Worship and Outreach: The Evangelical Strategy

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For better and for worse, we are products of our time. Who we are today is a complex mixture of the shaping we received from our parents, teachers, clergymen and others. We have been no less influenced by our society and culture. What that means for the twenty-first century pastor deserves to be pondered. Greater men than this essayist have lamented the materialism, the narcissism, the hedonism, the "cult of me," the self-absorption that permeates our culture. There is another element of our American society, equally as threatening, that does not frequently make the headlines. Americans want to win. They love success.

Could it be possible that we are so thoroughly the products of our own culture that we underestimate how intoxicating this pursuit of winning can be? A recent newspaper poll of parents suggested that winning was at least as important as skill development and fun in youth sports. This phenomenon runs far deeper than the "bigger is better" or "new and improved" tag lines of commercials. It shapes perceptions - and in our culture perception is frequently reality. People are always more favorably disposed to brands they perceive positively than those that are not, although other brands may be superior products. It affects decisions. People cheer for the team that consistently wins, not for the team that is persistently lousy. How else can we explain the swell in attendance when a team gets on a winning streak other than to say the bandwagon jumpers are coming out of the woodwork? Yet at the first sign of a losing streak the same fans go away. Americans want to be connected with a winner.

Should it come to us as any surprise that the religious climate in our country is in many ways a direct reflection of the general trends in our culture? Why would an unbeliever be persuaded to attend the smallish congregation in the modest looking building when the common perception is that the people who worship in the cathedral-like building belong to the more successful church? Would you rather worship in a Crystal Cathedral or in a WEF unit? Similarly, congregations that are growing in membership and Sunday worship attendance are considered to be successful. Like a team on a winning streak they tend to attract even more guests. Whether those additional bodies translate into real Christians or bandwagon jumpers, however, is something God only knows.

The temptation for the twenty-first century pastor is obvious. We know faith comes from hearing the message, that truth has nothing to do with error, that the Holy Spirit provides the increase, that God works through the means of grace and that success comes from the Gospel. But when the evangelical community church down the road always seems to grow dramatically while the Lutheran congregation struggles to keep the souls it has, it makes a pastor scratch his head and wonder what he is doing wrong. Or, it makes him wonder what the community church is doing better and whether, in the name of success, there is anything to borrow. If Christ could return anytime, if there is any urgency to our ministry, should we not in the name of the Great Commission investigate these things? If the press of the pastor's schedule demands that he not reinvent the wheel, do the Evangelicals offer worship or outreach strategies that are worthy of reproduction? Or, is that akin to Esau selling his theological birthright for a bowl of soup?

Each person may answer for himself how he has been influenced by the American concept of success. As we begin the third full century of American history, this essay means to investigate more closely the religious organizations that have enjoyed success in the first two. It seeks to demonstrate that the worship and outreach strategies the Evangelicals still employ were a byproduct of a loosely defined theology, a penchant for cultural adaptation, and a pursuit of success defined on societal rather than biblical terms. A related question is whether Evangelicals offer anything for us to copy. The author offers the following outline as a guide:

I. The Seeds of Evangelicalism
II. Methodism, Revivalism and the Great Mission Century

III. Church Growth Movement & Mega-church priorities
IV. Evangelical Self-Assessment
V. Lutheran Assessment

I. The Seeds of Evangelicalism

Jonathan Edwards

The seeds of American Evangelicalism were sown in the years before the eighteenth century, but especially during that century they began to sprout. By that time the religious climate in America was a quilt of many European threads. The New England colonies especially skewed toward Anglicanism and their dissidents - most notably the Calvinist leaning Puritans. The way most of those early colonists learned to worship, then, was in the same way their fathers had worshiped on the other side of the Atlantic. Generally, it was liturgical.

Into this New England religious culture came a man who would eventually challenge the status quo. Jonathan Edwards was born in 1703 to a Puritan minister. His maternal grandfather was Solomon Stoddard, a famous Latitudinarian[1] and pastor at Northampton, Massachusetts. By age 13 Edwards enrolled at Yale, graduated first in his class within four years, and only then began to study theology. For almost a decade - a time Edwards describes as his personal search for conversion - he devoted himself to Scriptural learning 12-14 hours a day. By the end of this journey, he declared that he had become convinced of his Christianity, his Calvinism, and his passion to progress his piety. At age 27, his grandfather asked him to serve as his associate at Northampton, but only as a scholar pastor (not a visiting or preaching pastor). After Stoddard died two years later, Edwards found himself as the sole pastor of one the largest, wealthiest, and most progressive congregations in the New World.

Edwards finally had a pulpit. The world would learn that he knew how to use it. If the Northampton congregation spent any time wondering whether Edwards was ready to fill the shoes of his innovative grandfather, he quickly answered any questions. Even at his young age, people recognized Edwards to be superior to his pastoral predecessor in both intellect and oratory. A staunch Calvinist, he emphasized the "total" in total depravity. His fire-and-brimstone sermons were both dynamic and engaging. The following is an excerpt from his most famous sermon, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,* and forms a representative sample of his vitriolic preaching:

> The God that holds you over the pit of Hell, much as one holds a spider or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked; his wrath towards you burns like fire; he is of purer eyes than to bear to have you in his sight; you are ten thousand times so abominable in his eyes as the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours. You have offended him infinitely more than ever a stubborn rebel did his prince, and yet 'tis nothing but his hand that holds you from falling into the fire every moment.[2]

Edwards was a captivating speaker. Besides his graphic depictions of hell, Edwards would routinely preach against the heresies of Arminianism. In 1734, he preached a series of sermons on justification by faith alone to counter what he perceived to be a growing tendency by the pastors and people in his region to lean on the Arminian tenets of self-reliance and natural

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[1] "Latitudinarian" was a derogatory term use in the 1600s to refer to theologians who claimed allegiance to the Church of England, but who believed that doctrinal, liturgical, and church organizational issues should be carried out with a great deal of flexibility.

[2] Garry Wills, *Head and Heart,* p. 110.

abilities for salvation. The reaction to his sermon-series was phenomenal. Historian Mark Noll records a letter Edwards wrote describing his amazement at the response.

> All seemed to be seized with a deep concern about their eternal salvation; all the talk in all companies, and upon occasions was upon the things of religion, and no other talk was anywhere relished; and scarcely a single person in the whole town was left unconcerned about the great things of the eternal world.... Those that were most disposed to condemn vital and experimental religion, and those that had the greatest conceit of their own reason, the highest families in the town, and the oldest persons in the town, and many little children were affected remarkably; no one family that I know of, and scarcely a person, has been exempt.[3]

Edwards sensed an opportunistic moment in his young ministry. These souls had been conditioned by his preaching to a "deep concern about their eternal salvation." So he followed up his popular sermon-series with some of the established tenets of pietism. He organized his congregation into small groups, divided by gender and age, to encourage them in holy living. People flocked back to church. They spoke about God and recommitted to decent living. This revival of spirituality that splashed in Northampton with Edwards' preaching rippled through Connecticut and Massachusetts. In all, twenty-five communities reported waves of spiritual revival similar to what Edwards confessed he witnessed in his congregation and hometown. It began with dynamic preaching that led to a personal experience inside worship, and was followed up with an encouragement to personal piety.

Historians generally agree that this series of events in Edwards' Northampton congregation form the beginnings of what is known as the First Great Awakening. This movement in American history is marked by candid law preaching that evoked a tremendous sense of guilt. That guilt sent people fleeing back to church in search of redemption and ready to make a greater commitment to obeying God. So far as Edwards was concerned, this spiritual revival flamed out within six months. That may be due at least in part to the fact that Edwards' detailed pictures of God's wrath against sin and vivid depictions of hell overwhelmed at least a few tender souls. Two suicides, one within his own congregation, put something of a damper on the intense spiritual revival of which Edwards had previously gloated.

George Whitefield

The Awakening would live on. Across the ocean another staunch Calvinist, George Whitefield, was experiencing the immediate and irresistible force of conversion. A lifelong Anglican, Whitefield was long bored with what he considered the dead orthodoxy of the church. Like Edwards, he entered a period of intense spiritual struggle, the outcome of which convinced him of his conversion and assured him of his salvation. Whitefield, too, was something of a savant. Educated at Oxford, he was ordained within a year of his conversion experience and began preaching.

Whitefield may have been young and inexperienced, but he was a tremendous preacher. Because he was barely into his twenties, the Church of England would not yet assign him a congregation. Unfazed, Whitefield preached in parks or in fields or in any open-air venue where he could find an audience. Like Edwards, he preached in a way that targeted the emotions and solicited a response. After just six weeks he was moved from rural settings to London where he would routinely attract large crowds, some estimated to be as large as 20,000. When the great hymn writer Charles Wesley heard him preach, "he reported that it had not been 'with the persuasive words of a man's wisdom, but with the demonstration of the Spirit, and with power.'"[4]

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[3] Mark Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism.* p. 77.

[4] *Ibid*, p. 88

What made Whitefield so captivating? Some say it was his clear language; others the practicality of his messages. The following excerpt seems to suggest that the attraction of Whitefield's sermons had less to do with Spirit's power and more to do with his dramatic presentation.

> Whitefield's great effect rose from what he proclaimed about the need for the new birth, but even more from how he proclaimed it - urgently, immediately and as the great question for every hearer *right now*. To Whitefield, formal doctrine was mostly irrelevant, but not the lived experience of God's grace in Christ. He preached about these matters like no one Londoners had ever heard before. In the pulpit he simply exuded energy; his speech was to the highest degree dramatic; he offered breathtaking impersonations of biblical characters and needy sinners; he fired his listeners' imagination; he wept profusely, often and with stunning effect. When he was announced as the preacher, churches were jammed - with some, to be sure, who came to scoff, but mostly with open-minded inquirers drawn from all classes who knew great entertainment when they saw it and who were touched by this young man's message of grace. From August 1737 until he finally departed on December 30, Whitefield preached over one hundred times (six to seven times per week), and he had become London's best known celebrity. Two weeks before taking ship, he observed his twenty-third birthday.[5]

Only one thing could outshine this preaching prodigy. After two years of waiting, Jonathan Edwards' detailed description[6] of the Northampton revivals finally made it to London. In Edwards' *Faithful Narrative*, he carefully detailed every step leading to the revival he witnessed in Northampton. He expounded on his graphic law preaching and the reality of salvation. He gave an elaborate description of the affect on the converts, their emotions reactions of crying and laughter and spontaneous singing. He included testimonials from conversions of a child and a woman, tracing their spiritual journey from despair to joy. Edwards' tract was instantly famous. What is more important, it served as a template for future preachers to follow. When Whitefield read Edwards' treatise, he left his itinerant preaching post in England and sailed to America to preach.

Whitefield's reputation preceded him to the colonies. By the time he stepped off the ship in Delaware, he was already a celebrity. The days he spent in England preaching six and seven days a week in parks and fields and open air settings would serve him well for what he would face in America. He set out on two different preaching tours in 1739-1741 that reignited Edwards' revival fires. Traveling with assistants who essentially served as publicists, he addressed crowds from Maine to Georgia. His audiences experienced many of the same things Edwards had detailed in his *Faithful Narrative*. People loved him. Mainline clergy did not. They refused him access to their pulpits (a blessing in disguise since the crowds Whitefield attracted would not fit into most churches). They denounced his "enthusiasm," his excessively dramatic preaching style, and itinerant preaching. On the whole, Whitefield proved to be as divisive as he was helpful to the Great Awakening. For all his oratorical brilliance, he was a lightning rod for controversy. His dynamic preaching forced both revivalists and mainline clergy to meet. They would discuss matters of faith and practice. Personalities clashed. To pursue Edwards-like success, Anglicans and others began to take liberties with historic church practices. Even

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[5] *Ibid, p. 88-89.*

[6] Edwards' tract was entitled *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprizing Work of God in the Conversion of Many Hundred Souls in Northampton, and the Neighbouring Towns and Villages of New Hamshire in New England.* It has never gone out of print.

Edwards himself, whose revival experience was responsible for drawing Whitefield to American, cautioned his audiences against Whitefield's extremes.

There were other characters involved in this First Great Awakening, but none as significant as Edwards and Whitefield. By the time the Awakening had run its course, historians generally agree that it was characterized by the following religious innovations:

- Theatrical worship style that reacted against the coldness of dead orthodoxism
- A break from historic church rules and traditions, e.g. itinerant preaching
- Preaching that downplayed doctrine and concentrated on emotionalism
- An experiential response from listeners
- Preaching that focused on piety and holy living
- A focus on promotion, publicity and publication of sermons

Despite the considerable shadow these two men cast, their legacy remains mixed. Mark Noll, an Evangelical himself, evaluates Whitefield this way: "...there was no consistency to his broader actions, no depth to his thinking about culture. Ready, fire, aim was his style. In a word, much that would be best and much that would be worst in the later history of evangelicals in America was anticipated by Whitefield in this one stirring year [1740]."[7] Yet characters like Edwards and Whitefield paved the way for reactionary movements stronger than the Awakening itself. Garry Wills expands,

> The Awakening was more powerful for what it helped its opponents do than for any lasting impact on its adherents. George Marsden says, "The Awakening, like all radical renewal movements, created a liberal backlash among those whom it had judged spiritually cold... The Calvinist Awakening thus had the ironic consequence of undermining the structure of Calvinist orthodoxy, especially around Boston." Sydney Ahlstrom puts it this way: "The Great Awakening thus became the single most important catalyst of the "Arminian" [free will] tradition which had been growing surreptitiously and half-consciously since the turn of the [eighteenth] century.[8]

John Wesley

At the same time Whitefield was preaching his way around the colonies, another pair of Oxford students, John and Charles Wesley, were finding their religious bearings. The brothers Wesley were close friends with George Whitefield at Oxford. Whitefield was a member of the Wesleys' "Holy Club," an Oxford religious group for students organized to receive the Lord's Supper, pray together, study Scripture, and encourage each other in pious living. Members of the club were derided by fellow students as "Methodists" who tried to follow God every waking moment of the day by submitting to a system of rules. At least in the Wesleys' case, this was very true.

John Wesley's beginnings were similar to those of Jonathan Edwards. He was born in 1703 into a clergy family of nineteen children. While Edwards was influenced by his Latitudinarian grandfather, Wesley was shaped more so by his mother. Wesley's mother instilled in all her children from little on that the way to self-improvement and perfection was by following a carefully planned out method of behavior. Because of his mother's influence, Wesley devoted himself to a variety of devotionals that would eventually come to shape his perfectionist theology.

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[7] Noll, *Rise*, p. 108

[8] Wills, *Head and Heart,* p. 123-124.

By the mid-1730's, Wesley found himself disenchanted with the path his life was taking. He was training at Oxford to be an Anglican clergyman, but found himself at odds with church teachings. His pursuits in the Holy Club did not seem to be progressing. When an opportunity presented itself for Wesley to travel to America near the end of 1735 to carry out mission work among the Indians in Georgia, he felt it to be divine intervention. He tried to persuade his brother Charles to join him, but Charles did not want to go to America. He had not finished his studies at Oxford and was not ordained. In order for him to carry out mission work in Georgia, he would need to be. Noll reports that "...Charles rushed through ordination (as deacon September 21; as priest, September 29)." [9] Together they set sail by year's end. The thought of a dangerous transatlantic voyage and poorly defined tasks continued to beleaguer the already troubled John Wesley. Just before his journey he wrote in a letter that "his 'chief motive' in leaving Britain 'is the hope of saving my own soul.'"[10]

Mission work in Georgia did not provide Wesley the peace he was searching for. Both he and his brother Charles were young and naive, fooled by what mission work would actually entail, trapped in a foreign environment and working with a population that was largely unreceptive to their ministry. Charles Wesley did not last long. The hurried way in which he received his ordination called into question his real ministerial qualifications. That, together with "his experiences, including one Sunday (March 21, 1736) when his sermon was disrupted by gunshots and an irate matron threatened to blow him up as a religious hypocrite, were mostly discouraging."[11] Charles returned to England shortly afterwards. John resolved to stay, but it would not be long before he followed his brother. His preaching was having little effect. He fought with his subjects, refused them Holy Communion, was jilted at the altar and then subsequently was sued by the man she had chosen instead. All these events might lead one to believe the mission trip was a total failure. That was certainly not the case. Before he left, John Wesley published a hymnal he co-authored with his brother Charles. "In both the promotion of new hymnody and outreach to slaves, the Wesleys were anticipating very important aspects of later Methodist history."[12]

John Wesley sailed back to England discouraged. He was particularly disappointed that he had not found the trip to be spiritually transforming. Joining him on the voyage were a group of Moravians, deeply influenced by the pietistic movement sweeping through Germany. These Moravians would make a lasting impression on Wesley and affect his theology. The trip across the Atlantic Ocean was very dangerous, and the ship they travelled on was reportedly in danger of breaking up on several occasions. Each time a storm threatened them, Wesley marveled at how calm the Moravians were. Borrowing from Acts 16, they would sing psalms and wait for the storm to pass. The conversations he had with them, though, were more significant. Wesley records one such conversation in a letter he wrote.

> [Spangenberg] said, "My brother, I must first ask you one or two questions. Have you the witness within yourself? Does the Spirit of God bear witness with your spirit that you are a child of God?" I was surprised, and knew not what to answer. He observed it, and asked, "Do you know Jesus Christ?" I paused, and said, "I know he is the Saviour of the world." "True," he replied, "but do you know he has saved you?" I answered, "I hope he has died to save me." He only added, "Do you know yourself?" I said, "I do." But I fear they were vain words.[13]

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[9] Noll, *Rise*, p. 82.

[10] *Ibid*, p. 82.

[11] *Ibid*, p. 83

[12] *Ibid*, p. 84

[13] *Ibid*, p. 85

Wesley's theology was becoming increasingly convoluted. For a young man who grew up listening to his mother's encouragements to follow "the method," whose studies qualified him as an Anglican minister, who participated with Whitefield in the Calvinist-leaning Holy Club at Oxford, who skewed toward perfectionism in his devotional readings, whose mission trip to America was a self-described journey in search of personal salvation, Wesley now added the pietistic pull of the Moravians. Their conversations suggested that if he did know Jesus Christ, he should have the witness of the Holy Spirit in his heart. That witness would "bring with it both a dominion over sin and true peace of mind - both holiness and happiness."[14] In Wesley's opinion, he had neither. He knew Christ had died for his sins, but did not feel it inside. That changed one night after he had safely arrived home in London. Still intrigued by the Moravians' peace and assurance, Wesley attended one of their religious meetings. Wesley recorded the experience in his journal:

> In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate St., where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change that God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.[15]

The Aldersgate St. event was Wesley's "second grace" conversion experience. He believed he had already been redeemed and justified through faith in Jesus - that was the first grace. Not until the specific moment about a quarter before nine did he feel the personal assurance of his salvation, and in so doing received the second grace the Moravians told him about on the ship, holiness and happiness.

About the same time Wesley returned from the mission trip to America, Whitefield was on his way there to embark on the preaching tour that would rekindle the Great Awakening. Considering the variety of influences that shaped Wesley's theology, there had perhaps always been an undercurrent of theological differences between Wesley and Whitefield. Those differences had never been addressed during their shared time at Oxford's Holy Club, perhaps because of Whitefield's force of personality or Wesley's penchant to incorporate any thread into his theological tapestry. While Whitefield was in America, however, Wesley decided to publish a series of tracts that would flesh out their different theologies. By the time his pamphlets were printed, it became clear that Wesley was separating himself from Whitefield by aligning himself more closely with the teachings of Jacob Arminius. Less than a year after his conversion experience at the hands of the Moravians, Wesley broke from them, too, and founded his own brand of Methodism in England. The move ostensibly established two branches of Methodism in England, Whitefield's Calvinist Methodists and Wesley's Arminian Methodists. From that time on the once cozy relationship between Wesley and Whitefield was strained.

Whitefield's Calvinism was easy to identify. It is more difficult to get a bead on Wesley's theology because it was a mixture of so many ingredients. This useful quote from a Pentecostal illustrates the point. "In a lifetime that spanned the eighteenth century, Wesley had time to develop and refine his ideas on theology, society, and ecclesiology. Partly because of the sheer volume of his writing, there have emerged several John Wesleys to whom different people refer for different reasons."[16]

Regardless, there are a few elements of Wesley's theology that are worth mentioning. The first is his rejection of the Bible doctrine of total depravity and his belief in the Arminian idea of

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[14] Synan, Harold Vinson. *The Holiness-Pentecostal Movement in the United States.* p. 15.

[15] Mayer, FE. *The Religious Bodies of America.* p. 296.

[16] Synan, *Holinenss-Pentecostal Movement*, p. 13.

free will. Because the Bible is clear about mankind's fall and the loss of the image of God, Wesley found himself fumbling to support this viewpoint. The way he solved the problem was to recognize Adam and Eve's fall, but to qualify what they lost. To Wesley, the image of God consisted of two parts: a moral element, and the natural element of human reason and free will. He argued that when Adam and Eve sinned, they lost only the moral perfection God had given them at creation, but they retained their natural ability to choose based on their reason. This division of the image of God into two parts not only paved the way for decision theology, but opened the door for a variety of worship and outreach changes that would soon come.

Even if a person assumes Wesley's division of the image of God above, he still has to wrestle with the reality that man is morally and spiritually dead. If he is morally and spiritually dead, how can a man's natural reason or free will make any good decision, such as choosing to believe in Jesus? That issue was solved with a second innovation of Wesley, the idea of prevenient grace. Although man is morally and spiritually dead, his natural reason has been endowed by God with prevenient (sometimes referred to as preceding) grace. Before and independent of any human choice, God has given every man this prevenient grace. Prevenient grace enables men to make good decisions, especially the decision to come to faith in Jesus and be saved. A person simply needs to tap into this grace to make their decision to believe. Thus, Wesley could teach in good conscience that fallen man cannot come to faith without the help of God. At the same time, he could emphasize human decision and personal cooperation as the *sine qua non* of conversion.

The final element of Wesleyan theology that had a dramatic affect on future worship and outreach practices was the belief in total sanctification, sometimes known as perfectionism. The teaching of perfectionism was not historically new. The novel element Wesley added came when he connected perfectionism with the second grace. To Wesley, the first grace was the personal decision to believe and be justified. The second grace was what Wesley received on Aldersgate St. in London, May 24, 1738, at 8:45pm. Second grace, entire sanctification, and perfection were synonymous to Wesley. They were also intricately connected with personal experience and feeling. One calls to mind the questions the Moravians posed to Wesley on his transatlantic voyage: "Do you know that you are saved? Have you the witness within yourself? Does the Spirit of God bear witness with your spirit that you are a child of God?" Wesley's second grace perfectionism would answer, "Yes, I have experienced it and I feel it."

Many questions remain about Wesley's perfectionism theology. What does "perfection" really mean? Is it the same as sinlessness? Does the second grace that brings happiness and holiness mean sin is completely done away with or is it simply restrained? While Wesley never provided a comprehensive answer to those questions, one can infer enough from his teachings and sermons to draw the following conclusions:

1. Wesley believed the essence of perfection is pure love.
2. Wesley said that a Christian can be so perfect that he does not commit sin. However, he held that a man filled with pure love may still be subject to a mistake of judgment. Since this mistake of judgment is a departure from perfect love, it still requires the atoning blood of Jesus. Yet this mistake is not a sin, since it is not contrary to love. Thus Wesley held that it was not possible in this life to attain absolute perfection but only a relative perfection. It is not clear whether Wesley believed that sin is merely suppressed or eradicated.
3. Wesley held that Christian perfection is both an instantaneous act - the exact moment of which must be known - and a progressive development. The moment of second grace sets you on the road to purify yourself to attain perfection.
4. Wesley believed that following a regulated method of living is indispensable for the attainment of Christian perfection. Thus Wesley outlined the discipline in

which every phase of a Christian's life is carefully prescribed. This is the "method" of Methodism.[17]

The following chart [18] may prove helpful to understand theological differences between Whitefield's Calvinism and Wesley's Arminianism. Especially note the significant switch from "total depravity of man" to "free will remains" in the first line item.

Lutheranism	Calvinism	Arminianism
1. Total depravity of man	1. Total depravity of man	1. Free will remains.
2. Election to salvation by grace	2. Election to salvation and damnation	2. Election in view of forseen faith.
3. Justification is universal and objective in nature.	3. Justification is limited to those elected to salvation (objective but not universal).	3. Justification is conditioned on faith (universal but not objective).
4. Conversion through the means of grace is resistible.	4. Conversion is immediate and irresistible.	4. Conversion involves free will and is resistible.
5. Scripture gives both the warning that we can fall and the assurance that God will preserve us in the faith. Both law and gospel are needed because of the dual nature of a Christian.	5. Perseverance of the elect to salvation. They can never fall. Once saved, always saved.	5. Possibility of total and final fall from faith. A person cannot be sure of salvation.

II. Methodism, Revivalism, and the Great Mission Century

Methodism

For all the theological differences between Whitefield and Wesley, the movements they originated shared many of the same features. Whitefield broke with Anglican tradition when, after he was not assigned a pulpit, he took to the countryside and preached wherever he could find an audience. Wesley observed the tremendous success Whitefield had with itinerant, open-air preaching, and how effective it was at reaching audiences beyond regular churchgoers. Wesley not only followed Whitefield's lead, but personally approved untrained and unordained laymen both to preach and carry out other pastoral responsibilities. Laymen were carefully trained to mimic the energetic and enthusiastic preaching style Whitefield had mastered. Borrowing heavily from the pietistic Moravians, Wesley also used these lay workers to establish small group ministries. They divided people into societies, and societies were subdivided into classes. These smaller groups met to pray and study, celebrate agape meals, to confess sins, and to give testimonials - a marketing feature that had been around for ages, but modified and implemented by the Methodists with great success.

One would think that for all his defiance against strict church institutions and theological innovations, John Wesley would be considered *persona non grata* by the Anglican Church. That was true. He was denounced from Anglican pulpits and called a heretic. His followers were

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[17] Lyle Lange. *God So Love the World*. p. 389.

[18] *Ibid*, p. 448.

written off as fanatics and enthusiasts. Despite it all, Wesley remained Anglican and his Methodists grew tremendously in England. During the second half of the eighteenth century, they had so many followers that they began to develop an independent ecclesiastical structure and sent missionaries to America and elsewhere. When pressure mounted from the numerous lay preachers that Wesley break from the church, he defended Anglicanism saying that even "with all her blemishes, [...] nearer the Scriptural plans than any other in Europe."[19]

Wesley always held a deep regard for his high church upbringing. Though most of his ministry was spent on horseback traveling from place to place to preach, he preferred a liturgical form for the sacramental service. He and his famous hymn-writing brother Charles both had a high regard for the Anglican liturgy. When they co-authored the Methodist hymnal, it was largely influenced by the *Book of Common Prayer*. He defended apostolic succession, permitted only Anglican clergy to administer the sacraments, and counseled all his Methodist clergy to remain affiliated with the church (especially in America). But he refused to concede his positions on the second grace, itinerant and lay preaching, nor would he dissolve his small groups. Nevertheless, John Wesley died a member of the Anglican Communion in 1791.

Methodist history in American traveled a somewhat different road. Methodist missionaries had begun work in America as early as the 1760s. Their work was governed closely, of course, by Wesley. After the Revolutionary War, all colonial congregations affiliated with the Church of England were required to sever their ties. That presented a problem. Until the Church of England established an American version of itself with ordained Anglican clergy, parishioners were without the sacrament. Since American Methodists were at the time affiliated with the Church of England, they also were left out. Never one to let the historic practice of the church stand in the way of progress, John Wesley decided he had waited long enough. He named two Anglican clergymen, Francis Asbury and Thomas Coke, bishops of his newly formed American church body, the Methodist Episcopal Church.

As theologians, the early American Methodists traveled light. They thought of themselves as an evangelical wing of the Church of England, and their self-understanding came initially from the Anglican theology of their founder.[20] Like their missionaries, the American Methodists imported their theology from England. They considered John Wesley's sermons and writings to be "the most comprehensive, the deepest, the most experimental and practical body of divinity to be found in the English language."[21] Wesley removed the Calvinistic parts of the *Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion* of Anglicanism and was left with twenty-five. These articles still provide the official doctrinal statement of Methodism, such as it is, today. Doctrine was never a front-burner issue for American Methodists. Lay preachers were encouraged to ignore it. That allowed Methodist lay workers to devote their full attention to Wesley's evangelism strategies: traveling their circuits, open-air preaching and serving their small groups.

The American frontier provided the perfect soil for Methodism to grow.

> From the very beginning it had been geared toward working with small and scattered groups. Small "classes" of ten or a dozen souls, sustained by lay-preaching and periodic visits from the circuit rider, could be formed in countless places in the young States. Furthermore, the warm and personal aspects of the Methodist faith tended to be an antidote to the rugged and often lonesome pioneer life, and the fact that Methodism tended to be practical in its emphasis rather than doctrinal allowed it to adapt itself or "fit between" the various denominations among which it found itself.[22]

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[19] Don Thorson. *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral*. p. 97

[20] E Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America,* p. 256.

[21] *Ibid,* p. 257.

[22] Armin Panning, *A Look at Holiness and Perfection Theology*, p. 6.

Francis Asbury was especially important in the exponential growth of American Methodism. "Though made a bishop, Asbury did not indulge in any pomp of office, but kept tirelessly riding the circuit. When age and illness made it impossible for him to do this on horseback, he kept moving in a buggy. He had no residence, no family, nothing to clog or slow him down."[23] As a church administrator, Asbury ran a tight ship. He operated a one-pronged evangelism program that expanded the Methodist faith: itinerant preaching, from the bishops down to the lay preachers. He worked hard to recruit young lay preachers; they were better at attracting crowds and usually came unattached. If they thought of giving up their preaching circuits, Asbury promised they would do so at the expense of their membership in the Methodist faith. He led by example; there was no place he would not go and nobody he was unwilling to evangelize. One man in particular, Richard Allen, was a disciple of Asbury and traveled with him on some of his circuit rides. A former slave, Allen became a preacher, eventually establishing the African Methodist Episcopal Church in America (AME).

Revivalism

It was not the trained theologian serving a congregation, but the untrained circuit rider dealing with a small group that set the fuse of the mission explosion that began the nineteenth century. It was not the historic, liturgical divine service, but the week-long camp meeting that lit the fuse. As settlers moved westward, the frontier offered few houses of worship and fewer minsters to serve them. Itinerant preachers could reach many settlers in small groups, but the camp meetings invited larger crowds to gather. Situated in a remote area where attendees would have to travel and then camp out, a steady stream of itinerant preachers would captivate their audiences for hours before yielding to the next. Initially crowds limited their participation to singing.

> Spontaneous song became a marked characteristic of the camp meetings. Rough and irregular couplets or stanzas were concocted out of Scripture phrases and every-day speech, with liberal interspersing of Hallelujahs and refrains. Such ejaculatory hymns were frequently started by an excited auditor during the preaching, and taken up by the throng, until the meeting dissolved into a "singing-ecstasy" culminating in general hand-shaking. Sometimes they were given forth by a preacher, who had a sense of rhythm, under the excitement of his preaching and the agitation of his audience. Hymns were also composed more deliberately out of meeting, and taught to the people or lined out from the pulpit.[24]

As the camp meeting later developed, gatherers who felt moved by a particular speaker might demonstrate as much by swooning, screaming, barking, or jerking. The camp meeting became the way Christians received their second grace, experienced God, felt his presence and received his assurance of happiness and holiness. These rural revivals were the places preachers were born. Consider Lorenzo Dow, nicknamed "Crazy Legs." A frail man, asthmatic and epileptic, he would fake his death during his sermon to warn people to be ever prepared to meet Jesus. Aspiring evangelical preachers flocked to revivals. They came from all kinds of religious backgrounds, and some none at all. The environment rewarded the man who was more performer than preacher.

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[23] Wills, *Head and Heart*, p. 290-291.

[24] Louis F. Benson. *The English Hymn: It's Development and Use in Worship.* p. 292.

> The camp meeting set the pattern for credentialing Evangelical ministers. They were validated by the crowd's response. Organizational credentialing, doctrinal purity, personal education were useless here - in fact, some educated ministers had to make a pretense of ignorance. The minister was ordained from below, by the converts he made... The do-it-yourself religion called for a make-it-yourself ministry.[25]

The first revivals began at the turn of the century. The now famous Cane Ridge, Kentucky meeting that drew an estimated 20,000 people met in 1801. These camp meetings ushered in a century of unprecedented religious fervor known historically as the Second Great Awakening. Among other trends of this movement, the following are generally characteristic:

- Revival redefined America's concept of worship
- Camp meeting became method of conversion and second grace experience
- Ecumenical; complete disregard for any doctrinal lines
- Proliferation of denominations
- Evangelization of frontiersmen and slaves
- Eschatological preaching

Although he was not Anglican, the *primus inter pares* of revivalism was undoubtedly Charles Finney. From the turn of the century onward, itinerant preachers worked studiously to develop the revival into a highly specialized art form. None systematized it as carefully as Finney. Worship historian James White called Finney "the most influential liturgical reformer in American history."[26] A brash layman, Finney boasted that seminary was an investment in wrong education. He was an inspiration to young men who had no desire for higher learning, yet who wanted the celebrity status of the revivalist preacher. He boasted that "he had a higher claim on God's call than did ministers who could read the Bible in its original languages, since he had saved more souls than any man alive."[27] Finney's conversion rate can be attributed to old methods dating back to Edwards and Whitefield, but he added a few new methods of his own.

> He had amassed these [conversions] by a series of innovations that his opponents attacked as the New Measures - prerevival campaigns of publicity, personal testimonies advertised, women's participation, long night sessions, cards signed by the converted (who could then be counted in competitive rankings of converted from each meeting). To top it all, there was the highly effective "anxious bench" up front for people not yet ready to give themselves to Christ, who sat as it were in a pressure cooker while the whole congregation turned up the heat of their fervent prayers for such sinners. Calling people up to the anxious seat was an important step in the revival form. Earlier, people had been urged to show they were ready for conversion by holding up their hands or standing. The "decision for Christ" would become the climax of almost all later revivals, with the converted streaming forward toward the preacher.[28]

Finney's new worship methods - songs with a simple and familiar melody and lyrics, dramatic and charismatic preaching, and the famous anxious bench - were pure pragmatism. The pastor should not worry about biblical guidelines or historical precedent. He should ask,

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[25] Wills, *Head and Heart*, p. 294.

[26] James White, *Protestant Worship: Traditions in Transition*. p 176.

[27] Wills, *Head and Heart*, p. 300.

[28] *Ibid,* p. 300.

"Will it lead unbelievers to Christ?" Worship was a means to an evangelistic end; it was all aimed at eliciting the decision. When he was pressed by those who questioned his innovative, contemporary style of worship, guess how Finney answered? "Adiaphora!" From his revival textbook, "God has established no particular measures to be used... We are left in the dark as to the measures which were pursued by the apostles and primitive preachers."[29]

Finney had Madison Avenue savvy. It did not hurt, either, that he was tall, dark and handsome with a deep voice and a magnetic personality. Assembled in the same package, Finney's charisma and business acumen merged church and growth into a unit concept. Little was left to the Spirit. Manipulation of the emotions was perfected.[30] Like Edwards before him, Finney would document his revival methodology in great detail. In his book *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, he includes chapters on "When a Revival is to be Expected," "How to Promote a Revival," "Means to be Used with Sinners," "To Win Souls Requires Wisdom" and "The Wise Minister Will Be Successful." There are also four chapters dealing with prayer and another on how to be filled with the Spirit. There are, of course, no chapters on the efficacy of the means of grace. A final, telling quote from Finney:

> [A revival] is not a miracle, or dependent on a miracle, in any sense. It is a purely philosophical [methodical] result of the right use of constituted means - as much so as any other effect produced by the application of means... The right use of means for a revival, and a revival, is as philosophically sure as between the right use of means to raise grain, and a crop of wheat.[31]

It would be a mistake to underestimate Finney's effect on worship and outreach. He redefined American worship, and in so doing recast how Americans practice faith. The following quote suggests he did more than that.

> First, his pragmatic approach emphasized freedom and innovation over tradition... By pointing out that scripture did not require specific styles and forms in worship, Finney managed to relativize all liturgical tradition and break down opposition to innovation. Second, Finney developed a new way to relate worship to its surrounding culture. His new measures created an "indigenous" form of worship suited to the emerging American outlook and culture, largely by embracing popular styles and downplaying the importance of clerical authority. He despised the formal study of divinity because it produced dull and ineffective communication." Third, Finney reversed the relationship between worship and evangelism. Previously, theologians and pastors believed evangelism was a secondary byproduct of worship, even in a camp meeting. Saving souls was a high priority to those early camp meeting and quarterly meeting leaders, but worship was a higher priority. For Finney it was the opposite; evangelism was primary, while worship was a secondary concern. Everything that was said and done, sung and prayed in his evangelistic meeting must happen in a way that maximized the opportunity for conversion.[32]

The Great Mission Century

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[29] Charles Finney, *Lectures on a Revival of Religion.* p. 232

[30] Wills, *Head and Heart*, p. 301.

[31] Charles Finney, *Lectures on a Revival of Religion.* p. 13, 33

[32] Robb Redman, *The Great Worship Awakening: Singing a New Song in a Postmodern World*. p. 8

The nineteenth century, with its camp meetings and itinerant preachers, saw exponential growth in all evangelical denominations. In this great mission century, no one grew like the Methodists.[33] Between the years 1800 and 1860, Methodists multiplied from some 65,000 souls to over 1.8 million! By 1860, Evangelicals made up at least 85 percent of the American church population.[34] Another famous revivalist preacher turned politician, Peter Cartwright, described Methodist involvement in this Great Mission Century well:

> The Presbyterians and other Calvinistic branches of the Protestant Church used to contend for an educated ministry, for pews, for instrumental music, for a congregational or state-salaried ministry. The Methodists universally opposed these ideas; and the illiterate Methodist preachers actually set the world on fire (the American world at least) while they were lighting their matches.[35]

Evangelical revivalism shot through the nineteenth century sky like a blazing comet. What stifled it, of all things, was a lack of doctrinal integrity. As Methodists and others pushed across the frontiers with their anti-institutional, anti-intellectual message, small groups began to develop their own ideas how best to follow Jesus. The movement that began with a Calvinist and Arminian head started to fragment into a thousand tiny pieces. One of the more noteworthy splinters of Methodist Evangelicalism was the holiness movement, a further iteration of Wesley's ill-defined perfectionist theology. A handful of Wesleyan followers who dedicated themselves to the study of his sermons reasoned that if a second grace was possible, so also was a third grace. This "third grace" became synonymous with "fire baptism," "Spirit-baptism," "Spirit filled," "full dispensation of the Spirit," and the like. Traditional Methodists found themselves in an awkward position. The same denomination whose growth was championed by an anti-doctrine, antiestablishment message now found itself on the defensive against these "third grace heretics." Eventually, those pursuing the third grace would break from the Methodists and holiness movements altogether. After the Azusa Street revival in 1906, Pentecostalism was born.

Twentieth century Evangelicalism with all its denominations would experience ebbs and flows. Growth still ticked up, in some cases significantly. Evangelical positions on temperance and the Scopes Trial adversely affected public perception. Two world wars and the Great Depression posed additional challenges. These factors would contribute to the next Evangelical reinvention, the Church Growth movement.

III. Church Growth Movement & Mega-church priorities

Church Growth Movement

In the same way Arminian revivalism redefined America's concept of worship, the twentieth century Church Growth movement redefined America's concept of outreach. The Church Growth movement is synonymous with the name Donald McGavran. In his early years, McGavran served as a missionary to India in the 1930s. He spent considerable time studying the growth rate of his own denomination versus the growth rates of other Christian churches in India. What intrigued him was how some churches were stagnant while others grew by double and even triple digits. Why such a discrepancy? The Church Growth movement is McGavran's answer to the question *cur alii, prae aliis*? "Why do some churches grow and not others?"

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[33] For a statistical report of how substantial Methodist membership growth was over time, please refer to Appendix A.

[34] Wills, *Head and Heart*, p. 288

[35] *Ibid*, p. 291.

In an autobiographical work published shortly before his death, McGavran boiled his life's work down to three general observations.[36]

1. The Bible is the authoritative Word of God. Christ's commission to preach the gospel and discipleize all nations needs to be taken seriously. With this thought, McGavran meant to differentiate himself from social gospel and mission work that seeks to improve lives without implanting faith.
2. Missionaries should bloom where they are planted. They especially should strive to understand the people and cultures they serve. Their work involves changing people's religion, not their culture.
3. The growth rate of a church determines the effectiveness of its missionary and ministry. If a church is not growing, the missionary and ministry have failed. It is the exposition of this third thought to which McGavran devoted the majority of his study and writing.

The landmark volume on the Church Growth movement was McGavran's *Bridges of God.* C. Peter Wagner, one of McGavran's coworkers and his chief advocate, called it the "Magna Carta of the Church Growth Movement."[37] Wagner condenses the book into four main points, which essentially serve as four pillars upon which the Church Growth movement stands.

1. The Theological Issue: God wants the lost found. Evangelism, therefore, is more than proclaiming the gospel. It involves making disciples. This issue would lead to his "harvest principle."
2. The Ethical Issue: Evangelism efforts should be measured pragmatically. Do they work? Measurables such as statistics and numbers should be employed as a gauge of success.
3. The Missiological Issue: People prefer to become Christians while maintaining their unique racial, linguistic, and class identity.
4. The Procedural Issue: Properly divide time and energies between discipling and perfecting. We might call this nurture and outreach. In McGavran's view, missionaries spent far too much time perfecting and not enough energy making new disciples.

Over time McGavran and his allies, most notably C. Peter Wagner and Win Arn, developed a series of principles intended to support these pillars. These Church Growth principles were developed through rational, scientific study, through careful analysis of numbers and statistics, through evaluation of a variety of demographic and sociological factors, and through simple pragmatism. If it worked in congregations that were growing, it became a principle. In all, there are over 100 Church Growth principles. For our purposes, let us consider a few of the more important ones.

One of the more curious principles of the Church Growth movement involves an evangelism strategy distinction between sowing a seed and reaping a crop. McGavran calls it a difference between a "search theology" and a "find theology." Those who follow a search theology are those whose evangelism programs are satisfied with preaching the Gospel. A find theology includes the added element of bringing in the harvest. This "harvest principle" is expanded by C. Peter Wagner:

> Sowing the seed is not an end in itself; it is a means to the end of producing the fruit... If we follow the harvest principle, evaluate our activities in terms...not of how many missionaries we send, but how many lost people we reach and bring

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[36] In the paragraphs that follow I am following David Vallesky, *The Church Growth Movement, An Evaluation*, p. 2-4.

[37] C. Peter Wagner, ed., *Church Growth: State of the Art,* p. 23.

> to Jesus Christ. We will never be satisfied with "good" outreach programs that are supposed to bring people to Christ but do not.[38]

Church Growth principles make extensive use of social sciences, especially quantitative research, to gauge the receptivity people may have to the Gospel. There are psychological factors such as sudden changes in life - marriage or divorce, job loss, relocation - that may make a person more receptive to the Gospel. Sociological factors including economic class, race and gender, or a perceived need for community can provide valuable clues. By observing these circumstances and focusing on these felt needs, the Church Growth evangelist can position himself to be more successful in his outreach. Since growth is the goal, the purpose of this type of research is to remove as many obstacles to success as possible. The following chart, originally developed by Pastor Paul Kelm, illustrates how the evangelist might appeal to felt needs to strike up a more meaningful conversation.

Problems ---> PROBLEM ---> SOLUTION ---> Solutions

Other principles have been derived from these social sciences. For example, advocates of the movement would argue (on sociological grounds) that it is in the best interests of growth and success to establish churches where all the people generally share the same racial, economic, and social status. According to this "homogenous unit principle," it would be more prudent to establish three separate churches rather than to try to mix Caucasians, Hispanics and African-Americans into the same congregation. As the thinking goes, people are more inclined to join with others who look like them, speak their language, share the same musical heritage and other interests. Wagner underscores how strongly he believes this principle when he writes, "of all the scientific hypotheses developed within the church growth framework, this one as nearly as any approaches a 'law'... Show me a growing church, and I will show you a homogenous unit."[39]

McGavran claims in good conscience that his Church Growth strategies are supportive of Jesus' commission to make disciples. A final principle worth our consideration is called the "discipling, not perfecting principle." The title is a bit misleading. It does not mean to downplay the role of nurture - the "teach them to obey" of the Great Commission. Rather, since all principles are geared toward growth, the discipling, not perfecting principle means "bring them into membership first and worry about teaching later." There is no 20-week basic doctrines course before membership in the Church Growth evangelism strategy.

The way they define "disciple," however, deserves further scrutiny. Wagner defined a disciple as someone who meets three criteria: 1) faith in Jesus Christ 2) obedience 3) responsible church membership. His definition reminds us of the challenge Church Growth has by relying so heavily on scientific measurables. How do you count faith? How do you measure the Holy Spirit? Wagner's answer is to expand the definition of a disciple beyond biblical bounds. You can measure sanctification - obedience and responsible church membership. Faith is invisible, though, and therefore immeasurable. This principle also explains why many of today's Church Growth adherents struggle with nurture.

Study, observation, research and science drive the majority of the growth principles. Some methods strike us as sanctified common sense, but what is abundantly clear is that every principle is aimed at numerical growth. What validates their methods is not God or Scripture or the means of grace, but whether there are more people worshiping this Sunday than there were last Sunday.

The American Mega-church

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[38] C. Peter Wagner, *Leading Your Church to Growth.* p. 19.

[39] C. Peter Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow: Seven Vital Signs of a Healthy Church.* p. 110, 116.

The rise of the Church Growth movement runs parallel with another American phenomenon, the development of the mega-church. The American mega-church is perhaps the quintessential example of the way an American concept of success has affected the Church. Definitions vary for what requirements must be met for a congregation to be considered part of this elite group, but it is generally agreed that a weekly worship attendance of at least 2,000 qualifies. Adopting that number as our baseline, there are over 1,300 mega-churches in America.[40] With their sprawling campuses, parking-lot shuttle buses, state-of-the-art technology and thousands of weekly worshipers, there is no denying their influence on the American religious landscape.

One example of a modern day mega-church is Willow Creek Community Church in suburban Chicago, Illinois. Established in the 1970s, Willow Creek's lead pastor, Bill Hybels, promised to redefine the way we "do church." Hybels is widely credited for an innovation that combines worship and outreach, the seeker service. The following quote illustrates the evangelical strategy behind the seeker service.

> The seeker service approach builds on a basic assumption: unchurched people have dropped out of church or have stayed away because of traditional liturgy and music. Seeker churches create instead an alternative environment in which to hear the gospel by using styles of music and communication that the seekers already know. By setting aside traditional styles of liturgy and music, pastors and service planners hope to appeal to seekers through creative communication media—drama and the visual arts, but above all music and nontraditional preaching... The buildings do not look like typical church structures, the atmosphere inside is informal and casual, and the attitude is often intentionally irreverent. "Slice of life" drama sketches, video clips from movies, TV programs and music videos, and message-oriented Christian music (or even secular music) are woven together into a tight thematic package. Different approaches to preaching, often using multimedia visual aids, focus on felt needs of the target audience, rather than on biblical text... Seeker-sensitive services try to incorporate elements of the seeker-focused approach, such as creative communication and appreciation of the seeker's state of mind, within the context of a traditional worship service...these approaches attempt to minimize what many believe are the less attractive aspects of traditional worship, namely, uninspiring and uninteresting music, a formalized and ritualistic style of leadership, and too much religious jargon as well as a way of speaking that might confuse or even alienate the newcomer... Moreover, the seeker service embraces an emotional approach, making an appeal to the heart as well as to the head, primarily through personal testimony, drama, and music... Today's seeker service may seem like an invention of the 1980s, but it comes from a long family history. Its pedigree includes revivalists and evangelists who sought to combine worship and evangelism, going back at least to colonial America. Among them were important figures in American religious history: John Wesley, George Whitefield, Charles Finney, D. L. Moody, Aimee Semple McPherson, and Billy Graham.[41]

This quote from self-described evangelical Robb Redman, is revealing on many levels. One immediately senses an antiestablishment, anti-liturgical tenor with his descriptive denigrations. The identified target audience does not seem to be the unchurched unbeliever, but the liturgically disenchanted de-churched believer. True to Church Growth principles, the seeker

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[40] There are thought to be 3,000 Roman Catholic Churches that also meet this weekly worship quota, but RCC congregations are not considered to be part of the mega-church movement.

[41] Robb Redman. *The Great Worship Awakening*. p. 8

service creates an environment that appeals to emotions and felt needs by the careful selection of music and communication styles. What is especially interesting, however, is his admission that the seeker service is not a modern invention. It is the natural outgrowth of Wesley's Arminianism and Finney's revivalism.

The success of the seeker service evangelism strategy employed by many mega-churches today owes a debt of gratitude to McGavran. Many of today's mega-church pastors were trained by McGavran or C. Peter Wagner at Fuller Seminary; Rick Warren is among them. While the Church Growth movement is officially indifferent on all things worship, it contributed to the development of some mega-church worship practices passively through what we would term pre-evangelism. Is there enough parking? Is the campus clean? Are the restrooms accessible? Do I feel warmly welcomed? Because Church Growth is concerned with growth, it begs the mega-church to look at worship through the eyes of the unbelieving, unchurched visitor.

Critics of mega-churches abound, both inside and outside Christendom. Pejorative terms for these believer behemoths such as "God-co," "McChurch," or "Six Flags Over Jesus" suggest a stereotypical belief that the mega-church is less interested in God than it is in numerical and financial success. Sin and salvation are replaced by strategy and sensitivity. Outreach methods are criticized as being borrowed from the business world rather than the Bible, sold to seekers through slick marketing. The size of the crowd rather than the depth of the heart determines success. Their worship methods are panned for pandering to popular consumerism, advocating entertainment over Scriptural enlightenment. Nevertheless, the mega-church remains the logical conclusion of Wesley's Arminianism, Finney's revivalism, and McGavran's Church Growth.

IV. Evangelical Self-Assessment

Does the future of the church belong to the Evangelicals? For all their numerical success, they would say "no." Much of the discussion inside Evangelical writing is self-congratulatory when it comes to their outreach efforts, but self-conscious when it comes to their efforts at nurture. Although they would not say it this way, their downplaying of doctrine does them no favors. The same empirical research they use to plan seeker services and build mega-churches is the same research that reports back that Evangelicals still sin. Many of them are quite accomplished at it. "Evangelical Christians are as likely to embrace lifestyles every bit as hedonistic, materialistic, self-centered, and sexually immoral as the world in general."[42] Revelations like this are shocking to Evangelicals who have allegedly been born again, Spirit-filled, perfected, who have received second and sometimes third graces. Talking points are circulating throughout mega-church leadership. They differentiate cheap grace and full gospel to coax parishioners back to obedience and responsible church membership - as C. Peter Wagner defines discipleship. The answers they are coming up with do not end at the cross or the empty tomb. Their answers are in keeping with their Arminian heritage. "We've just got to focus on being the church."

Evangelicals understand that they face problems, particularly related to the way they develop and nurture the faith of their congregants. Willow Creek's Bill Hybels, whose seeker services influenced a generation of imitators, released the findings of a multiyear self study in 2007. He describes the "earth shaking, ground breaking, and mind blowing" findings in his own words.

> Some of the stuff that we have put millions of dollars into thinking it would really help our people grow and develop spiritually, when the data actually came back it wasn't helping people that much. Other things that we didn't put that much money into and didn't put much staff against is stuff our people are crying out

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[42] Ronald Sider, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience.* p. 17.

> for... We made a mistake. What we should have done when people crossed the line of faith and become Christians, we should have started telling people and teaching people that they have to take responsibility to become 'self feeders.' We should have gotten people, taught people, how to read their bible between service, how to do the spiritual practices much more aggressively on their own.[43]

What is noteworthy about Hybels' comments is not his confession, but that his solution suggests a return to Scripture to deepen faith. That runs contrary to Church Growth principles where success is measured by church participation and numerical growth, not by growing and developing faith through the Scriptures. Hybels was simply following the Church Growth textbook principle "discipling, not perfecting." Could it be that this Church Growth champion would consider a break with McGavran's methodology? The following quote is from the author of the Willow Creek self-study, Greg Hawkins.

> Our dream is that we fundamentally change the way we do church. That we take out a clean sheet of paper and we rethink all of our old assumptions. Replace it with new insights. Insights that are informed by research and rooted in Scripture. Our dream is really to discover what God is doing and how he's asking us to transform this planet.[44]

That sounds eerily similar to what they said before they launched the seeker services. The exciting words "rooted in Scripture" still follow "rethink," "new insights" and "informed research." Until proclaiming Christ becomes the focus of worship and outreach, this mega-church will be destined to repeat its same lack of success.

A second item in Willow Creek's self-study is worth nothing. Evangelicals sense a tension between nurture and outreach. They are so focused on making disciples - achieving numerical growth at any cost - that the "teaching them to obey" of the Great Commission becomes almost an afterthought. They believe it; they give it its biblical due. But their bigness gets in the way. There is an irony here. For all their growth and bigness, Evangelicals frequently talk about getting smaller.

> Sadly, because of their size, mega-churches are about as intimate as a professional ball game... My experience as a mega-church pastor leads me to believe there's too little opportunity for affective ministry. The numbers of people make it more like herding cattle than sharing the profound and intimate love of Jesus. Still, this seems to be the trend in the church, so, let's see if we can take this mega-church thing and find a way to infuse intimate discipleship into the process.[45]

Let no one gainsay the zeal Evangelicals have for outreach, but the struggle they have with nurture will likely remain. It is the product of a theology that intentionalizes outreach and focuses on growth, but uses worship methodology cooked in revivalism to achieve it. They pay lip-service to the authority of the Scriptures, but do not believe doctrine to be important. They will speak of the work of the Holy Spirit, but do not yield to his means. Instead, they implement worship and outreach methods carefully devised to condition the psychology of man to make a decision of free will. That is the elephant in their room. Revivalism and the Church Growth

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[43] Cally Parkinson and Greg Hawkins, *Reveal: Where Are You?*

[44] Cally Parkinson and Greg Hawkins, *Reveal: Where Are You?*

[45] Glen Williams blog http://www.web-church.com/articles-christian/mega-churches.htm

movement are just progressively more sophisticated attempts to circumvent Arminianism's fatal flaw: pelagianism.

IV. Lutheranism Assessment

Confessional Lutherans have a different theology that shapes their worship and outreach, and it deals immediately with the Arminian preoccupation with success. Against prevenient grace and free will, we submit to the Bible's teaching of total depravity. Inclined to evil, dead in sin and hostile to God, Christ died for us *while we were still sinners*! Paul writes, "[all] are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus" (Romans 3:24). Lutherans believe in "free," but not the kind of "free" the Arminians do. The "free" that appeals to Lutherans is not followed by the word "will," but it is connected to justification by grace alone through faith alone. This is the Gospel that brought us to faith, that keeps us in faith, and the Gospel that God has given us to proclaim. "...that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation." (2 Corinthians 2:19-20).

And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. Lutherans who pay more than lip-service to the Scriptures have always understood verses like these to be critical to our understanding of worship and outreach. We are Christ's ambassadors. We are speaking for him. We are carrying his message. The Gospel message we carry defines what we do in worship and outreach. Worship that can rightly be called Lutheran is worship that proclaims the Gospel, communicates justification by grace alone, and shows the sinner "Jesus for me." Outreach that can rightly be called Lutheran is outreach that divides law and gospel, sin and grace, that proclaims Christ. We can say it more boldly. Worship and outreach that proclaims Christ is always successful, because any time God's word goes out it accomplishes his purpose.[46]

Conscientious Lutheran pastors will undoubtedly be concerned with success. But the theological presuppositions that we have become convinced of teach us that the way we go about achieving success is different from the way the Evangelicals do. God works success through the Word; he binds us to the use of the means of grace. Evangelicals are the product of different theological presuppositions. They are largely influenced by the Arminian idea of free will. Therefore, they develop styles of worship and outreach are aimed at coaxing the will into a decision. Charles Finney could hardly have been clearer when he said, "[A revival] is not a miracle, or dependent on a miracle, in any sense. It is a purely philosophical [methodical] result of the right use of constituted means."[47] For the Evangelical, the method is the means. Worship and outreach choices are made with that end in mind. The revivals, the testimonials, the anxious bench, the stirring music, the theatrical preaching, the Hollywood-esque production methods, the sociological and psychological measurables are all aimed at eliciting a response of the will.

It is not enough for us to simply understand the differences between Evangelical and confessional Lutheran theological presuppositions. We must be convinced of the principles of our own theology. If it is true that faith comes from hearing the message,[48] if it is true that the objective promises of Gospel convert rather than the subjective feelings of man, if it is true that the Holy Spirit working through the word effects faith rather than the conscious decision of a man's will, then we will invariably be led to forms of worship and outreach that conform to those principles. Rather than gearing worship and outreach methods at a decision of the will, we seek to proclaim the Gospel often and clearly. Unlike the Evangelicals, we do not presume to do God's work for him. We recognize that God has committed to us the message of reconciliation.

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[46] Isaiah 55:10-11

[47] Charles Finney, *Lectures on a Revival of Religion*. p. 13

[48] Romans 10:17

As Christ's ambassadors, we share the message, and then stand down as the Holy Spirit works success as he wills.

Confessional Lutherans have typically followed a liturgical pattern of worship primarily because it so faithfully proclaims Christ. The confession and absolution, the songs of the ordinary, the didactic congregational hymns, the word and sacrament all lead us to see Jesus. What we believe determines how we worship. There is certainly no sin in using non-liturgical rites in public worship or borrowing hymns from non-Lutheran sources - so long as those rites, ceremonies and hymns proclaim Christ. In our own hymnal we have included hymns from some prominent Evangelicals - Charles Wesley and Isaac Watts among them. We should also understand that selecting worship forms that rely on the means of grace and proclaim the work of Christ is not adiaphoron. It is biblical. It is our theology.

The Holy Spirit works through the word. Finally, the word is all we need in successful worship and outreach because it is the means through which God operates. Therein lies the work for the Lutheran pastor: getting people in touch with the word. If only it were as easy as opening the front doors to the church and announcing the time of service! In the interests of gaining an audience for the word, theologians have long acknowledged that there are also side doors of entry to the church. Luther, in his inimitable way, explains that making use of these side doors is not only useful, but necessary when carrying out congregational worship and outreach.

> Now there are four kinds of men... The fourth class are those who are still lusty and childish in their understanding of such faith and the spiritual life, and they must be coaxed like young children, enticed with external, definite concomitant adornment, with reading, praying, fasting, singing, churches, decorations, organs, and all those things commanded and observed in monasteries and churches, until such time as they too learn to know the teachings of faith. But still there is great danger here when the rulers (as is now unfortunately the case) busy themselves with these same ceremonies and external works, insist of them as if they were the true works, and neglect faith. They ought always to teach faith along with these works, just as a mother gives her child other food besides milk, until the child can eat solid food by itself.[49]

What Luther calls "concomitant adornments" are all those things that do not immediately deal with the word of God or faith. Whether the congregation sings the hymn or the children do is finally irrelevant. If the children sing, though, it may lure unchurched grandparents or other relatives to hear the word. Those concomitant adornments allow the word to be preached to a wider audience. Whether the congregation is located off the beaten path or on the busiest corner in the city has no bearing on the purity of the gospel that is preached inside her walls. But location and visibility are frequently determining factors for many in the community as to where they will attend worship. Much of the research that Church Growth has uncovered in this area is helpful. Properly speaking it is not evangelism because it does not deal directly with gospel proclamation. As pre-evangelism, however, these concomitant adornments, sociological and psychological factors can be very useful in planning worship and outreach strategies. Luther's final caution is in place. Pre-evangelism strategies ought always to be accompanied by evangelism strategies to promote faith. The church is not in the business of gaining an audience alone. It is the in business of proclaiming the word of God so that the Spirit may do his work.

For all of their false theology, misuse of law and gospel and questionable practices, what the Evangelicals do offer us is a positive example of how quibbling over debatable matters should never replace doing what is not debatable. "Go into all the world and preach the good news to

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[49] Martin Luther. *Luther's Works, Vol. 44: The Christian in Society I.* p. 35.

all creation,"[50] "Go and make disciples of all nations,"[51] and "do the work of an evangelist"[52] are not open to debate. The Lord Jesus Christ commissions us to proclaim his message. Part of Christ's commission involves leaving the comfort of our pastoral studies, going to the homes of the people in our community, and carrying out the work of personal, face to face Gospel proclamation. We may not agree with all the methods of a John Wesley or a Francis Asbury, but we can hardly impugn their missionary zeal or their Christian work ethic. They certainly understood "go" and the "work of an evangelist." Their tireless itinerant preaching was in no small part responsible for the resulting numerical growth of the Methodists as they pushed across the American frontier in the Great Mission Century.

While there is good reason to be cautious and even critical about adopting Evangelical practices, we must give credit where credit is due. The Arminian Methodists and Evangelicals of today have demonstrated a passion for the lost that shames us. Many of our own theologians have rightly warned against the pitfalls of Evangelicalism and Church Growth principles. One of our finest missionaries, E.H. Wendland, has sounded such warnings. In the following quote, however, he emphasizes some positive features when he writes,

> In an era when many churches have become thoroughly shot through with humanistic propaganda and anti-supernaturalistic philosophy, McGavran comes upon the scene as a welcome change. He at least professes to take the Bible seriously. His use of scriptural terminology such as sin, repentance, conversion and salvation wants to be understood in its originally intended sense... McGavran also takes mission work seriously. To McGavran mission work is a life-and-death matter. He most urgently wants to extend every effort toward making the most efficient use of time, talent and money to carry out what he earnestly believes to be the greatest task in the world.[53]

One wonders why the Evangelicals and Church Growth adherents seem to have so much more zeal than we do. How are the Methodists able to grow 3000% in sixty years while our growth stays flat? The success story of American Evangelicalism has caused many a Lutheran pastor to cast a covetous eye in their direction, perhaps looking for something to borrow. If there is anything we should borrow, it is their biblical drive to "go" and "do the work of an evangelist." Rather than wondering about the Evangelicals, perhaps we should really ask whether Christ's commission resonates between our own ears? Does a love for the lost fill our hearts? The WELS Statistical Report suggests that our numbers do not enjoy the same trajectory as other Evangelical denominations. A review of survey responses[54] suggests that outreach efforts are generally not a high congregational priority. Why is that? How is it possible that confessional Lutherans who have the Gospel and regularly benefit from the means of grace do not seem to have the Evangelical fire in the belly? If the answer is that we longed to gather the children as hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but they were not willing,[55] or that our

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[50] Mark 16:15

[51] Matthew 28:19

[52] 2 Timothy 4:5

[53] E.H. Wendland, *Church Growth Theology*, p. 4-5

[54] In preparation for this Symposium, members of the Institute for Worship and Outreach conducted listening sessions across the districts of the Synod. About fifty pages of comments were recorded and compiled. Essayists were encouraged to review these findings as part of their research.

[55] Matthew 23:37

parish area is devoting themselves to what their itching ears want to hear,[56] then take Jesus' advice. "Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."[57] If the answer is something else - lack of zeal, worldliness, laziness or worse - then follow David's lead. "Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity. Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will turn back to you."[58]

Other essayists have pointed out for two generations that the days of German immigration are over. Countless souls on American shores are still lost to the devil, not to mention those abroad. We have what they need. There is an urgency to Christ's commission to reach the lost. We observe some encouraging signs. Work in cross cultural settings seems to be accelerating. An increase of foreign students in our worker training system is noticeable. Lay led efforts, most notably WELS Kingdom Workers, continue to support mission work. Partnering with Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, WELS has worked hard to preserve what this essayist believes is a program crucial to improving our synodical mission mindset, the Vicar in mission setting program. There is still much work to do. World missionaries have been called home in droves. Fully funded Synod home mission starts are all but nonexistent. Congregations are struggling to keep the souls they have and outreach languishes. The devil is still very much at work! But the devil cannot chase from our hearts the best outreach method God has given every one of us. "Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks."[59] When God so blesses us to gravitate in that direction, the liturgy will not be the only work of the people. Outreach will be, too.

+ SDG +

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September 20, 2010

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[56] 2 Timothy 4:3

[57] Matthew 5:12

[58] Psalm 51: 9-10, 13

[59] Matthew 12:34

Appendix A[60]

UNITED METHODIST MEMBERSHIP AS COMPARED TO USA POPULATION CENSUS							
UNITED METHODIST LAY MEMBERSHIP					UNITED STATES POPULATION		
EUB	*METHODIST*	*TOTAL*	*% CHANGE*	*YEAR*	*NUMBER*	*% CHANGE*	*% UMC*
-	**57,858**	**57,858**	**-**	**1790**	**3,929,214**	**-**	**1.5**
-	65,181	65,181	12.7	**1800**	5,308,483	35.1	1.2
528	174,560	175,088	168.6	**1810**	7,239,881	36.4	2.4
10,992	257,736	268,728	53.5	**1820**	9,638,453	33.1	2.8
23,245	478,053	501,298	86.5	**1830**	12,860,702	33.4	3.9
38,992	855,761	894,753	78.5	**1840**	17,063,353	32.6	5.2
61,175	1,185,902	1,247,077	39.4	**1850**	23,191,876	35.9	5.4
141,841	1,661,086	1,802,927	44.6	**1860**	31,443,321	35.6	5.7
190,034	1,821,908	2,011,942	11.6	**1870**	38,558,371	22.6	5.2
270,032	2,693,691	2,963,723	47.3	**1880**	50,155,783	30.1	5.9
346,751	3,441,675	3,788,426	27.8	**1890**	62,947,714	25.5	6.0
423,699	4,226,327	4,650,026	22.7	**1900**	75,994,575	20.7	6.1
498,551	5,073,200	5,571,751	19.8	**1910**	91,972,266	21.0	6.0
608,519	6,140,318	6,748,837	21.1	**1920**	105,710,620	14.9	6.4
667,294	7,319,125	7,986,419	18.3	**1930**	122,775,046	16.1	6.5
663,817	7,682,187	8,346,004	4.5	**1940**	131,669,275	7.2	6.3
801,105	8,935,647	9,736,752	16.7	**1950**	150,697,361	14.4	6.5
763,380	9,884,484	10,647,864	9.4	**1960**	179,323,175	18.5	5.9
-	-	10,671,774	0.2	**1970**	203,211,926	13.3	5.3
-	-	9,519,407	-10.8	**1980**	226,545,805	11.4	4.2
-	-	8,853,455	-7.0	**1990**	248,709,873	9.7	3.6
-	-	8,411,503	-4.9	**2000**	281,421,906	8.7	3.0
*** EUB is the Evangelical United Bretheren**							

[60] Statistics are taken directly from UMC nation website. http://www.gcah.org/site/pp.aspx?c=ghKJI0PHIoE&b=3828783

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