup>McGavran believed, “Without doubt new Christians can reach their intimates and kinsmen much more effectively than they can anyone else.” McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 406.

<sup>80</sup>McGavran, “Training the Laity,” 66.

<sup>81</sup>Ibid., 340.

<sup>82</sup>McGavran said, “I cannot exaggerate the part lay Christians play in the growth of the Church. Unless lay Christians vigorously back it, growth does not happen. The minister can do something, but unless there is massive lay participation little growth results.” McGavran, “Training the Laity,” 62.

<sup>83</sup>McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 131.

to become leaders in church growth to be an essential principle of church growth.<sup>84</sup> The members of each church must be trained with the objective of producing church growth.

McGavran stated,

Whenever Christians do what wins people to Christ and leads them into baptized membership in his Church, churches grow. Most nongrowth is due to the fact that church people are spending their time, talents, and money doing good things that do *not* find and fold lost sheep. It is as simple as that. Church growth is abundantly possible if church leaders will recruit and train as many class-two leaders as it does class-one leaders. . . . Our objective must be very clear. We are *training the laity to make churches grow*.<sup>85</sup>

Lay leaders must be trained in church growth because a biblical view of the church and the world demands it. They must be taught to think in terms of church growth. McGavran stated,

We must make sure that leaders are trained in church growth. They must come to have “church-growth eyes.” They must see the congregations as a *church* not a Christian club. They must see the city as in great need of Jesus Christ and the church as the answer to that need. In short, all of us must think about leadership training from a thoroughly Christian perspective.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>84</sup>McGavran stated, “multiply unpaid leaders among the new converts, training them to go out and communicate Christ to their unsaved relatives, neighbors, and fellow laborers.” McGavran, “Why Neglect Gospel-Ready Masses?,” 18. He stated, “new converts are the greatest source of good leaders if the church would grow. This must never be forgotten.” McGavran and Arn, *How to Grow a Church*, 77.

<sup>85</sup>McGavran, “Training the Laity,” 73. McGavran stated, “The key to dynamic, effective church growth is in recruiting, training, and utilizing Class II leaders.” McGavran and Arn, *Ten Steps for Church Growth*, 109. McGavran defined “class 2 leaders” as “leaders whose energies primarily turn outward toward non-Christians in an effort to bring them into the Body of Christ.” Ibid. 128. He defined “class 1 leaders” as “leaders whose energies primarily turn inward toward the service of existing Christians and existing church structures.” Ibid.

<sup>86</sup>McGavran and Arn, *How to Grow Church*, 108.

**Perfecting new members.** Churches should teach a new members' class that lays out the biblical basis for the priority and necessity of evangelism that leads to fruit-bearing disciples in the local church.<sup>87</sup> New members should be taught how God calls all Christians to share the gospel, and how they can use their spiritual gifts in the evangelism and church planting ministries of the church. McGavran commented upon new members' classes by stating, "Here they discover that all Christians are witnesses. They are taught to use their gifts in outreach ministry."<sup>88</sup>

**Perfecting through the ministry of worship.** The regular meeting of the church for worship is an essential aspect of spiritual growth. New believers should be incorporated into churches and regularly meet for worship. McGavran was clear that "postbaptismal care involves . . . instituting regular worship."<sup>89</sup>

Churches and Christians should view times of worship as important events. McGavran thought regular worship within a congregation leads to stronger Christians regardless of their initial motive for coming.<sup>90</sup> Each local congregation should develop

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<sup>87</sup>McGavran stated, "Developing and structuring Class II leaders into the church program begins in the new members' class." McGavran and Arn, *Ten Steps for Church Growth*, 109.

<sup>88</sup>Donald A. McGavran and Winfield C. Arn, *Ten Steps for Church Growth* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1977), 109.

<sup>89</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 364.

<sup>90</sup>He stated, "Converts who came for rather secular or social motives became good Christians when they became parts of congregations which faithfully worshiped God. Converts who came for spiritual motives and became parts of poorly led and scandalously neglected congregations became weak Christians." Ibid.

within its members “habits of devout worship of God.”<sup>91</sup>

McGavran considered assembling with the church for worship on a regular basis to be a characteristic of a well-shepherded movement to Christian faith. He stated,

The regular worship of God, not only on Sunday but during the week as often as possible, is instituted. In India those people movements where the worship of God was a *daily* occurrence showed much more growth in grace than those where Christians assembled only on Sunday. Congregations which worshiped morning and evening showed more Christian achievement than those who worshiped only in the evenings.<sup>92</sup>

The more a church can meet to worship God, fellowship with one another, and study God’s Word, the greater the level of perfecting that takes place.

McGavran, therefore, advocated for churches to meet more often than once a week.<sup>93</sup> He thought the American custom of meeting only once a week is often harmful on the mission field. He stated, “At no place does the Eurican pattern damage new movements more than in the assumption that because Christians in . . . Nashville meet only on Sunday morning . . . it would be burdensome for new Christians in Peru . . . to assemble each evening.”<sup>94</sup>

**Perfecting through the ministry of Bible teaching.** Christians grow as they

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<sup>91</sup>Donald McGavran, “Advanced Church Growth” (Lecture Notes, Winter 1978) Folder 5, Box 85, Collection 178, Papers of Donald Anderson and Mary Elizabeth McGavran 1906-1991, 2000. Archives of the Billy Graham Center, Wheaton, Illinois.

<sup>92</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 351.

<sup>93</sup>He stated, “regular evening worship for the whole new Christian community (which in any village lives within a hundred yards of the meeting place) is not only feasible, but soon comes to be a cherished experience and is influential in developing a truly Christian character.” *Ibid.*, 364.

<sup>94</sup>*Ibid.*

learn, study, and obey the Bible. McGavran said that “perfecting” or “growing in grace” is “making sure that the baptized believers become biblical Christians, that their lives are irradiated by the knowledge of the Bible, and that they have a deep personal relationship with Jesus Christ.”<sup>95</sup> He argued that spiritual transformation is “impossible without knowledge of the Christian Scriptures.”<sup>96</sup> Each local church should help believers in the “development of habits of regular intelligent study of the Bible.”<sup>97</sup>

The best way to bring social transformation and liberation to people is to teach them the Bible. The Bible provides the biblical worldview necessary to abolish ungodly social structures and injustice. McGavran exclaimed, “The Bible has broken the bonds of population after population and community after community through all the world. It has brought untold liberation to many peoples in the West. It has transformed the Mizo people.”<sup>98</sup>

An important part of missions is teaching illiterates to read so that they can read the Bible. McGavran claimed that “if the children of the new churches are not educated at all, the movement may fail because the church is left illiterate.”<sup>99</sup> He was convinced the Bible should be read by every Christian; therefore, perfecting “involves

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<sup>95</sup>McGavran and Arn, *How to Grow a Church*, 80.

<sup>96</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 190.

<sup>97</sup>McGavran, “Advanced Church Growth.”

<sup>98</sup>McGavran, *Ethnic Realities*, 231. The Mizo people are an ethnic tribe in Mizoram, India.

<sup>99</sup>McGavran, *The Bridges of God*, 85.

teaching to read as a religious duty.”<sup>100</sup> Each believer is responsible to teach others to read the Bible. McGavran said, “In order to be a Bible-reading and Bible-obeying fellowship, the Church should also teach illiterate Christian adults to read the Bible and hymnbook. The duty of every Christian to teach illiterate Christians to read God's Word cannot be overemphasized.”<sup>101</sup>

Christians should be taught the Bible, and then taught to go out and teach what they have learned from the Bible to their friends and relatives.<sup>102</sup> McGavran pointed out that one source of great growth in South Korea was a month long Bible and evangelism training of village leaders, who then “went back to teach what they had learned, to their often illiterate wives, brothers, neighbors.”<sup>103</sup>

Just as Bible study enhances evangelism, evangelism in turn enhances Bible study. McGavran thought the best Bible teachers are those who are involved in personal evangelism. He stated, “The Bible will come alive for him and he’ll find new depths of meaning. He’ll communicate essential Christianity better to his students if he is showing them by example how to introduce men to eternal life.”<sup>104</sup>

Bible memorization is also an important facet of spiritual growth. Christians

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<sup>100</sup>McGavran, “Principles and Procedures in Church Growth.”

<sup>101</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 365.

<sup>102</sup>Ibid., 346.

<sup>103</sup>Donald McGavran, letter to Pat Major, 8 August 1963, Folder 5, Box 35, Collection 178, Papers of Donald Anderson and Mary Elizabeth McGavran 1906-1991,2000. Archives of the Billy Graham Center, Wheaton, Illinois.

<sup>104</sup>McGavran and Arn, *How to Grow a Church*, 95.

should be taught to memorize the Bible through programs put into place to teach Christians to hide God's Word in their heart.<sup>105</sup> Scripture memorization makes God's Word more "dear and meaningful" to believers, as well as allowing them to more easily teach it to new converts and others.<sup>106</sup> McGavran believed Christians should be taught to memorize the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, the Beatitudes, and Psalm 23, as well as other passages of Scripture.<sup>107</sup>

The memorization of Scripture should be a part of the worship service as well. McGavran thought liturgical repetition is a helpful aid in memorization. He stated,

ALL MEMORY PASSAGES SHOULD BE USED AS UNISON RECITATIONS IN THE CHURCH EVERY MONTH AND AT THE BEGINNING EVERY SUNDAY. Otherwise they will memorize and then promptly forget what they have learned. Only a liturgical repetition will write these matchless passages on their hearts. So that when they wake up frightened in the middle of the night they can say, "The Lord is my shepherd . . . . I will fear no evil . . . . You prepare a table for me in the presence of my enemies . . . ." And roll over and go to sleep.<sup>108</sup>

Teaching the Bible can also be an evangelistic activity. As nonbelievers come to church and hear the Bible taught or study the Bible with a believing friend or relative, they come face to face with the gospel. Faith is produced within people's hearts through

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<sup>105</sup>McGavran stated, "As part of catechetical instruction, all Christians commit the passages to memory. Repeated use inscribes these on the tablets of their hearts. Christian virtues begin to form part of their character." McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 351-52.

<sup>106</sup>Ibid., 365.

<sup>107</sup>Donald McGavran, letter to James C. Smith, 30 September 1981, Folder 2, Box 83, Collection 178, Papers of Donald Anderson and Mary Elizabeth McGavran 1906-1991, 2000. Archives of the Billy Graham Center, Wheaton, Illinois.

<sup>108</sup>Ibid. McGavran's emphasis.



the study of God's Word. McGavran gave an example of a man who turned from Catholicism to Evangelicalism through studying the Bible. He said of the man, "When he found no prayers to the Virgin Mary in the New Testament and no mention of Purgatory, he concluded that the Evangelical religion was the true faith and confessed Christ with his wife and children."<sup>109</sup>

**Perfecting through the ministry of prayer.** McGavran saw prayer as a necessary ingredient of church growth. Without devoted prayer, church growth fails. McGavran said, "Fervent faith and ardent prayer are as necessary to growth of the Church as sunshine is to the growth of grain."<sup>110</sup> Through fervent and consistent prayer the church grows.<sup>111</sup> McGavran stated,

Growing churches also regularly pray that Christians may become skillful finders of lost sheep and responsible stewards of the grace of God. They bathe in prayer every activity of the church intended to incorporate men a women into living churches. They petition that the power of the Holy Spirit will operate beyond our poor efforts, working a deliverance greater than we had dared imagine.<sup>112</sup>

Likewise, revival should bring about greater abiding in Christ and greater obedience to Christ. Specifically, McGavran thought revival should lead to church

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<sup>109</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 362.

<sup>110</sup>Ibid., 125.

<sup>111</sup>McGavran stated, "If in any congregation a group were to pray and continue steadfastly in prayer that the church would grow, their church would grow." McGavran and Arn, *How to Grow a Church*, 177.

<sup>112</sup>McGavran, "Why Some American Churches Are Growing and Some Are Not." in *The Complete Book of Church Growth*, ed. Elmer L. Towns, John N. Vaughan and David J. Seifert (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1981) 285-86.

growth as God's people renew their commitment to following the Lord in obedience to his eternal command to make disciples.<sup>113</sup> God brings about revival in response to the fervent prayers of his people. McGavran stated, "Revival is God's gift. Man can neither command it nor make God grant it. God sovereignly gives revival when and where He wills. . . . But God responds to sincere continued prayer. Prayer is what God wants His people to offer."<sup>114</sup>

Teaching believers to pray for the salvation of their lost friends and relatives is also an important element of perfecting.<sup>115</sup> McGavran believed God desires for Christians to pray for the salvation of the lost, listing prayer as an essential quality of Christian leadership.<sup>116</sup> In an address to 2,700,000 people in South Korea, McGavran said,

Every congregation and every Christian must pray earnestly for the salvation of the unsaved in South Korea. Thirty million men and women, boys and girls have yet to believe in Christ. Most Christians have unconverted relatives- parents, cousins, brothers, uncles and aunts. Most Christians have some connection with a village or a country side or city ward where many do not yet know Jesus Christ, have not yet

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<sup>113</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 192-93.

<sup>114</sup>Ibid., 189-90.

<sup>115</sup>McGavran stated, "One of the most effective plans to come to my attention, and one which could be used in congregations in the United States and every other nation, was the focusing of prayer by every member of the congregation on carefully chosen individuals." Ibid., 410.

<sup>116</sup>McGavran stated, "The fifth quality [of essential Christian leadership] I emphasize is prayer. In growing churches you see men and women praying for specific individuals by name—not just that the message may be blessed in general, not that our afternoon's work may prosper, but that Bill and Henry and Mary and Gladys may hear and yield themselves to Christ." McGavran and Arn, *How to Grow a Church*, 83-84.

been saved, have no local church. God is calling Christians in Korea to pray earnestly for the salvation of these relatives and friends.<sup>117</sup>

McGavran taught the importance of praying for specific persons to be saved, but he, too, taught that God answers believers' prayer for the salvation of the lost by sending them out to win others to the Lord. McGavran specifically said that God's response is to "send us to visit our cousins, in-laws, or fathers and mothers, and beseech them to accept the Saviour."<sup>118</sup>

Perfecting produces Christians who pray for church growth, and prayer then produces church growth. McGavran stated one of the observable reasons for church growth is someone "prayed for months and years that men and women would be won."<sup>119</sup> Pastors should therefore organize a prayer group that meets regularly to pray about evangelism.<sup>120</sup> It is no wonder that McGavran lamented that "in North America eighty million have no relationship to any denomination. Yet in most churches they are seldom made the subject of prayer."<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>117</sup>Donald McGavran, 14 August 1980, address notes, "Emergency Call for United Global Evangelism," 2, Folder 2, Box 83, Collection 178, Papers of Donald Anderson and Mary Elizabeth McGavran 1906-1991, 2000. Archives of the Billy Graham Center, Wheaton, Illinois.

<sup>118</sup>Ibid.

<sup>119</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 162.

<sup>120</sup>McGavran and Arn, *How to Grow a Church*, 87.

<sup>121</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 72.

**Perfecting in the ministry of giving.** Giving also affects world

evangelization; in fact, perfecting and church growth suffer when Christians are not taught to give sacrificially to the cause of world evangelism. McGavran stated,

If pastors as a rule are men of only a sixth-grade education and a year of bible training—“Well, it is not good, but it is the best we can do with what the churches raise and the mission gives.” Many a People Movement Mission has been short of funds for so long that it comes to make a virtue of the necessity, to the great detriment of the growth of the Church.<sup>122</sup>

As a missionary in India, McGavran complained about a lack of resources.<sup>123</sup>

He believed a substantial amount of energy is wasted when missionaries are sent and then not allowed to finish the job because money runs out. He said, “It is terribly expensive in life as well as money to send missionaries to some new language area and have them come back in a few months or years because their support ceased.”<sup>124</sup>

Biblical stewardship must be taught to Christians.<sup>125</sup> Giving helps Christians to not be self-absorbed, and to be instead outward focused.<sup>126</sup> Giving is as well an

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<sup>122</sup>McGavran, *The Bridges of God*, 79.

<sup>123</sup>“I am having considerable reversions because we don’t have the staff for 24 Churches, and I am having to manage with pastors who are barely literate, who are lazy, who are adulterers, who are dishonest in money matters, and no one in the mission is concerned. It does not cause the Mission secretary to lose a single wink of sleep.” Donald McGavran, letter to Dr. C. M. Yocum, 19 August 1949, Folder 22, Box 1, Collection 178, Papers of Donald Anderson and Mary Elizabeth McGavran 1906-1991, 2000. Archives of Billy Graham Center, Wheaton, Illinois.

<sup>124</sup>McGavran, "Basics of Effective Missions Anywhere," 46.

<sup>125</sup>McGavran taught an important part of perfecting “at the level of the local church” is the “development of stewardship sufficient to nurture and extend the Church.” McGavran, “Advanced Church Growth.”

<sup>126</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 346.

important aspect of church growth. McGavran believed Christians' faith is tested by the level of sacrifice in giving to church growth. He stated,

Any serious effort to reap ripe fields will require financial undergirding. When we pray the Lord of the harvest to send laborers into the harvest, we are also praying that He will motivate existing Christians, congregations, and conferences to give sacrificially to that end. I am speaking to Americans, the most financially secure of any citizenry in the world. Our Christian faith will be tested by the degree to which we undergird effective evangelism at home and abroad. Let us make sure that at this point our plans are both biblically correct and financially responsible.<sup>127</sup>

New congregations and Christians should be taught that systematically giving to the church is a part of a dedicated Christian life.<sup>128</sup> Biblical stewardship allows the church to grow so that it is not indefinitely dependent upon mission agencies. McGavran stated, "Only systematic giving by the incoming congregations can properly sustain future growth . . . these new congregations will become a source of income, rather than expenditure, to the evangelistic movement."<sup>129</sup>

Furthermore, Christians should be taught the importance of giving money to missions. McGavran lamented the small amount of money most denominations give to missions. In relation to the "evangelization of the non-Christian nations" McGavran stated, "At the present time even the most devout and missionary-minded denominations spend only one hundred and fifty dollars per member on missions while the least missionary-minded denominations spend only ten dollars per annum per member."<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>127</sup>McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 48.

<sup>128</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 352.

<sup>129</sup>McGavran, *The Bridges of God*, 138.

<sup>130</sup>McGavran, "Missions Today and Tomorrow," 100-101. Based upon the Southern Baptist Convention's 2011 membership of 16,116,088 and the International

Christians should build systems by which missions can be funded, built upon the belief that funding missions is a matter of conviction. He said, "If senders have the conviction, they readily build substantial ongoing support systems."<sup>131</sup> McGavran thought Christians should identify those mission agencies which are doing evangelism and church planting and give to them.<sup>132</sup>

**Perfecting in the ministry of evangelism training.** One methodology McGavran gave for teaching believers in the local church to do evangelism is "training classes."<sup>133</sup> Those who were receiving training were to be given regular opportunities to share about their evangelism experiences as a source of encouragement and accountability.<sup>134</sup> When McGavran was a missionary in India, he proposed that every school conduct "classes in winning souls to Jesus Christ," and for the student to "give a report of what he has done to win his relatives."<sup>135</sup> McGavran thought evangelism training must not be a one-time event, but a regular practice.<sup>136</sup> He stated, "Training the

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Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention 2011 budget of \$308,500,000, the SBC spent \$19.09 per member on international missions in 2011.

<sup>131</sup>McGavran, "Basics of Effective Missions Anywhere," 46.

<sup>132</sup>McGavran, "Crisis of Identity for Some Missionary Societies," 11.

<sup>133</sup>McGavran, "Training the Laity," 66.

<sup>134</sup>McGavran and Arn, *How to Grow Church*, 83.

<sup>135</sup>Donald McGavran, letter to "Members of the Refresher Course," 16 April 1935, Folder 8, Box 1, Collection 178, Papers of Donald Anderson and Mary Elizabeth McGavran 1906-1991, 2000. Archives of Billy Graham Center, Wheaton, Illinois.

<sup>136</sup>McGavran and Arn, *How to Grow Church*, 83.

members of the [evangelism] task force is a continuous process. It is not something done with some book once and then terminated. The pastor observes how the task force is functioning and feeds in remedial training.”<sup>137</sup>

### **Perfecting and Evaluation**

McGavran said one question that must be asked about a church is, “In what areas is the church in poor health?”<sup>138</sup> Additionally, he said missionary agencies should ask questions such as,

Are they carrying on effective evangelism or merely looking after themselves? How can they be helped to become evangelistically more powerful? Are they sending missionaries to *all* their own unreached populations, or are most of the unreached still being evangelized by missionaries from other nations? Have divergent cultures been taught to the evangelizers so that these cultures cease to be obstacles to the adoption of the Christian faith? Are Christians working to produce a more Christian social order? Are they praying, and are they working to increase peace, brotherhood, and justice? Are the socially and economically disadvantaged and the oppressed being redeemed?<sup>139</sup>

Every question that is properly answered helps missionaries and churches to determine the degree of perfecting that has taken place and to devise a strategy for fixing any problems that are discovered.<sup>140</sup>

If a goal of perfecting is to produce obedience, and more specifically obedience in evangelism, then evaluating whether or not the goal is achieved can be helpful. McGavran argued that there should be “an honest evaluation of the

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<sup>137</sup>McGavran, “Training the Laity,” 66.

<sup>138</sup>McGavran and Arn, *How to Grow a Church*, 60.

<sup>139</sup>McGavran "Beyond the Maintenance Mentality," 29.

<sup>140</sup>McGavran and Arn, *How to Grow a Church*, 60.

effectiveness of the systems of missionary training now used.”<sup>141</sup> McGavran believed the way to gauge perfecting is whether or not it produces obedient Christians. He stated, “The real measure of a good plan is that it mediates a deepened experience of Christ, and gets ordinary Christians gladly bearing witness to what Christ has done for them and persuading their fellows to become disciples of Christ.”<sup>142</sup>

The number of people coming to Christ from each people group within a city should be monitored so missionaries and pastors can determine what it will take to perfect those who have been saved.<sup>143</sup> McGavran stated, “The nature of each Church, its amounts and varieties of growth, should be precisely known. Only then can it devise proper care, diet, spiritual nurture, and correct assistance.”<sup>144</sup> Churches should evaluate whether their growth is coming from evangelistic activity or biological and transfer growth.<sup>145</sup> McGavran believed an accurate picture of the growth of the church focuses attention on it and “often induces in the whole congregation a desire to grow.”<sup>146</sup> He also

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<sup>141</sup>McGavran, "Crisis of Identity for Some Missionary Societies," 200.

<sup>142</sup>McGavran, "Why Neglect Gospel-Ready Masses?," 18.

<sup>143</sup>McGavran stated, “It would be profitable for the Protestant Churches to know the total Protestants from each tribe. These homogeneous unit totals would indicate to the Churches the size of the shepherding task in following up Protestants who have moved to Kinshasa [of Congo]. When Riddle and McGavran did this in 1977 they found that 600,000 claimed to be Protestants of whom less than 100,000 were on the rolls of all Protestant churches taken together.” McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 96.

<sup>144</sup>Ibid., 91.

<sup>145</sup>See McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 42-44.

<sup>146</sup>McGavran and Arn, *How to Grow Church*, 63.



gave an example of the effect upon perfecting when research and evaluation are neglected, stating,

In two stations in Africa, manned by eight missionaries each, membership of the churches for one area was 3,000 and for the other 30,000. Egalitarian policy kept the staffs of the two stations equal for twenty years, which in effect guaranteed that the 30,000 who had flooded in would be spiritually and intellectually starved.<sup>147</sup>

Mission agencies should determine if missionaries and churches are effectively incorporating converts into new churches for perfecting. Data should be evaluated to determine if training systems are producing spiritually mature leaders and members. The relevant data should include losses from “reversions, excommunications, and removals.”<sup>148</sup> Mission agencies should be greatly concerned about reversions and should act swiftly and decisively when they are occurring. McGavran believed only those converts “who are successfully grafted into the Body” should be counted.<sup>149</sup>

The results of theological and practical training should be researched so that, as McGavran said, this information is known: “what kind of teaching produces men able to win others, and what kind of teaching produces men who will talk learnedly on sacred

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<sup>147</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 90-91. Egalitarian policy distributes missions money equally without considering the degree of church growth. *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>148</sup>McGavran, "Conclusion," 239. McGavran defined reversions as those who had initially professed faith in Christ, but reverted back to their old religious beliefs and practices. See McGavran to Dr. C. M. Yocum, 19 August 1949, letter. He defined excommunications as those whom had been church disciplined out of the membership of the church. He defined removals as those who had been removed from the church membership roles. Vernon Middleton, Interview by author, Phone Interview, Bakersfield, CA, March 7, 2012; Gary McIntosh, Interview by author, Phone Interview, Bakersfield, CA, 8 March, 2012.

<sup>149</sup>McGavran, “Training the Laity,” 76.

subjects but will inspire no one to win others.”<sup>150</sup> Missionary agencies, theological schools, and congregations should gain accurate information to determine if their training in evangelism was more than simply the impartation of knowledge, but the development of an obedient disciple.<sup>151</sup> McGavran stated, “The test of curriculum is (not your grades or degree) what happens after you get back to your work.”<sup>152</sup>

### **Conclusion**

McGavran’s perfecting strategy was intentionally designed to teach and produce church growth. He believed perfecting produces Christians and churches that are more obedient to the Great Commission. His methodology was driven by the conviction that the spiritual disciplines of the Christian life should be connected to evangelism. Whether it is worship, Bible study, prayer, or giving, God’s purpose in all of the Christian life is to make believers more like Jesus in their passion and obedience to proclaim the good news of Christ’s kingdom. All spiritual disciplines are involved in church growth.

Biblical perfecting intends to produce Christians who are actively involved in church growth.<sup>153</sup> If perfecting does not intend to produce obedient evangelistic Christians, then it is not biblically sound. Christians who are not willing to pay the price

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<sup>150</sup>McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 49.

<sup>151</sup>Ibid.

<sup>152</sup>Donald McGavran, Miscellaneous notes, Folder 3, Box 83, Collection 178, Papers of Donald Anderson and Mary Elizabeth McGavran 1906-1991, 2000. Archives of the Billy Graham Center, Wheaton, Illinois.

<sup>153</sup>McGavran stated, “Without clear-cut, aggressive plans for the growth of the

of church growth are missing a crucial fruit of perfecting. They neither know the Scriptures nor the power of God. They are not like the early church whom McGavran described as, “very actively involved in the work of Christ and his church; they were willing to sacrifice and pay the price.”<sup>154</sup>

A perfecting strategy should be designed with the intent to make Christians not only biblically knowledgeable, but also biblically faithful.<sup>155</sup> Christians should be taught to be doers of the Word and not hearers only (Jas 1:22-25). McGavran stated, “An effective strategy is a strategy that works. It results in people receiving Christ and becoming part of his Body.” Perfecting is not over when Christians know what to do; perfecting must bring believers to the point where they are doing what they know. Jesus’ desire for his disciples to bear much fruit should be the intended goal of perfecting.

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church, there will be no growth. The church doesn’t grow by carrying on good youth meetings, a Sunday School, good preaching or a good choir unless these are inspired by a desire to see persons become disciples of Jesus Christ and responsible members of His church.” Ibid., 170.

<sup>154</sup>Ibid., 6.

<sup>155</sup>McGavran said, “Let us make sure that all biblical soundness is fully biblical and our spiritual renewal does send us out to the field ripe to harvest.” McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 51.

CHAPTER 6  
CONCLUSION

**Introduction**

McGavran thought biblical discipleship complements the growth of the church.<sup>1</sup> He argued that winning people to faith in Christ and gathering them into a local church where they can be taught to follow Jesus is the mission of the church. An analysis of the role of perfecting in McGavran's church growth thought can be helpful in developing an effective discipleship strategy.

**Strengths of McGavran's Approach**

A review of McGavran's approach to discipleship shows that discipleship must have three goals in order for it to be biblical. These goals, in fact, reflect the strength of his approach.

First, discipleship must strive to teach Christians to share the gospel with others. Jesus said to his disciples, "Follow Me, and I will make you become fishers of

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<sup>1</sup>As a missionary in India, McGavran saw a purpose of the perfecting task as producing church growth. He stated, "We have congregations meeting in 17 places-small congregations, but each one with the possibilities of growth. My greatest single responsibility is going to be the spiritual nature of these village Churches. These growing points." Donald McGavran, letter to "Dear Friends," 1 October 1950, Folder 23, Box 1, Collection 178, Papers of Donald Anderson and Mary Elizabeth McGavran 1906-1991, 2000. Archives of the Billy Graham Center, Wheaton, Illinois.

men” (Mark 1:17).<sup>2</sup> Jesus’ approach to discipleship indicates that following Jesus necessarily involves becoming evangelistic. Additionally, Jesus’ command to “teach them all things” necessarily includes teaching all believers to do evangelism (Acts 1:8). A failure to teach evangelism is a failure of discipleship.<sup>3</sup>

Second, discipleship must strive to teach responsible church membership. God has ordained for the Christian life to be lived out within the context of a local church. Christians should be taught to use their spiritual gifts for the mutual spiritual care and edification of the church (1 Cor 12). Therefore, a goal of biblical discipleship must be to bring new believers into the fellowship of a local church where they can be taught to obey Jesus (Acts 2:40-47).

Third, discipleship must strive to teach more than mere knowledge of Christ and his commands; it must strive to teach obedience to Christ and his commands (Jas 1:22-25). Jesus said, “teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you”

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<sup>2</sup>Ben Witherington has said, “What Jesus seems to be asking these disciples to do is rescue some in the face of the coming eschatological judgment, lest all be lost, or rescue some out of the clutches of the powers of darkness.” Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 85-86.

<sup>3</sup>D. A. Carson has stated, “Christianity must spread by an internal necessity or it has already decayed; for one of Jesus’ commands is to teach all he commands. Failure to disciple, baptize, and teach the peoples of the world is already itself one of the failures of our own discipleship.” D. A. Carson, *Matthew*, in vol. 8 of *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. by Frank E. Gaebelin and J.D. Douglas (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, Regency Reference Library, 1984), 599.

(Matt 28:20).<sup>4</sup> Jesus did not command his disciples to merely teach knowledge of his commands, but obedience to them as well. At the point of obedience to Jesus evangelism and responsible church membership are lived out within a life of discipleship. The fruit of biblical discipleship is evangelistic fruit-bearing disciples in the local church. Thus, a key aspect of biblical discipleship is that it teaches and leads to church growth.

An additional strength of McGavran's approach is his emphasis upon church planting. A commitment to responsible church membership presupposes a church planting missions strategy in unchurched and unreached areas, one in which those who trust in Christ are formed into churches where they can be taught to obey Christ. This strength is particularly helpful considering much of the world still needs to be reached. Churches must desire to extend discipleship beyond themselves and "multiply sound, believing, Spirit-filled congregations in every segment of society in North America and the other five continents as well."<sup>5</sup>

### **Weaknesses of McGavran's Approach**

There are, however, three major weaknesses of McGavran's approach to discipleship. First, the way McGavran defined "discipling" and "perfecting" based on Matthew 28 is debatable at best. Separating the concepts "discipling" and "perfecting" does not match the grammar of the Great Commission in Matthew 28:18-20. Teaching

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<sup>4</sup>In commenting on Matthew 28:20, Frederick Bruner stated, "In this Gospel neither ecstasies, causes, ideas, nor any other good things must preempt the best — the obedience to Jesus that documents a disciple's reality." Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew A Commentary*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 826.

<sup>5</sup>Donald McGavran, *Effective Evangelism: A Theological Mandate* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company 1988), 78.

cannot be grammatically separated from discipling, but rather characterizes it.

Additionally, the New Testament does not present different types of discipling and “teaching.” The multiple ways in which McGavran defined the terms (e.g., D1, D2, D3) has brought confusion rather than clarity to the biblical meaning of “discipling” and the relationship between “discipling” and “teaching.”

Second, McGavran never attempted to provide a comprehensive approach to perfecting. As a result, he did not address many important biblical issues in relation to discipleship. He spoke about the importance of perfecting within the church, but failed to provide an ecclesiological framework for the church. He emphasized the need for responsible church membership, but did not give a complete picture of what a responsible church member looks like or how to bring someone to a place of responsible church membership. Additionally, there are many other key aspects of biblical discipleship beyond evangelism and responsible church membership, such as character, ethics, conflict resolution, family life, personal worship, sexual purity, fruit of the Spirit, private prayer, and comprehensive doctrinal instruction. McGavran’s approach to discipleship does not address these important issues.

Third, McGavran lacked clarity about the state of those who have never heard of Jesus.<sup>6</sup> The exclusivity of the gospel provides an environment of mission compulsion. A part of missions is taking the gospel to those who have never heard it; therefore, the exclusivity of the gospel has huge implications for the missionary enterprise.

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<sup>6</sup>See the appendix for a more thorough discussion.

## **Insights for the Mission Field**

McGavran's gospel-centered and ecclesiocentric approach to discipleship can provide helpful insights on the mission field. The biblical task of discipleship takes place within the context of the local church. However, mission agencies and missionaries have the important role of aiding the local church in its spiritual growth. There are several vital areas McGavran thought mission agencies can foster and facilitate discipleship within the local church.

### **Biblical Curriculum**

Mission agencies can aid local churches on the mission field by providing biblical curriculum. Most pastors do not have the advantage of a seminary education, nor do they have the time or necessary skillset to develop comprehensive Bible study curriculum for all the age groups of their congregation.<sup>7</sup> Mission agencies can apply the best biblical scholarship available in the development of curriculum that aids in teaching the whole counsel of God's Word to members of local churches (Acts 2:27).

Biblical curriculum must demonstrate the biblical priority and necessity of evangelism that leads to fruit-bearing disciples in the local church.<sup>8</sup> Curriculum must include the implications of biblical truth for inward transformation and gospel

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<sup>7</sup>In a letter to James Smith, McGavran suggested the Chinese Christian Mission, Inc. should have a staff member whose chief task would be preparing biblical curriculum for pastors who have received little training. Donald McGavran to James C. Smith, September 30, 1981, Folder 2, Box 83, Collection 178, Papers of Donald Anderson and Mary Elizabeth McGavran 1906-1991, 2000. Archives of the Billy Graham Center, Wheaton, Illinois.

<sup>8</sup>See McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 1; and idem, *Understanding Church Growth* rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1980), 265.



proclamation. A comprehensive curriculum must include a thorough study of the doctrine of the church, a biblical analysis of responsible church membership, and practical applications of responsible church membership. In addition to Bible study aids, biblical curriculum can provide for prayer ministry, stewardship, new believers' discipleship, and evangelism training—all of which should give emphasis to the relationship between spiritual disciplines, evangelism, and responsible church membership.

Obedience to God's Word should be an intended consequence of biblical instruction; therefore, all curriculum should include application. Personal application should highlight evangelism and give an evangelistic challenge. Application should be given as it relates to the church's evangelistic outreach and discipleship strategy. In addition to Bible study aids, biblical curriculum can be provided for prayer ministry, stewardship, new believers' discipleship, and evangelism training; all of which should give emphasis to the relationship between spiritual disciplines, evangelism, and responsible church membership.

### **Theological Education**

Denominations and mission agencies are in a unique position to provide theological education to missionaries as well as pastors and church leaders on the mission field. Theological education should impart biblical knowledge concerning all the doctrines of the Bible, as well as biblical responses to false theology. Those doctrines which demand effective evangelism and responsible church membership must be taught. Theological training which does not produce evangelistic church leaders has failed in a

key goal of biblical theology— namely, obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, theological schools should include within their required curriculum classes in effective evangelism and biblical discipleship.<sup>10</sup> If a student graduating from a theological school does not know how to share the gospel with others or what the Bible teaches concerning responsible church membership, his or her theological training is insufficient. While seminary training among all Christian leaders is a good goal, seminary training is not possible in all situations. Denominations and mission agencies should provide whenever possible on-the-field theological training for Christian leaders that teaches effective evangelism.

### **Practical Training**

Mission agencies can also aid discipleship in the local church on the mission field by providing outgoing missionaries with practical training. Missionary training should be provided prior to going on the field, including— relevant language and cultural training. Furthermore, missionaries should be trained to develop mature fruit bearing disciples.

Pastoral training should be provided to pastors on the mission field prior to their planting a church. Church planters must be taught to plan and administer strategies

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<sup>9</sup>James 1:22-25- “But be doers of the Word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does.”

<sup>10</sup>See McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 4-7.

in the areas of evangelism, discipleship, prayer, stewardship, and leadership development. In addition, mission agencies can provide ongoing training to pastors in effective evangelism and in the development of responsible church membership.<sup>11</sup> Mission agencies cannot make a local church healthy, but they can provide training for leaders who can lead the church to be evangelistic fruit bearing disciples.

### **Insights for the Local Church**

McGavran's understanding of the role of biblical discipleship in church growth is helpful in developing a discipleship strategy for effective missions and ministry in the local church— both at home and abroad. The local church must be intentional in developing spiritually mature Christians. Christians must be taught to know and obey God's Word in relation to evangelism and responsible church membership in order to grow spiritually.

#### **New Believers**

Discipleship begins the moment a person repents of sin and puts faith in Jesus Christ; therefore, new believers' discipleship is an important part of any overall discipleship strategy.<sup>12</sup> The Great Commission and Christian love demand that the church mature spiritual babies into fruit-bearing disciples of Jesus Christ. An important

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<sup>11</sup>See Donald A. McGavran, "Missions Today and Tomorrow," in *Contemporary Christian Trends: Perspectives on the Present*, ed. William M. Pinson Jr. and Clyde E. Fant Jr. (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1972), 98.

<sup>12</sup>Various methods include a new believers' class or one-on-one discipleship.

part of that process is to teach them to faithfully and obediently share the gospel with the lost and bring them into the church for their spiritual edification.

**Gospel-centered.** The importance of salvation and God's desire for believers to share the gospel with their friends and family should be emphasized. Regular prayer for the salvation of lost loved ones is a vital aspect of spiritual growth. New believers should be taught that an important part of the Christian life is bringing persons to Christ and into the fellowship of the church.<sup>13</sup> New believers should be given an evangelism mentor with whom they can go out and share the gospel, preferably they will go witness to the new believer's family members and friends for whom they have been praying. God's command to make disciples of all the *ethne* must be delineated, and their future involvement in missions should be discussed.

**Ecclesiocentric.** The doctrine of the church and its role in Christians' spiritual growth is a crucial feature of new believers' discipleship. A biblical understanding of responsible church membership is central to biblical Christianity.<sup>14</sup> The Great Commission, its relationship with other doctrines, and its implications for the church and

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<sup>13</sup>See Donald McGavran "The Dimensions of World Evangelization," in *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, International Congress on World Evangelization, Lausanne, Switzerland, ed. J. D. Douglas (Minneapolis: World Wide Publications, 1975), 94.

<sup>14</sup>John Crabtree has pointed out that, "Responsible church membership is the antithesis of nominal Christianity." John Albert Crabtree Jr., "Donald Anderson McGavran's Theology of Evangelism and Church Growth as a Basis for Theological Education" (Th.M. thesis, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1997), 33.

each believer's life must be clearly outlined.<sup>15</sup> A biblical study of the role of church planting in accomplishing the Great Commission should be set forth, as well as the church's planting strategy and possibilities for a church member's involvement.<sup>16</sup> Incessant ministry application must be discussed throughout the new believer's discipleship process since the goal is not mere knowledge, but faithful and joyful obedience.<sup>17</sup>

### **New Members**

Churches should not assume Christians who transfer their membership are biblically or spiritually mature; therefore, new members' discipleship is a significant part of a church's discipleship strategy. Churches should teach a new members' class that lays out the biblical basis for the priority and necessity of evangelism that leads to fruit-bearing disciples in the local church.<sup>18</sup> New members should be taught how God calls all

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<sup>15</sup>For example, the doctrines of human depravity and sinfulness, human lostness, damnation, God's holiness and justice, substitutionary atonement, the exclusivity of the gospel, the church, sanctification, and the Second Coming of Christ should be taught; all of which point to the priority and necessity of evangelism that leads to fruit-bearing disciples in the local church.

<sup>16</sup>The book of Acts demonstrates the apostles understood the Great Commission in terms of winning people to Christ and forming them into new churches.

<sup>17</sup>For example, in *Ten Steps for Church Growth* at the end of each chapter McGavran asks questions for "review of discussion." See Donald A. McGavran and Winfield C. Arn, *Ten Steps for Church Growth* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1977), 22-23, 33-34, 58, 60, 72-73, 79, 91, 100-101, 115-16, 125-26.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 109.

Christians to share the gospel, and how they can use their spiritual gifts in the evangelism and church planting ministries of the church.<sup>19</sup>

### **Ongoing Discipleship**

Discipleship is not an event but an ongoing process; therefore, any church discipleship strategy must be ongoing. The following is a basic outline of other components involved in developing a gospel-centered and ecclesiocentric discipleship strategy within the local church.

**Stewardship development.** Stewardship is an important aspect of spiritual maturity. God is a generous and desires his children be generous as well. Churches must regularly emphasize biblical stewardship and giving to the local church and world missions.<sup>20</sup> The biblical basis for giving to missions should be outlined, as well as how God uses our giving to spread the gospel and plant churches. The broader issue of biblical stewardship should highlight the priority of evangelism and responsible church membership, while also teaching how God wants believers to use their time, money, and talents within and through the local church. Practical application should be delineated and encouraged.

**Spiritual Gifts.** God has given believers spiritual gifts to use in the ministry of the church for the purpose of mutual edification (1 Cor 12). An important facet of the

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<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

<sup>20</sup>Donald McGavran, "Advanced Church Growth" (Lecture Notes, Winter 1978) Folder 5, Box 85, Collection 178, Papers of Donald Anderson and Mary Elizabeth McGavran 1906-1991, 2000. Archives of the Billy Graham Center, Wheaton, Illinois.

church's mission and ministry is producing fruit-bearing disciples; therefore, believers must be taught how they can use their spiritual gifts in the evangelism and church planting ministries of the church.<sup>21</sup> All of the gifts of the Spirit can be taught in the context of evangelistic application, as well as the mutual edification of the church.

**Prayer.** God wants his children to pray (1 Thess 5:17). Christians grow spiritually when they pray; therefore, prayer is an indispensable aspect of a church's discipleship strategy. The church should develop a discipleship strategy that teaches believers to pray for the salvation of their lost friends and family, and the conversionary growth of the church.<sup>22</sup> Christians should pray for boldness and spiritual power in witnessing (Acts 4:29-31). Any prayer ministry should involve mobilizing members to pray for evangelistic growth among church plants, people groups, and missionaries (2 Thess 3:1-2).

**Evangelism.** God has commanded that his disciples make disciples (Matt 28:18-20). The Holy Spirit gives Christians power to do evangelism (Acts 1:8). An

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<sup>21</sup>For example, those with the gift of service can use it in servant evangelism. Those with the gifts of ministry or mercy can use them in ministry evangelism. Those with the gift of teaching can teach the gospel and give evangelistic application when teaching Scripture. Those with the gift of giving can use that gift to support missionaries, church plants, and missions. Those with the gift of leadership can lead others to do evangelism and church planting. Those with the gift of exhortation can exhort others to share the gospel and edify the church. Those with the gift of helps and administration can organize evangelistic events, church plants, and mission trips. McGavran stated believers should be "taught to use their gifts in outreach ministry." Donald A. McGavran and Winfield C. Arn, *Ten Steps for Church Growth* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1977), 109.

<sup>22</sup>See McGavran, "Why Some American Churches Are Growing and Some Are Not," in *The Complete Book of Church Growth*, ed. Elmer L. Towns, John N. Vaughan, and David J. Seifert (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1981) 285-86.

evangelism training class must be a regular aspect of any discipleship strategy within the local church. A theology of evangelism and the church should be outlined.<sup>23</sup> Christians should be trained in how to use the Scriptures to share the gospel with the lost. Any class should include going out and actually doing evangelism.

**Church planting.** A multitude of new churches must be planted in order to reach the billions of people on the earth who do not know Christ and are not responsible members of his church.<sup>24</sup> Christians must be taught that one church cannot reach and mature the multitudes of lost people in their city, much less the multiplicity of people groups that reside within urban areas. There must be a strategy for involving believers in both domestic and international church planting endeavors. Mission trips should be utilized as a tremendous discipleship tool, providing opportunities for believers to be obedient to Christ and align their lives with the redemptive purposes of God.

### Conclusion

Rather than viewing perfecting as inimical to church growth, McGavran incorporated perfecting into his theology and practice of church growth. The role of perfecting in McGavran's church growth thought was shaped by three biblical tenets. First, God's purpose in the gospel is to bring men to faith and obedience.<sup>25</sup> Second,

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<sup>23</sup>See footnote 15 of this chapter.

<sup>24</sup>See McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 6; and idem, *Effective Evangelism*, 14.

<sup>25</sup>Donald McGavran, "Church Growth Strategy Continued," *International Review of Mission* 57 (1968): 335.



God's plan for maturing believers is within and through the local church. Third, perfecting must go beyond mere knowledge and concern; it must aim for joyful obedience as well.<sup>26</sup> These tenets remain important ones today as churches strive to teach and produce obedience in evangelism and responsible church membership. Donald McGavran's legacy thus continues.

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<sup>26</sup>McGavran explained, "Healthy, normal churches grow. They feed on God's Word, worship and obey the Head of the Church, practice their Christian faith, and are deeply concerned about the pagans inhabiting their very neighborhoods. Not only are they concerned, but they do something about it." Donald A. McGavran, "The Discovery of Church Growth," in *Religion and Future: Essays in Honour of Prof G. C. Oosthuizen*, ed. Gerald J. Pillay (Pretoria: HSRC Publishers, 1992), 23.

## APPENDIX

### DONALD MCGAVRAN AND THOSE WHO HAVE NOT HEARD OF CHRIST

As noted in chapter four, McGavran was not always consistent in his claim that faith in Jesus is necessary for salvation. McGavran stated,

While in extraordinary circumstances it may be that our sovereign God saves men and women who have not heard of Christ, it is clear from the Bible that His plan of salvation, sealed in the blood of the Cross, is that men should be saved through faith in Jesus Christ. The Word is clear that there is “no other Name.” Our Lord said plainly, “No one comes to the Father but by me.”<sup>1</sup>

Here he implies that for those who have not heard of Christ, explicit faith in Jesus may not be necessary for salvation. He is not consistent in claiming that faith in Jesus is the means of salvation, and yet also claiming that someone may be saved without any knowledge of Him. McGavran’s statement raises a serious question: If the Word of God is clear concerning men being saved “through faith in Christ,” how is it possible for those who have not heard to be saved apart from faith in Jesus?

McGavran made a similar statement concerning those who have not heard of Christ. He stated,

There is therefore no way to be reconciled to God other than by believing and trusting in the atonement He has wrought by Christ. Since Jesus Christ is the only Mediator, it is by Him alone that we can come to God. There is no other name by which we can be saved. Only as people of every race, culture, language, condition,

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<sup>1</sup>Donald McGavran, *Ethnic Realities and the Church: Lessons from India* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1979), 246-47.

and economic status believe on Jesus Christ is it possible for them to be reconciled to God. . . . Evangelicals cannot believe that God will save such men and women, counting their belief in Baal, Ashtaroth, modern civilization, Rama, Krishna, Gautama, Marx, or money as sufficient to win them salvation. Rather Evangelicals believe that, according to the teaching of the Bible, those who do not believe in Christ are lost. Evangelicals also believe that God is sovereign. Should He so choose, He can bring those who know nothing of Jesus Christ back into fellowship with Himself. But the means by which He might do this (and whether in point of fact He ever does do it) remains hidden. God has not chosen to reveal this in Scripture. In consequence of this doctrine, an inescapable responsibility rests on Christians to proclaim the gospel and tell men and women everywhere of the only Mediator between God and them, and the only way of salvation, the cross of Christ.<sup>2</sup>

To be clear, McGavran did not argue God will save those who have never heard of Jesus, he said that we do not know “whether in point of fact He ever does do it” and that “God has not chosen to reveal this in Scripture.”<sup>3</sup> This raises two important questions. First, how can McGavran say “those who do not believe in Christ are lost,” if there is the possibility for “those who know nothing of Jesus Christ” to be brought into fellowship

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<sup>2</sup>Donald McGavran, "Contemporary Evangelical Theology of Mission," in *Contemporary Theologies of Missions*, by Arthur F. Glasser and Donald A. McGavran (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), 103-4.

<sup>3</sup>McGavran's statements represent an “agnostic restrictivism” concerning the unevangelized. For further discussion about agnostic restrictivism, see Daniel Strange, *The Possibility of Salvation among the Unevangelized: An Analysis of Inclusivism in Recent Evangelical Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002), 310-312. While McGavran was open to the possibility of those who have never heard of Jesus being saved in “extraordinary circumstances,” he was adamant that no salvific act would take place through the beliefs of religions other than Christianity. See McGavran, “Contemporary Evangelical Theology of Missions,” 103. Additionally, McGavran expressed pessimism concerning the unevangelized. While he believed it is possible for God to save them if God so chooses, McGavran did not see any Scriptural warrant for believing God ever does. For further discussion about “pessimistic agnosticism” concerning the unevangelized, see Dennis Okholm and Timothy Phillips, “Introduction,” in *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, ed. Dennis L Okholm and Timothy R. Phillips (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 19-24; Strange, *The Possibility of Salvation among the Unevangelized*, 310-312; and Christopher Morgan, “Inclusivism and Exclusivism,” in *Faith Comes by Hearing: A Response to Inclusivism*, ed. Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 30-32.

with God by some other means? Second, what is to be done with those Scriptures that say explicit faith in Jesus is necessary for salvation if God does something different than what He describes in His Word?<sup>4</sup>

McGavran undermines his own argument that a belief in the necessity of faith in Jesus for salvation is essential to evangelistic motivation.<sup>5</sup> Missionary motivation is driven in part by a belief that those who have not heard cannot be saved because “faith comes from hearing and hearing from the Word of God” (Romans 10:17). Therefore, it is absolutely necessary that we preach the gospel to those who have not heard. If they do not hear the gospel “how will they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher?”<sup>6</sup> Those two questions compel Christians to preach the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ to those who have not heard of him. McGavran implies this when he states, “God intends that all men shall have the opportunity to accept Jesus Christ as God and Savior. The only way that this can happen is for Christians everywhere to consider the proclamation of the gospel . . . as God’s

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<sup>4</sup>For instance, John 3:16-18, John 1:12; 14:6, Acts 4:12, 1 John 4:2-3, Romans 1:16; 10:13-17.

<sup>5</sup>McGavran stated, “When you cease to hold that the Bible is God’s infallible Word, that belief in Jesus Christ is necessary for salvation, that man is an immortal soul, and that ‘no man comes to the Father but by me,’ how, they ask, can you carry on Great Commission missions? You will, naturally, continue philanthropic mission and humane assistance of your fellow men on the physical plane. Even Gentiles do the same. But conversion mission will be forever beyond you.” Donald McGavran, “Crisis of Identity for Some Missionary Societies,” *Christianity Today*, 8 May 1970, 12.

<sup>6</sup>Romans 10:14

command.”<sup>7</sup>

Despite his inconsistencies, throughout McGavran’s life he repeatedly said Christians should be taught faith in Jesus is the way of salvation and they should share the gospel with all those who have not heard.<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, McGavran’s personal view concerning whether or not God saves those who have not heard of Jesus is ambiguous; however, the missionary enterprise cannot afford ambiguity on such a critical issue as the exclusivity of the gospel.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Donald McGavran, *Effective Evangelism: A Theological Mandate* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company 1988), 14-15.

<sup>8</sup>See Donald McGavran "The Dimensions of World Evangelization," in *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, International Congress on World Evangelization, Lausanne, Switzerland, ed. J. D. Douglas (Minneapolis: World Wide Publications, 1975), 95; idem, "Salvation Today," *Church Growth Bulletin* 9, no. 1 (September 1972): 266; idem, "Church Growth Strategy Continued," *International Review of Mission* 57 (1968): 338; idem, "Training the Laity for Church Growth," in *Church Growth: Strategies that Work*, by Donald A. McGavran and George G. Hunter III (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980), 65; idem, "Crisis of Identity for Some Missionary Societies," *Christianity Today*, 8 May 1970, 12; McGavran and Arn, *Back to Basics in Church Growth*, 22.

<sup>9</sup>For a biblical and theological defense of the exclusivity of the gospel, see Ronald H. Nash, *Is Jesus the Only Savior?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994); idem, "Restrictivism," in *What about Those Who Have Never Heard?*, ed. John Sanders (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1995); R. Douglas Geivett and Gary Phillips, "A Particularist View: An Evidentialist Approach," in *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 213-245; Christopher Morgan and Robert Peterson, eds., *Faith Comes by Hearing: A Response to Inclusivism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008); and Strange, *The Possibility of Salvation among the Unevangelized*.

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## ABSTRACT

### THE ROLE OF “PERFECTING” IN DONALD MCGAVRAN’S CHURCH GROWTH THOUGHT

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This dissertation examines the role of “perfecting” in Donald McGavran’s church growth thought. Chapter 1 introduces McGavran and the need for a study of his “perfecting” concept. Chapter 2 briefly gives McGavran’s background and describes his discovery and definition of “church growth.” This chapter also explores the experiences in McGavran’s own life which shaped his understanding of the perfecting task and motivated its incorporation into his church growth thought.

Chapter 3 theologically defines the terms “discipling” and “perfecting” as McGavran understood and used them. McGavran’s rationale for using the term “perfecting” is examined, as well as why he chose the term perfecting as opposed to other terms. The chapter includes an analysis of McGavran’s understanding of the relationship between discipling and perfecting. Chapter 3 concludes with a critique of the helpfulness of McGavran’s choice and use of the term “perfecting.”

Chapter 4 is an analysis of the church growth thinking that distinctively comprised McGavran’s understanding and approach to perfecting. McGavran’s belief that missions is to be evangelistic and ecclesiocentric is outlined and analyzed, and how it affected his understanding of the perfecting task.

Chapter 5 examines McGavran's methodology in relation to perfecting. The role of worship, Bible study, prayer, and evangelism in relation to perfecting and church growth is described. Chapter five focuses upon the role of perfecting in the training of workers, and how McGavran's methodological approach to perfecting differed from the missiology of his day.

Chapter 6 evaluates the role of perfecting in Donald McGavran's church growth thought, determining that it was shaped by his conviction that biblical perfecting teaches and produces church growth. Chapter 6 concludes that McGavran's understanding of the role of biblical perfecting in church growth is helpful in developing a perfecting strategy for effective missions and ministry.

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