Coming Home to Roost
Scripture: Selected Scriptures
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We learned in our last post that it is possible to be a faithful and effective missionary without excessive contextualization. In fact, there was a time when things like translating the Bible, eating native foods and wearing native clothing, and learning to appreciate the cultural interests and activities of the people among whom you lived as a missionary didn't require fancy terminology to validate it (like *contextualization* or *redeeming the culture*); it was just good common sense.

So, what changed?

Once again, it came down to good old-fashioned pragmatism. Pragmatism, the proud banner of the church growth movement, is the one-word explanation for this popular preoccupation to contextualize gospel preaching and church ministry.

Flash back to India, early 1900s, and the sociological studies of Methodist missionary J. Waskom Pickett. He had been observing conversion and church growth rates among castes and social groups in certain parts of India. He started to identify and categorize common traits among groups that, from what he could see on the surface, had more conversions and higher rates of church growth. Pickett published his findings in a 1933 book called *Christian Mass Movements in India*.

Pickett's book had a profound influence on Donald McGavran, the father of the church growth movement. (McGavran once said, "I lit my candle at Pickett's fire.") McGavran had been disappointed with the paltry results of his missionary work in India, and Pickett's study gave him hope for better visible results. McGavran took Pickett's work further, studying the causes and barriers to church growth, and the factors contributing to church growth among particular people groups. He also identified principles that could be used to guarantee higher rates of church growth.

McGavran formulated his theories of church growth around the now famous (but then controversial) *homogeneous growth unit principle* (a *homogeneous unit* is a group in society in which the members share common characteristics). McGavran taught that "men like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers." If you don't force people to cross barriers, you'll see better results in evangelism and church growth. Simple.

That typically Arminian approach to evangelism (driven by an assumption of synergism, not monergism) emphasizes the choice of the sinner more than the sovereign election of God. It also

perpetuates a fleshly tendency to trust the visible methods of man to the invisible power of God. What can immediately be seen, measured, analyzed, reported, and gloried in is more important than waiting on and trusting in the work of the Spirit that cannot be seen or measured (making it difficult to analyze).

McGavran resigned his missionary post in 1961 and founded the Institute for Church Growth in Eugene, OR. Four years later, in 1965, he moved his institute to the campus of Fuller Theological Seminary School of World Mission in Pasadena, CA. Together with C. Peter Wagner, Ralph Winter, and other missiologists, McGavran taught students of missiology, theology, and ministry the theories of church growth.

It didn't take long for McGavran's theories to take root and grow in the fertile, Arminian soil of American evangelical churches. McGavran and Wagner started teaching church growth classes at Lake Avenue Congregational Church. With the high-profile success of pastors like Rick Warren and Bill Hybels, other pastors wanted to know, "How did you do it? How can I grow my church like that?" As other pastors learned and applied the principles, they watched their churches grow bigger faster. The results became their own justification. Principles of church growth, at least in popular perception, were no longer just *theories*; they had become unarguable facts. Pragmatism had won the day.

In the face of dramatic statistical evidence—the so-called facts that attest to the success of church growth theory—who in their right mind would argue with its legitimacy?

We would.

The Bible is replete with examples of people who crossed barriers of race, language, class, and family to find the salvation of God. Ruth's repentance runs counter to the whole thrust of the homogeneous unit principle, and she found salvation because of it. When Naomi tried to dissuade her from returning with her to the land of Israel—*precisely because of* the barriers of race, language, culture, and family—here's how Ruth responded:

Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the LORD do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you. (Ruth 1:16-17)

In fact, Jesus *required* His followers to crash through every possible barrier to follow after Him. "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it" (Luke 9:23-24). Those who lose their life for Christ's sake, even when it means crossing barriers, show the same marks of the true repentance we see in Jesus' great, great, … great grandmother Ruth.

It’s fascinating to see how the missions movement returned home to set the direction for the church. So much of what missionaries have accomplished is exemplary, useful, instructive, and enriching. But this church growth pragmatism has not been helpful at all. It causes pastors, missionaries, and church leaders to focus more on methodology than theology; more on the breadth of their ministry than the depth of it; and more on what can be seen and counted (which is pride-inducing) than on what is unseen and spiritual (which is God-exalting).

The egg pragmatism laid in faraway India was hatched in the missiological think-tanks of Fuller Seminary. Its offspring thrives in many of today’s evangelical churches. The early pioneers of church growth conceived the ideas that gave birth to the Seeker Movement. Their children have grown up to set the direction and the tone for many churches, and many church planting and foreign missions movements. This chicken has come home to roost, and American evangelicalism has never been the same.

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