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A Response to Dr. Litfin

Carl George

Introduction

Dr. Litfin, thank you for coming. Your presence here is valued. We know that we “Church Growth types” can be wrong, both in content and method. We do need to talk about persuasion. Some of us may not think it’s all bad. However, the real issue may not be about talk at all, but about another dimension that has not been addressed, and that is the dimension of power. We have been hearing about rhetorical talk and herald talk. Duane has defined for us “**p**ersuasion.” Chuck has defined for us “**p**ragmatism.” I would like to introduce a third “**P**-power.” Incidentally, where does Barna fit in? I have heard him quoted as a Church Growth authority, so I would like to address whether we can induct him into our ranks today. We should revisit some miscellaneous cautions that I believe are really on target, followed by a recap.

Dr. Litfin’s method of discourse is gracious. His use of indirect reference to “they” and “some say” in citing criticisms from the mouths of others certainly objectifies the arguments and permits unheated consideration of them, thanks to the gracious convention of leaving critics nameless.

Litfin is certainly gracious, in casting Church Growth’s critics as arguing from a principled point of view, and in recommending that we receive the critics’ observations in similar manner.

Confessions of a Church Growth Advocate

It is possible that those of us who are advocates of a Church

Growth point of view are capable of assigning low motives to our critics. We are tempted to discount their remarks as unworthy of thoughtful answers. We are able to imagine and suggest that those who disagree with Church Growth assertions are irresponsible. We can suspect they are trying to escape their God given obligations. We wonder about their faithfulness, in that they consistently repeat familiar methods, whether fruitful or not.

Indeed, we may have vented our spleen against those who disagree with Church Growth assertions. We say we suspect they are refusing to use persuasion (even as Litfin defines it). Indeed, we have been heard to say these critics refuse to develop strategies that arise from reading a culture and seeking to connect with those within it who are ready to hear, so we can make the Gospel plain to them.

Litfin's observations provoke a reexamination of persuasion and its place in Church Growth work and thought.

Exploration of Persuasion

It may be that "Persuasion," a word used as one of Church Growth's sacred "3-P's," could use clarification, in the light of the uses of that word in other contexts.

"Persuasion," as used in the "3-P" construct from Church Growth's legacy, declares the Church Growth conviction that evangelism is a multifaceted transformative process which begins with *incarnation* (the 1st P=Presence) continues through *preaching* of the Gospel (the 2nd P=Proclamation) and continues until new converts are *incorporated* into a faith community (3rd P=Persuasion).

Church Growth's use of the word "Persuasion," heard by ears trained in other disciplines would mean only "convinced by skillful argumentation and impressive delivery," and does not necessarily mean "incorporated into a faith community." Fresh ears, unfamiliar with Church Growth teaching, hear the word "persuasion" in our 3-P outline as a convenient alliteration, a homiletical convention. "Persuasion" as used in the "3rd P" speaks with imprecision that creates dissonance in the scholarly mind. It is a part of the legacy of Church Growth that we use the word "persuasion" to speak of incorporation. It is intended to describe communication strategies that go beyond Proclamation and beyond *convincing* unto the place we can evaluate its effec-

tiveness by the observable effect of Incorporation. But we *do not* adjust the *truth* of the proclamation, only the *style* of it. If this is an admission that we alter the message, then so be it. What may be of greater import is not a nuancing of definitions, but a re-framing of the entire discussion.

The crux of this dialogue is not to be found in the *format of the communicative act* but in the *apostolic role of the speaker*.

I consider the selected construct for analysis to be inappropriate and therefore unhelpful. It is not fancy talk versus plain talk. Mere talk cannot do what an apostle must do.

Let's talk about talk. Rhetoricians appear to operate from the role and perspective of speechmakers and their church equivalent, sermonizers, who have been privileged to assume the presence of an audience for their preaching, rather than having to do the bold apostolic work of calling together an audience, so that a hearing occasion is created.

Those critics who are Evangelicals often have a worldview and theology that expects the written and preached word to be the tool of choice for the advance of the Gospel. These word-smiths have little expectation of miraculous intervention or demonstration of Godly power via the miraculous.

The most impressive contrast is not between one kind of talk or another (oratory-rhetoric versus plain-herald). Rather the contrast is between *talk* on the one hand and *the miraculous* on the other. The contrast between words that change opinions and *healings* that change bodies is profound.

Tools of rhetorical persuasion		Tools of apostolic encounter
Reason, speechmaking in propositional language, argument, appeals to shared understandings, persuasion	...differ in type and scope from...	Miracle, revelation, power in demonstration, story which interprets miracles as signs, heralds of a Kingdom of power and light
wisdom of men 1 Cor 2:5		power of God

words which man's wisdom teaches I Cor 2:13	what the Holy Ghost teaches
speech of the puffed up I Cor 4:19	the power
the Kingdom of God is not in word I Cor 4:20	but in power

Paul's definition of himself and his ministry is less about rhetorical style than about his sociological role and intent.

Evangelists and pastor-teachers in the pulpit during a traditional worship service have a task to preach to a gathered and seated audience on an occasion. By contrast, the apostolic task is to remake the agenda of a people—to be an agent of connecting with and calling out the responsive and inducting them into a new social order—the *ekklesia* which is the visible Body of Christ, where one-another person-to-person interaction occurs in the presence of Jesus his Spirit.

Does Barna come within the boundaries of classical Church Growth?

What are we to say about Barna's placement among us by those who read him?

- George Barna's placement alongside Church Growth authorities, because he is often quoted in discussions of church leadership and management is problematic, but only a little.
- Not every tool employed by practitioners in growing churches is automatically accredited as a tool that arises out of McGavran's framework and perspective for Church Growth.
- Barna's perspective, methodology and discipline is clearly that of a demographer/pollster who has dreams and sympathies for supporting the growth of Christian congregations. But Barna does not derive or advertise his work as grounded in McGavran's Church Growth perspective.

Discussion

McGavran's mission was that of cross-cultural church planter among largely non-Christian populations often in the developing world. Indeed, contextualizing Church Growth to the American scene is a continuing challenge—especially among the segments of the population in which Evangelicals traditionally minister, where the sociology of large groups applies. Those majority population segments where most Evangelicals work seem to lack cultural self-awareness as a people group. People blindness and uproar over the homogenous unit principle are diagnostic of majority group blindspots. Such blindness to critical cultural issues persists, which is evident, for example, in the cluelessness of the media to the presence and depth of their ignorance of racism as they expressed disbelief in the outcome of the O. J. Simpson trial.

Conclusion

Barna is an ally. In contrast with McGavran, he is a user of modern information age tools in the relatively affluent, message saturated, urban industrialized world. In Barna's world, "pitching" by impersonal means, i.e. advertisements sent by direct mail and broadcast media is the usual practice. Such messages must be crafted to reach into the consciousness of moderns who are sought to participate in public programs offered by organized churches. Barna's polling helps economize this process.

Incidental Questions Posed

Litfin's grace: his observations are not futile. He does the Church Growth Movement a service by forcing our reflection and self reinterpretation.

- His cautions about pragmatism that is so extreme as to be casuistry are sound.
- His questioning regarding a preoccupation with success begs for a revisitation of the role and place of suffering in the life of the believer.
- His method of discourse calls us to acknowledge scriptural authority and forces practitioners to question

whether they are obedient to the canonical word of God.
For this we thank him.

How do we use the Word of God?

Take for example Jesus' parable of the sower. The parable of the sower categorizes predictable outcomes. It does not go on to speak to strategy. The parable of the sower allows a connection between soil preparation and resulting yield. If the parable of the sower is handled in such a way as to allow us to create strategy, i.e. sow on good ground if it is discernible, then we have an outcome endorsed by Church Growth. On the other hand, if this parable is intended by Jesus Christ as an instruction to set three-fourths of our seed deliberately in to unfruitful places so as to destroy it by intent, then we have an outcome which is not endorsed by Church Growth. A farmer friend, to correct my urban horticultural perspective, told me that if he ever had an employee that deliberately threw away three quarters of his seed, he would fire the man. Church Growth sides with the farmer. Sanctified common sense says that deliberate waste of resources must not be blessed as faithfulness. (This, perhaps, is an instance of Church Growth's pragmatism.)

Reflection

Litfin's argument, upon reflection, is not to be objected to on the basis of his definition of persuasion as a method of discourse.

The more significant difference in perspective is between the common evangelical assumption of a brass heaven and a remote transcendent God who largely confines himself to spiritual conversion and new birth when apostles from the first century until now act as agents of an immanent personal God who significantly intervenes in human experience through miracles of healing, prophecy and exorcism.

The style of Paul's speaking may have been to avoid persuasion by rhetoric, but his use of miracles was clearly calculated to shatter unbelief and compel acknowledgment of the Kingdom of Jesus. He used miracles to advance the view that what he did was a demonstration of Holy Spirit power. It was intended to be convincing that the Kingdom of our Lord was real.

The more pressing question is why should any of us settle for mere words of learning when we can appropriate the power

of the miraculous? The great problem may be that we know how to train orators, but we have little track record for training miracle workers.

Dr. Litfin, we may be persuaded that Paul preferred not to use rhetorical persuasion. It will be more difficult to convince some of us that he preferred talk to power. We may not yet be persuaded that we are wrong to persuade, if persuading is limited to adjusting style and approach, but your remarks do stimulate reevaluation. We must repudiate unfruitful habituation. Do we have courage to embrace the power of God?

Writer

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