

THE APOSTOLIC CONGREGATION: CHURCH GROWTH
RECONCEIVED FOR A NEW GENERATION

A Book Review

Submitted to Dr. Bill Day

of the

New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Course

EVAN6351 Contemporary Trends in Growing an Evangelistic Church

in the Division of Pastoral Ministry

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April 1, 2012

Hunter III, George G. *The Apostolic Congregation: Church Growth Reconceived for a New Generation*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2009.

Biographical Information

In *The Apostolic Congregation: Church Growth Reconceived for a New Generation*, George Hunter III considers church growth in relationship to "apostolic" models of church. At the heart of the book is a concern with how churches can reach "pre-Christian people" who were characteristic of the times of the New Testament.

Book Summary

In the opening chapter, Hunter "reintroduces church growth to new generation." The idea of an re-introduction is based on the fact that Hunter see many of the church growth categories and principles from the past to still be important for the current discussion related functions like an "apostolate" church. A significant portion of the chapter focuses on the work of Donald McGavran, who, for many, is the father of church growth theory. The essence of the work that Hunter surveys is McGavran's "types of church growth." After looking at the four types that were popularized by McGavran, Hunter introduces two new categories of church growth that he calls "Catalytic Growth" and "Proliferation Growth," which represents an attempt to "account for much of Christianity's expansion" since the original four categories were proposed.

In chapter two, Hunter seeks to answer the question, "What kind of church reaches pre-Christian people?" In brief, Hunter sees the mission of the church to be "commissioned by the risen Lord and empowered by the Holy Spirit to bless the earth's people and to make Christ-followers among all peoples." Hunter identifies ten areas in which the churches that reach "pre-Christian people" and experience "substantial growth" tend to excel in, namely, 1) Cultural Relevance, 2) Emotional Relevance, 3) Small Groups, 4) Lay Ministries, 5) Proliferation of Groups, Ministries, Congregations, and Leaders, 6) Social Network Outreach, 7) Outreach

Ministries, 8) Radical Outreach, 9) Social Conscience, and 10) World Mission Involvement. He closes the chapter by noting how these churches are also "high-expectation churches."

The next two chapters spend a great deal of time expositing aspects of relevance and outreach as it relates to the work of "apostolic churches." In some ways, this section has the most biblical content as it looks at examples from New Testament and considers the engaging ministry of men like Jonathan Edwards. Having explained relevant ministry and outreach essentials, Hunter moves on to consider perspectives for reaching "pre-Christian people" with the gospel. The first perspective is thematic with due attention being given to the four C's of Community, Compassion, Connections, and Conversations. He closes with a case study that exemplifies these thematic values. The next perspective is that of the narrative. Essentially, the idea is that one is to communicate the gospel in its story or canonical form, which provides the background for "pre-Christian people" to believe in the gospel.

In Hunter's final chapter, he addresses how the material of his book can be implemented in the setting of a local church with the goal of bringing forth true change. There is a significant focus on "theories for informing change," which is then followed by examples of how those theories are exemplified in churches that moved from being traditional to on mission.

Strengths and Weaknesses

The strengths of this book are various. First, Hunter's reintroduction of church growth is helpful for those who are new to the discussion. He faithfully recounts McGavran's principles without being a slave to a theory. This aspect alone is probably worth the price of the book, since there is so much confusion within evangelicalism regarding church growth. Second, the book is full of wonderful quotations that drive home the message of the author. For instance, Hunter quotes C.S. Lewis from *Mere Christianity* saying, "The Church exists for nothing else but to

draw men into Christ, to make them little Christs. If they are not doing that, all the cathedrals, clergy, missions, sermons, even the Bible itself, are simply a waste of time... It is even doubtful, you know, whether the whole universe was created for any other purpose."¹ Such quotes do not only bring variety to the book, but they serve to vividly capture the authors thought in a way that transcends their own personal work. When an author makes a statement, that's one thing, but when an author can show that others have thought the same thing, it tends to be compelling. Another strength of this book is that it goes beyond mere theory and gives examples of its principles at work in the form of case studies.

As for weaknesses, there are not many, but there are a few. First, it is hard to find a concise definition of the gospel and its relationship to transforming "pre-Christian people." That is not to say that this book does not include traces of the gospel or that it is not gospel-centered in terms of proposed content for the prescribed mechanism, but, it is not wise to assume the gospel. It is beyond doubt that many will read this book and implement the method without really understanding the message. Second, this book suffers from what many "church growth" books suffer from, namely, a poor understanding of human nature. At the heart of all approaches to reaching the lost there must be a fundamental understanding of the nature of sin and its effect on the sinner. Often times, books on church growth deal in terms of statistics and then from there they move to probability for reproducing the results that were surveyed. Unfortunately, that is not how salvation works, so what ends up happening is that books are written and conferences are organized that promote a method without understanding the need for God's supernatural work to take place in the heart of the sinner. Salvation is not a matter of getting all of the theories and methods lined up in a row with a people that are "open," but rather, it is about God making people receptive through the empowering work of the Holy Spirit so that they may turn to Christ.

¹ Pg. xvii

Ultimately, church growth is a theological matter and how it is approached will have a lot to do with what one thinks of the nature of salvation. In the case of this book, the primary focus is on reaching the man on the basis of what has "worked" for other churches without giving due consideration of the need for ministers to be faithful to the God ordained means of preaching and praying for the conversion of the sinner.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *The Apostolic Congregation: Church Growth Reconceived for a New Generation* will be a helpful resource for this generation of church leaders so long as it is utilized as a supplemental to more biblical material regarding the mission of the church of Jesus Christ.