

# Church Growth Through Cell Groups:

## A Consideration of Four Books on Cell Church Methodology

The following is an adaptation of a work concerning the church growth movement that was written to a specific audience in January of 1994. Much has happened around this topic since then though this adapted work does not fully express such. It is presumed that the reader has at least some knowledge of the church growth movement both pro and con.

Though the notion of cell group churches is really not totally new, currently there are several authors promoting what they call "a new move of God" in church growth methodology. It is known by many names: Cell Church, Cell-Based Church, Meta-Church, Open Church, etc.... For this discussion we will use the term Cell Group Church. The Cell Group Church (CGC) is presented as a new paradigm for the social architecture of the church. In this new organizational system the cell group (up to 15 members) is the primary church; individual cells are connected through several levels of leadership which are ultimately accountable to the Senior Pastor; growth is realized as the cells divide, birthing new cells. According to CGC author Ralph Neighbor Jr. most churches are "Program Based Design" (P.B.D.) churches. A "P.B.D." church is one that is structured around specific programs/offices e.g., Elder board, Trustee board, Sunday school, V.B.S., Ladies Aid, etc... The CGC is not about simply adding small groups to the existing P.B.D. church; one must read carefully to discern the redefinition of terms.

We have carefully read the following: Prepare Your Church for the Future, Carl F. George -- 20/20 Vision: How to Create a Successful Church with Lay Pastors and Cell Groups, Dale E. Galloway -- Where Do We Go From Here?: A Guidebook for the CELL GROUP CHURCH, Ralph W. Neighbour, Jr. -- The Shepherd's Guidebook, Ralph W. Neighbour, Jr.. Hereafter referred to as PYC, 20/20, WDWG and SG respectively. As discerning Christians, we feel constrained to voice our concerns. This document, a critique of the principles taught by the authors of the books, is our response as Lutheran Christians who have a high view of Scripture and are committed to Biblical Truth.

For the sake of brevity we have narrowed our presentation to these five concerns:

1. This new paradigm is presented as a restoration of the church to a NT form of church life; current church organization is presented as carnal, ineffective and even offensive to the Holy Spirit.

2. It is claimed that this new paradigm empowers the laity by de-centralizing a power hierarchy that has crippled the church for 1700 years.
3. Word Faith and Third Wave Theology, present in this new paradigm, is not compatible with an orthodox confession of Christianity.
4. This new paradigm promotes the de-emphasis of Theology expressed in church doctrine, and emphasizes subjective experience and meeting "felt-needs".
5. This new paradigm relies on humanistic philosophy, trends in the business community and modern social science research, i.e., Marketing, Sociology, Psychology.

At each point, in quoting from the books, we have included only a small sample of those quotes which could be included. We encourage the reader to examine our statements Cell Movement Critique carefully to see that we have quoted the authors in context and have not misrepresented CGC philosophy.

We will begin our discussion by stating those points expressed by the authors with which we concur.

### **Positive contributions of the authors**

Many of the concerns the authors raise are truly valid. Though the following list may not be exhaustive, we affirm:

1. The discovery, and development of spiritual gifts and the need for a Spirit-filled life of service and witness.
2. The mobilization and motivation of the laity in order to share responsibility for the work of the kingdom of God.
3. The primary role of the pastor/leadership in equipping the saints.
4. The importance of small groups as a place for accountability, and nurture. The value of encouraging groups, as they grow in number to consider reorganizing into smaller groups in order to maintain intimacy.
5. The realization that the church is not simply a building or a collection of programs.
6. The emphasis on the value and worth of children as a part of the church.
7. The need to raise our awareness of the isolation that exists in our society.
8. The need to discard evangelism methods which are unrelational and do not treat the person as a person.

In an effort to deal with the above issues the authors promote their new paradigm. The CGC is said to be a "new move of God" which is occurring now because, according to the authors, the Church has been lost in an institutionalized, clergy-dominated structure which has rendered the church helplessly ineffective at dealing with people's felt-needs. The CGC system is not necessarily considered "new" by the authors. Rather it is argued that, finally, God is restoring the Church to all her original New Testament glory. Hence our first concern.

## Concern #1:

*This new paradigm is presented as a restoration of the church to amore Biblical NT form; current church organization is presented as carnal, ineffective and even offensive to the Holy Spirit.*

In the fourth century Constantine established Christianity as a state religion. It is suggested that this institutionalization resulted in a clergy-dominated church which reduced the layperson to a passive recipient of, rather than an active participant in, ministry:

*It's a brutal but true fact: most churches have become just one more of the kingdoms of this world. We shall not deny they have a proper theology, but their ecclesiology violates the Cell Movement Critique clear teachings of our Lord, and Satan gleefully imprisons them in their own kingdom structure.*

WDWG p 130 (italics his)

Using Scriptures, like Acts 2:42-47; 20:20, the authors claim a biblical mandate for the CGC. That believers met in houses and that the Church grew in the first century cannot be denied, but it can not be shown that its growth was exponential, nor can it be shown that the key to its growth was the manner in which the people were organized. Rather it seems that the true key to the growth of the early Church was the Truth preached concerning the sinfulness of every human being and God's Grace in sending His only begotten Son to die on the cross and rise again so that God might reconcile fallen human beings to Himself (1Cor 15:1-11). Still, the CGC authors argue that the pattern or structure of the church which God originally intended had believers meeting in small house fellowships and then gathering together for large group celebrations. During and after the fourth century the focus shifted toward large group gatherings and small group gatherings were lost. There is some truth to this shift in emphasis, yet it is difficult to show how Constantine's action was destructive enough to support the authors' belief that the long lost, "True" NT church has now returned in the CGC model:

*I return to the disturbing point that has been made before in this book and will be repeated again and again. The cell group church lifestyle is too New Testament to be blended into a P.B.D. structure. It causes endless conflicts for those who attempt it...*

WDWG p 55,56

*Straight ahead lies yesterday! The first century church has returned to us in a simple, straightforward format. It's composed of deeply committed people who form cell groups... They are where we go from here.*

WDWG p 55 (italics his)

*Cell churches are the only way that true community can be experienced by all Christians.* It is not a 'purist's dream' to suggest the church should structure itself around this truth. Rather it is a return to a life style which has been bastardized by centuries of unbiblical, crusted traditions. The cell group is not just a *portion* of church life, to be clustered with a dozen other organizations. *It is church life; and when it properly exists, all other competing structures are neither needed nor valid.*

WDWG p 112 (italics his)

We do not believe that an emphasis on Christian community and house to house ministry has been lost for 1700 years. Holding fast to such a view is both presumptuous and arrogant. It also takes a dim view of the power of God and the effectiveness of the Holy Spirit to guide the church. It is true that throughout church history certain emphases have waxed and waned, but to say that they have been lost and only now been rediscovered is absurd. There is no "golden age" to which the Church should return.

Though always in need of reformation and revival, it is our contention that through Jesus Christ the Church is perfect and beautiful in God's eyes even though imperfect in her own eyes and the eyes of the world. For Christ's sake God accepts His people as they are. To assert that a structural/organizational solution, i.e. "systems of small (cell) groups," will make God's people more acceptable/pleasing to God or will bring about some kind of spiritual renewal is obviously ridiculous, as if people will in some way be spiritually different in a different organizational structure! One may change the current organizational structure of the church and as a result see behavioral changes in people, but these changes will not necessarily be true Christian spiritual renewal. That social constraints can and do influence human behavior does not mean that the development and implementation of such constraints is morally or Biblically acceptable. There are many successful "Christian" sects and cults whose membership continues to grow in spite of their lack of Biblical Truth.

The CGC is a new ecclesiology, a new understanding of church order, form and function. The authors claim that the CGC system decentralizes the power hierarchy of the church and thus empowers every believer to be an active participant in ministry. On the surface this sounds wonderful and may appear to be true, yet a closer examination reveals a new power hierarchy that actually imposes a centralized power structure on the church, a structure which only allows laypersons the power to serve the "vision" of their leadership--the "vision" of one man at the top, casting his "vision" down the chain of command. This leads to our second concern.

## **Concern #2:**

*It is claimed that this new paradigm de-centralizes an age old, man-centered power hierarchy that has crippled the church for 1700 years.*

The proponents of this "new church" claim that they wish to mobilize the laity and reduce the burden carried by the clergy. This would be positive. This is one of the truths which flowed out of the Reformation teaching concerning the Priesthood of all believers and the doctrine of calling (vocation). However, upon closer inspection, it appears that the CGC system actually centralizes power and authority. It is a highly structured authoritarian system which places the leading, preaching, and teaching function in the hands of a select few, mainly one, "anointed leader"--the Senior Pastor. The Senior Pastor casts his "vision" and then the people are to embrace that "vision" and work to fulfill it.

Though these books give the appearance of affirming lay involvement, in actuality it appears that only loyalty and progress reports go from the bottom up. Leaders "below" the highest echelons are not encouraged to exercise gifts of teaching or biblical exposition but rather are to exercise care-giving and shepherding gifts; we quote:

The Senior Pastor guides the Church... The clear direction set for the church by the pastor is a mandate for the congregation to focus on one thing alone. As one cell group pastor said to me, 'This one thing we do!'... Pastor Paul Yonggi Cho goes to Prayer Mountain once a year to fast and pray, seeking God's mandate for the church's life for the next twelve months. When he returns from that time with the Lord, the goals which are given to him are printed and framed. These framed statements are then hung on every wall of every church worker on the staff. All is in perfect focus, and everything done by every person is directed toward meeting that objective.

WDWG p 76

The Shepherd's (leaders of the individual cells) assignment can be reduced to one simple statement: *encourage flock members to be totally responsible for properly exercising their spiritual gifts.*

WDWG p 219 (italics his)

They (members of shepherd groups) should understand they are under authority, a part of a greater vision.

WDWG p 210

*Always, always*, the measuring stick for the health of a cell should not be how much they pray or study the Bible, but *how much they minister*. In the case of the Abidjan church, Dion Robert's Zone Pastors do not permit more than a two week period of stagnancy before they step in and ask the Shepherd, 'What's wrong in your

group?' Yonggi Cho told how he does the same thing with Zone Pastors. If a zone does not show conversions for a couple of weeks, he says to the pastor in charge, 'You go up to Prayer Mountain and fast and pray until God shows you your problem. Something is wrong spiritually, or the cells would be reaching out!' With such a spirit, the cell group churches can grow at a rate which far exceeds what traditional churches can expect. Wearing the 'full armor of God' is intended for *soldiers, not sitters!*

WDWG p 171 (italics his)

The Senior Pastor is over the entire home cell system. He is continually giving the vision and motivating the District Pastors, Sectional Pastors, and Lay Pastors in ministry. Through sermons and communications he is actively recruiting lay people into ministry. He sees that they are given the proper training and supervision to be successful. The Senior Pastor's heart must be in the home cell ministry if it is to be effective. This is one ministry that cannot be handed over to someone else and forgotten.

20/20 p 128

Every Friday the Senior Pastor receives a detailed report of attendance, number of visitors, converts, contacts made, and how the district is doing on its goals from each of the District Pastors. The District Pastor makes up his report from the sum totals of all the reports that come in from the TLC group meetings. On Friday as Senior Pastor I know exactly how many people attended a TLC group meeting for the week. I pay close attention to these reports which let me know how we're doing on the reaching of our goals for the year.

20/20 p 149

In their weekly report sheets, our TLC leaders are required to tell us how much time has been spent in each of these three activities (Sharing, Conversational Prayer, and Application of Bible). We monitor this to see that our groups are kept balanced.

20/20 p 112

In Dale Galloway's 20/20 Vision plan, the only power a lay person is truly afforded is the power to serve the vision. Loyalty to leadership, fellowship in the "vision" and working toward the established goals are the characteristics of those serving in a CGC. For more on this read pages 125-138 in Mr. Galloway's book. Also read Leadership Principle No. 2 found on pp.88-89: in spite of including an emphasis on the need to be a cohesive leader who loves people, the weight of the principle comes down on the side of the strong vision which must be proclaimed, pursued and seen to completion no matter the cost.

It is clear that the "successful" churches used as model examples, (e.g., Dale Galloway's, Paul (David) Yonggi Cho's), are strictly guided by the Senior Pastor. It is their "vision" which must be realized; anyone who questions the "vision" or authority of the Senior Pastor is released; anyone who fails to live up to the conditions required for service on staff, paid or not, is disciplined and soon released if not brought into compliance. The possibility that the "vision" of the leadership could be in error and appropriately confronted by the laity is never considered. It seems that loyalty to leadership is the real glue that holds the CGC together.

Remember that we are fallen people; social order does not come naturally to us. Any reasonable person ought to see the severe danger inherent in the CGC system. Holding people accountable is difficult work and often leads to manipulation, guilt, peer pressure and even mind control. One may build a Church, but it will not be Christ's Church.

The Senior Pastors of the churches referred to in these books could teach just about anything they want and not be accountable because it is their "vision"; God supposedly gave it to them while in prayer, reading the Scripture, or listening to the Holy Spirit. The fact that the teachings of these men range from questionable to outright heretical should be considered since the theological content of the message they preach and teach may well have more to do with the "success" of their churches than the CGC system itself.

Our third concern will address the Word-Faith (Positive Confession) and "Third Wave" (Signs and Wonders) elements present in the CGC philosophy.

### **Concern #3:**

*Word Faith and Third Wave Theology, present in this new paradigm, is not compatible with an orthodox confession of Christianity.*

It can be argued that the Word Faith and Third Wave movements present the most serious concerns to the true Christian Church today (MacArthur, 1992; Hanegraaff, 1993). Unlike other aberrant movements, these are residing within the popular Evangelical Christian community. The intricacies of Word Faith and Third Wave theology call for an in-depth, thorough presentation. Regretfully, we cannot give this concern the attention it deserves as it would require more than is feasible for this document. We encourage the reader to explore the bibliography provided as well as the references cited. There the reader will find authors who speak more exhaustively to both the specific details of each movement as well as the underlying social realities which have served to bring these movements to popularity. We assert that these materials should be carefully read alongside the CGC books.

That each of the CGC authors endorse and even promote both Word Faith and Third Wave theology is not at all difficult to see. Each of the authors praise the Yoido Full Gospel Church, in Seoul Korea which is pastored by Paul (David) Yonggi Cho--noted Word Faith teacher. Dale Galloway is heavily influenced by both Robert Schuller and Paul (David) Yonggi Cho; Carl George calls C. Peter Wagner--father of Third Wave--his mentor. These relationships go beyond any charge of "guilt by association."

There are many aspects to each of the movements, ranging from mildly aberrant to outright heretical. Here we simply offer brief definitions and treatment of those aspects which we feel are particularly relevant to the CGC paradigm.

### **Word Faith (Positive Confession)**

The Word Faith movement deifies the human person and lowers God to the human level by claiming that God Himself is a faith being who is subject to universal laws of faith. Dale Galloway reveals this Word Faith conviction when he says:

Since I have been learning to flow with the Spirit, many times when I preach, no matter what I preach on, when I come to the end of the message and speak the words of faith, people stand up and receive Christ's salvation flow. Flowing in the Spirit, I begin to speak *the Lord's faith*, and healings take place. Flowing in the Spirit, I've seen marvelous church growth taking place in our fellowship.

20/20 p.56. (italics ours)

In Word Faith theology, faith is a force and words are the containers which carry that force. It is taught that through words, spoken in faith, one can speak into existence that which is not. In its extreme forms believers are told that they are little gods who possess God's creative ability. In connection with this, many Word Faith teachers insist that believers should be healthy as well as materially wealthy and that to pray "Thy will be done" is a sign of weak or non-existent faith. It is in this Word Faith context that the word "vision" is used by Dale Galloway:

God wants to work through the function of our minds called VISUALIZATION to accomplish His work on this earth.

20/20 p.30 (caps his)

Before a vision can become a reality it must begin to be verbalized in spoken words of faith. Visions verbalized in words of faith release the creative powers of God to work through our lives, to bring into existence that which was not.

20/20 p.40

Carl George says that a senior pastor's major influence comes through vision



casting. His/her greatest resource is to cast the vision at worship services, staff meetings, and specific training sessions called, in Mr. George's model, Vision, Huddle, Skill gatherings. In order to grow and maintain a large Church, he says, the pastor must assume the role of a CEO. He says that the CEO's major influence comes through vision casting (PYC p.185).

"The top layer or function signifies Vision, with the storytelling that is appropriate to vision casting;... What does the pastor need to say? 'Go for it! Make it happen! Believe the Lord for great things!' Armed with exhortations from Scripture and inspiring illustrations, the pastor casts a vision that God will use to stimulate ministry."

PYC p 135-7

(Carl George quoting Pastor Dethmer:) "I consider my twenty-to thirty-minute opportunities for vision casting to be my central speaking engagement - more important, even, than my Sunday-morning preaching!"

PYC p 211

Ralph Neighbour Jr. echoes the emphasis on vision casting when he says:

An effective cell group church must be a *team effort*. In nearly all of them I have visited, they have another important ingredient: a truly *anointed* leader. Many pastors are good administrators and preachers, but they don't have an anointing, a God-given *vision* that causes others to catch fire and burn for Christ in a special way.

WDWG p 207 (italics his)

Paul (David) Yonggi Cho teaches that through visualization, whatever one envisions is incubated into existence in, what he calls, the fourth dimension. There are certain contexts wherein talking about vision is appropriate. The difference here is the true source of one's vision; that is, who originates, initiates and fulfills the vision. Though all of these authors will concede that one must know the will of God concerning one's vision(s), it is evident that their "vision" originates within their own creative consciousness, is initiated by their own casting of the vision before God, and finally is fulfilled via their cooperation with the Holy Spirit. Again, we quote Dale Galloway:

What you need to understand is that there is an incubation period... Spend time with your vision in fellowship with the Holy Spirit, clarifying, crystallizing that vision.

20/20 p.40

...within your creative imagination is the marvelous ability to picture what has not yet happened. When this happens, creativity is released and goes to work.

20/20, p 33

As I fellowship with the Holy Spirit my creativity comes alive and God's ideas are released into my mind. Through fellowship with the Holy Spirit came my vision to build a church of 15,000 by 1990.

20/20 p 51

For a long time I have had the desire in my heart for a three-piece black silk suit, custom made to fit. So I started talking to my heavenly Father about this very detailed request. One of the details was that it had to be at a price I could afford... one year later I am still enjoying the beautiful custom black suit that is my answer to prayer... But you have not because you ask not in detail. ... Right now I am continuing to take a number of requests to the Lord on a daily basis... it is clarified and broken down into manageable steps. The Lord and I are working together on fulfilling the requests... (we are to be) thinking positive, expecting thoughts about the request.

20/20 p 68,69

A God who is a partner in faith, a kind of cosmic bell hop who is empowered to act by our prayers might sound appealing to a self-obsessed society, but such a God is not to be found in an orthodox confession of Christianity.

### **Third Wave (Signs and Wonders)**

The Third Wave (signs and wonders) movement is relatively new to the evangelical community. The term "Third Wave" was coined by C. Peter Wagner in 1983 (Burgess & McGee (Eds.), 1988). Peter Wagner identifies the First Wave as the rise of modern Pentecostalism in the early part of this century and the Second Wave as the Charismatic movement of the 1960's. The Third Wave is essentially a variation of the first two waves. Third Wave advocates seek to avoid controversy by avoiding labels, like Charismatic, which carry negative weight and by trying to avoid some of the excesses of the other two waves. Yet actual differences, if any, boil down to a change in terminology, not in practice.

To support their claims, Third Wave teachers point to the experience of extraordinary signs and wonders. "Signs and wonders" ("power" healings, deliverance from demons, words of knowledge, etc...) are said to be necessary in order to authenticate the Gospel proclamation.

Ralph Neighbor Jr. affirms the Third Wave when he says that it is unfortunate that the association between cell group churches and the Third Wave movement causes people to downgrade the significance of his cell-group system. He says that those who do so have a limited vision of what is needed to bring the unreached to saving faith; we quote:

For those whose church life is formed around meeting in church buildings, there seems to be a limited vision of what is *needed* to bring the unreached to saving faith. Many who scoff at manifestations of the power of God, manifested to set men free in our day, do not have unchurched friends. The more one leaves the insulation of the church office, the books, and the church, the more the need for the *power* of God to do the *work* of God is recognized. Physical, emotional, and spiritual healing is constantly experienced by those who live together in the cell group church. Building up one another through using spiritual gifts is their lifestyle. Without the real power of God, a ministry to the abused, the abandoned, and the possessed is a farce. Cell group churches are not to be seen as Pentecostal or charismatic, but as *Biblical*. I submit we should confess that the traditional church has little need for the power required when assaulting the gates of hell. However, when cells begin to invade Satan's territories, they discover that evil forces are real!" (He goes on to quote C. Peter Wagner).

WDWG pp.35, (italics his); see also pp.35-37, 162-4, 420)

The traditional church is a farce? If one questions these so called "manifestations of power", one simply must not have any unchurched friends? One must have these "manifestations of power" in order to truly bring people to Christ? Mr. Neighbor's statements reveal the lengths he is willing to go to vilify God's work throughout the history of the church. Like Word Faith, once again it is evident that the Third Wave exalts the human person and treats God like a cosmic bell-hop whom one must cooperate with in order to release His power. It appears that Mr. Neighbor's lust for spiritual power has led him to dispense with God's true power, which is found in weakness, and to turn to impersonal forces sought out by the self in some form of mystic quest.

Ralph Neighbor Jr. says in chapter 11 (WDWG) that every Christian must have a *Listening Room* where they can hear God speak. It is in the Listening Room that one can receive words of knowledge so important to Third Wave adherents. His words reveal a mystic quest for ongoing extrabiblical revelation:

I confess that where I am going to take you in this chapter is a model of cell church life I have never *fully* experienced myself. There have been times, though, when it happened without being anticipated. In those precious, unforgettable serendipities where gifts flowed and edification took place, I felt as though I were caught up, as Paul, into the heavens--not as far as the *third* one, but much higher than the first one! And I also confess that *I feel cheated*. Before I die, I want to know the full reality of body life as described in scripture. *Of this I am certain: for those who won't settle for less, all we shall describe is possible.*

WDWG p 172, (italics his)

Chapter 14 of the *Shepherd's Guidebook* is titled: *Leading the flock to experience God*. Strangely enough, throughout the entire chapter God is not mentioned. It is mentioned that cell leaders are to facilitate the group so that members are led to share their personal life experiences. It seems that instead of experiencing God, what members are actually experiencing is each other and each other's experiences. It is clear that Mr. Neighbor considers supernatural experience the primary goal for cell group meetings; his own words speak clearly (notice the separation between intellect and experience):

I chided myself for believing that their many meetings spent intellectualizing about scripture had caused them to know each other on a spiritual level... Then the Spirit came. A word of knowledge was given. Quietly, the pastor said, 'I sense in my heart the Lord is telling me your problem... *The Lord had invaded His Body, and the gateway into the supernatural world had been crossed by us all.*

WDWG p 162-3 (italics his)

Once a cell group has stepped into the supernatural world, it can't ever be the same again... A holy boldness invades a group after it has seen the power of spiritual gifts working in its midst. They become aware that their battle is not against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers of the air. Every experience of knowing God's mighty power, instead of just reading about it in the scriptures, moves the group into deeper warfare and ministry.

WDWG p. 164

We know from scripture that deceiving spirits and false prophets are present in the world and that we must test them (I Jn 4:1); therefore, we must be careful never to automatically equate the supernatural with the divine. We, as people of a book, ought also be wary of any teaching which would lead us to remove intellect from experience. Jesus warns us of last days manifestations of supernatural power in Matthew 24:

For false Christ's and false prophets will arise and will show great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect. Behold, I have told you in advance.

(vs. 24&25, NASB)

And again in Luke 11:29 Jesus says, "This generation is a wicked generation; it seeks for a sign\*, and yet no sign\* shall be given to it but the sign\* of Jonah." \* Or, *attesting miracle*

(NASB)

The Third Wave focus on subjective experience and extrabiblical revelation can readily lead to undesirable conclusions. Perhaps the most serious of such conclusions is the tendency to de-emphasize the need for academic study and training in Theology. In the CGC system, the objective study and teaching of sound doctrine is secondary to meeting "felt needs" and the subjective experience of exercising spiritual gifts in celebration and community.

Referring to what he sees as the church of the future, Carl George says:

First, however, let me summarize the underlying assumptions on which the Meta-Church capitalizes:... # 3. *Churches will be known primarily as caring places rather than as teaching associations.* These churches of the future realize that God measures His people more by their obedience than by their knowledge of Bible facts. Therefore, they've shifted their priorities from teaching to caring, from understanding to application.

PYC p 154 (italics his)

In evaluating traditional church Bible studies, Mr. Neighbour says:

The most effective "Bible study" groups I have observed are the pseudo-Bible study cells. These don't really focus on the Bible; they use their group as an excuse to get together and share deeply. Usually these groups will begin with the reading of scripture, but the evening is spent in sharing.

WDWG p 66

De-emphasizing the careful study and teaching of sound doctrine is the concern we will address next. What happens when intuition replaces sound reason?

#### **Concern #4:**

*This new paradigm de-emphasizes both Theology as it is expressed in church doctrine, and objective learning through cognitive interaction with Biblical Truth; it emphasizes subjective experience, meeting "felt-needs" and learning through practical application of Biblical principles.*

What are some of the consequences of putting church growth and "felt needs" before the careful teaching/preaching of God's Word? In this section we will discuss (1) the CGC emphasis on spiritual experience as more important than knowledge of objective, doctrinal truth; and (2) the long-term implications of de-emphasizing doctrinal teaching.

Each of the CGC authors make it a point to say that teaching sound doctrine is important. A critical question to ask at this point is how do these authors define sound doctrine? Furthermore, where exactly does the teaching of sound doctrine take place? After a careful reading of the four books it seems that the authors' appeal for sound doctrine is nothing more than a shallow disclaimer. Here we quote Dale Galloway:

People in our world who are perishing from a variety of diseases of mind, body and soul--do not give two hoots about cold doctrine. Don't get me wrong, it's important to have sound doctrine but at New Hope we do not go around showing our bone structure to hurting people. Our calling is first to heal hurts and build dreams and at the right time and the right place we will instruct people in basic doctrines of the church.

20/20 p 16

The right time and place must be especially arbitrary since, at New Hope Church people receive salvation and become Christians no matter what the content of Pastor Galloway's message! He states his conviction quite plainly when he says:

Visions verbalized in words of faith release the creative powers of God to work through our lives, to bring into existence that which was not... Once I began to grasp this spiritual truth in cooperation with the Holy Spirit I started speaking the words of salvation at the conclusion of my message. Now, week after week, no matter what I preach on there is a flow of salvation. Large numbers of people stand, pray the sinner's prayer and commit their lives to Jesus Christ.

20/20 p.40

Mr. Neighbour says that the cell group is not the place for Bible study. Bible study needs are to be fulfilled at a different level of church life. Please read carefully the paragraphs in WDWG ch. 13 which follow this statement:

While it (cell group) will use the Bible freely in its lifestyle, it is not a place for Bible Study. These needs are fulfilled at a different level in the life of the Church, as we shall see in the paragraphs which follow.

WDWG pp. 198

It is difficult to find what we were supposed to see in the paragraphs which followed the above quote. At best we find "felt-need" focused teaching which comes during, what Mr. Neighbor considers, less significant Congregational (regional groups of cells, seldom more than 175 people) and Celebration (gathering of regional congregations) level gatherings which are more concerned with creating a festive, non-threatening seeker sensitive atmosphere.

De-emphasizing sound doctrine by placing it second to both meeting felt needs and producing a loosely defined spiritual experience turns the focus of the Christian life away from God as God and towards the self. The focus becomes what God can do for people rather than what God has done on their behalf in sending His only begotten Son to bear the punishment for their Sin. This opens the door for people to trust partly in themselves, in their decision to follow Christ and to adhere to certain principles. The kind of spirituality taught here is not historical, Biblical spirituality but rather a kind of pagan spirituality littered with superstition. This can be said because the role of the human person is exalted and subjective experience is considered more important than the objective, written Word of God. The line here may appear to be a fine one, but upon closer examination the long term consequences are serious.

In his book *Faith Misguided, Exposing the Dangers of Mysticism*, Arthur L. Johnson states:

Perhaps the greatest danger for evangelical Christians lies in the way they approach the Scriptures. In their hunger for immediate subjective effects, believers are in peril of treating the Bible merely as a tool for applicational impact, while bypassing foundational interpretation.

This danger is evident in Neighbor's agenda for a shepherd group meeting:

While scripture is a vital part of this (Edification Stage), it must be stressed that the focus is on using the Bible as a tool, not the focal point. The people present are the focal point. The manifestation of spiritual gifts which build up the members present is vital, as is total participation.

WDWG p 225 (italics his)

The Bible's primary purpose, according to the CGC authors, is found in its practical application to everyday life:

No matter how wonderful a theological position may seem, the heart of changing values is not theology but the practical application of it in experience.

WDWG p 57

Nowadays when people come to church activities, they expect their problems to be addressed... they're willing to get involved but only if doing so will help answer their personal cries for help.

PYC p 16

The cells of Christ must never be viewed as social gatherings or cognitive groups which simply share emotional needs with some form of Bible study. They must function on the level of the Spirit,

and that means they must operate through the activity of spiritual gifts.

WDWG p.140 (italics his)

In the CGC, it is the needs of the individual that define the work of ministry. No longer does Biblical Theology, expressed in doctrine, define Christian ministry because doctrine is "cold" and Theology is irrelevant to people with "real" needs. Furthermore, teaching is not considered edifying to the body, only the experience of shared spiritual gifts edifies. The question: is cognitive interaction with God's Word not edifying? The answer: true spiritual experience flows from responding, by faith alone, to the objective, written Word of Truth. Lutheran Theology declares that the Word of God is a means of Grace. That is, the Word of God is in itself efficacious in creating faith in Christ, thus justifying and sanctifying the soul.

In the short-term, it may be that the need-meeting discovery and free expression of spiritual gifts sounds refreshing compared to the hard work of cognitively encountering God as He reveals Himself to us in His Word. Long-term, the prospects do not look so good. What are the long-term implications of de-emphasizing doctrinal teaching?

The true long-term consequence of following after an experience-based Christianity is that the end product will be no Christianity at all; rather it will be just another superstition filled pagan spirituality with a human-centered god. The end product will be no Christianity at all because, once again, the role of the human person is exalted and spiritual experience is considered superior to the written Word. It is normal for corrupt human nature to turn aside to serve gods who promise to meet immediate needs and provide insight and powers which defy objective reason. God calls people to meet and experience Him where He has promised to be found: In Word and Sacrament.

The CGC authors place a strong emphasis on change and seeking new ways of thinking ("paradigm shift"). This is more akin to a secularized modern world view that reeks of subjective moral, cultural, and spiritual relativity than it is to a historic Reformation Christianity. Yet change is the catch-word of the day. The business world is currently going through massive changes in the face of an increasingly competitive global economy. In order to achieve and maintain a competitive edge businesses are focusing on catching up with and utilizing the latest technology, meeting customer needs by emphasizing change through new marketing techniques, organizational restructuring, down-sizing/right-sizing, paradigm shifting, preparing for the future, etc.... It is all too clear that CGC authors have taken the social science research employed in both the helping professions and the business world and are seeking to bring the church "up to speed."

The CGC movement is simply an extension of the larger Church Growth



movement. Our final concern deals with the reliance on humanistic philosophy and social science research.

**Concern #5:**

*This new paradigm relies on humanistic philosophy, trends in the business community and modern social science research, i.e., Marketing, Sociology, Psychology.*

Christianity and social science are not incompatible. In the past, Reformation Christianity provided Theological presuppositions which formed a basis for the work of science. In fact, it can be said that were it not for Christianity, modern science might not be at the advanced level it is today. Of course, there remains the question of whether or not certain social sciences are truly "scientific." Many psychological theories have a great deal of explanatory power (e.g., Freudian psychotherapy) but no predictive power; such theoretical systems are based on subjective interpretations reached through human intuition rather than objective, falsifiable evidence. The issue Christians must contend with today is the non-Christian base from which modern social sciences receive their fundamental presuppositions.

Pragmatism, Sociology, and Psychology have come to carry more weight than the Bible in deciding what is true in practice, what is true in society and what is true about individual persons. Pragmatism is an American-bred philosophy which basically says, "if it works, it is true." The consequence of this presupposition in church growth is that practitioners become more concerned with whether or not some new method works than with how faithful it is to Biblical Truth. It is as if to say, one thinks first if one "can," without considering whether or not one "should."

Professional Sociology and Psychology are respectable fields whose research can teach us a great deal about what can be observed in both society and the individual. But we must remember that theirs is a search for statistical significance and statistical significance is not to be equated with Biblical Truth. Humanistic presuppositions like the notion that people are basically good, that the human will is always free and that individuals have unlimited potential to affect change in determining their own destinies are plainly contrary to an orthodox Christian confession. The fact that modern Evangelicalism is shaping itself around such presuppositions has been argued by several authors (Horton, 1992, 1993 & 1993a; Wells, 1993; Senkbeil, 1989). The fact that the CGC authors have also bent to human centered presuppositions in formulating their strategies for church growth is evident. Carl George speaks most clearly at this point; we quote:

Ultimately, whether or not a church demonstrates the care and love of Christ boils down to its vision and structure. Know what you

believe God wants you to do, develop organizational framework so it can happen, and some amazing things will result. That's how the business community operates. If they can do it, why aren't we? We have God, and they have the dollar; surely God is a more durable and compelling motivation than the dollar!

PYC, p. 19

All church leaders could profit by likewise asking themselves, *How would a marketing expert describe the fundamental motivations of the people of our parish?* The answer should then be used to shape each congregation's ministry and structure. The result will be more effective and widespread ministry.

PYC p. 17 (italics his).

In an interview with *modernReformation*, a publication of Christians United for Reformation (CURE) , J. I. Packer says:

The kind of evangelical religion which doesn't challenge this self-centered, self-absorbed, standpoint, but rather, reinforces it by making one's religious experience the most important thing in the world, or God's gift of personal happiness, joy, good feelings, or that kind of thing is simply echoing the tenants [sic] of modern humanism.

(*modernReformation*, 1993)

Echoing the tenets of modern humanism is not a practice that is in line with historic Reformation Christianity. Martin Luther took his stand against the alliance that Rome had made with the humanistic elements of his day. Luther wrote, perhaps his greatest work, *Bondage of the Will*, in response to Erasmus' assertion of the freedom of the human will.

Humanistic presuppositions appeal to the heart, emphasizing the need to heal the hurts of the world, emphasizing the goodness of all people, emphasizing all that is emotionally appealing to a world full of fear, pain and loneliness. But human hurts are not the final word--Jesus is the final Word. The pain we see in our world today is not to dictate the purpose, form and function of Christian ministry. This is not to say that the Christian expression of faith in the Word of God can overlook or underscore the importance of addressing the felt-needs of our world. It is simply to say that the Word of God is the only authority to which Christians are bound. It is the knowledge of the truth that sets people free. In a society where fewer and fewer people have a solid Christian heritage to draw upon, it is especially important that the Church concern herself with content rather than experience. People who do not have a solid Christian heritage need doctrine first and foremost.

Long-term, what is likely to occur if "felt-needs" define Christian ministry? The source that will dictate the purpose, form and ultimate expression of Christian

ministry will not be the Bible or the historical confessions and creeds; it will rather be the "felt-needs" of those "unchurched" who know the least about its history and doctrinal foundations. Is this the direction that the CGC is moving? Is this where the Church should go from here?

(Please see the Sept 13, 1993 issue of *Christianity Today* p. 81. Call the number given (1-800-297-OPEN) and ask to receive a free audio cassette entitled *Christianity in an New Key*. With this tape you will receive a brochure in which you will find all of the authors critiqued in this document supporting what is called the Open Church.)

Since, according to Ralph Neighbor, most (all) churches are traditional or "Program Based Design" churches, it is obvious that the CGC authors would have them undertake a complete restructuring. For many churches, this might necessitate changing more than structure; Lutheran and Reformed churches may also have to reconsider their doctrinal distinctives. It is important to consider what this might mean since the CGC authors are not talking about simply adopting cell groups into the life of the P.B.D. church:

*The CGC authors assert that this new paradigm can not be effectively blended with traditional/current church structure, rather a complete transition from the old to the new must take place.*

So then, here we are. Ralph Neighbour Jr. asks, "Where do we go from here?" His answer is that we move away from the old, "impotent," "carnal" brand of church we know now and open our eyes to see what God is doing through the Cell Group Church:

There is a more effective pattern in our world today than planting traditional churches. The Holy Spirit is the author of this pattern, and it has sprouted up like mushrooms all over the globe. It is called the 'cell group church.'... A worldwide movement has been launched by the Holy Spirit, and He is paying no attention to denominational lines... (cell group churches) are not only the new wine, but the new wineskins.  
WDWG, p 20,21

Christ is among *all* His churches, not just some of them. In Revelation, He stood among the Laodiceans and the Thyatirians, and He is among all the problem churches today as well. But he *has* moved on to develop a younger Bride that is far more beautiful. There's a definite movement to report... a movement which will be significant through the end of this century.

WDWG p 89 (italics his)

Christ has two brides? One young and beautiful, and the other.....? Mr. Neighbor clearly asserts that the cell church cannot be effectively blended with existing church structures:

We must actively abandon the hope that stagnant churches can be renewed by painful restructuring and the tacking on of cell group church principles. According to Jesus, it's not possible to put new wine in old wineskins! The plan for the stagnant church must begin with the *wineskin*, not the new wine. A church cannot effectively mix traditional patterns of church life with cell group patterns. There must be a deliberate transition. After devoting nearly a quarter of a century to the attempt to help 'renew the churches,' I am a total skeptic that it can be done. The only hope for old wineskins is to pour out the wine they contain into new ones and *throw the leaky things away!*

WDWG p 36 (italics his)

Finally, in 1985 ... I began to ask myself a serious question: *can new wine be put into old skins?* The answer is 'No!' Attempts at a renewal don't work for one reason: our Lord told us over 2,000 years ago *it could not be done....* While I was trying to renew, He was shaping something *brand new*. That's what the rest of this book is about."

WDWG p 92 (italics his) See also bottom of p.68 "One of the greatest..."

When Mr. Neighbour says that the old wineskins should be thrown away, he speaks from many years of experience; he has tried to bring this "new life" to the P.B.D. church and failed. Mr. Neighbour is not alone in this judgment, he simply speaks with sharper words. Both Carl George and Dale Galloway express the same conviction, only perhaps in a more subtle, palatable way:

The first step, the focus of this chapter, is to present the big picture: how Meta-Church philosophy differs from traditional paradigms of ministry. In the process you'll learn why it is difficult to incorporate portions of Meta-Church methodology into an existing church in the same eclectic manner you assimilate other church programs. Such adaptation meets with consistent frustration and produces only marginal results.

PYC, p 58

A shift in paradigm must occur first in the heads of church leadership. Then it must be translated into a new framework of church organization.

PYC, p 69

Most North American churches function so differently that their leaders cannot visualize this new way of thinking. Rather, they tend to follow a departmental approach: 'Cells? Yes, good idea. Let's form some small groups.'... the structure of most churches isn't conducive to cell cultivation.

Pastor Dale Galloway ... started out to blend the cell group church with the traditional structure he had used to begin the work. Slowly, he realized he was trying to mix oil and water. He called in his staff and informed them their titles would change from 'Minister of Education' and 'Minister of Music' to 'Zone Ministers.' *He rightly realized that is not possible to have a church built around programs and build people at the same time!*

WDWG, p 34 (italics his)

Since all three authors agree that the CGC system cannot be effectively blended with traditional church systems, any church considering CGC methodology should honestly face the fact that the CGC claims to be an all or nothing proposition. Churches should also carefully consider the way in which potential opposition is described by the authors. It appears that those who reject it are simply considered "laggards" who are too accustomed to a "carnal" form of Christianity. This message is subtle but clear; we quote:

Can you envision such a collaboration of the Holy Spirit and human leadership? It's foreign to our Western minds because we're used to a carnal form of Christianity.

PYC p 81

*Is it really possible for this particular group of people to change? Should I attempt this?* There are thousands of churches who should simply be left alone. They are unable to change, and the attempt is a futile one. People gain their personal significance from their positions and power bases in church life as readily as they do in business life. To change the system is to threaten their worth and self-esteem, often developed at a great price of time invested by them during years of devotions and sacrifice to a church program. Unless a spiritual explosion occurs in their lives, *they won't change.* There are truly devoted pastors who cling to the security of the salary provided by a congregation. Should he risk all for a new concept of church life? That's a question for the *Listening Room!* He will invest years trying to bring change into that church. At the end, he may be no farther along than when he started - and stands a good chance of being sacked for his effort! Sometimes it's better to just start over. Sometimes it's easier to take a 'remnant'... *should the committed live in frustration because of the traditionalists who hinder the ministry, or should the uncommitted face a new future apart from them?*

WDWG p 406 (italics his)

When at least 50% of your membership are committed to the cell group church life, there will be a dissatisfaction with the many

conflicts with the programs that are still running. Drop your organizations, one by one... I really enjoy hearing Dale Galloway tell about the way he finally called in his staff and reassigned them to serve as Zone Pastors! What a day that must have been--the final clod of dirt had been dropped on the old coffin.

WDWG p 421

Ralph Neighbor Jr. claims that there are, in any church, five distinct types of people. Here he describes the Laggard:

The Laggards: Traditional to the core, this 16% are the last to adopt (new ideas). They possess almost no 'world vision,' and live in a tiny bubble of structured activity... When the 'pillars' of the church contain a majority of Laggards, there's little or no hope of that church body being changed. This trend builds up over years, and it may require many funerals before this group loses control.

WDWG p 412

Churches must understand that the CGC model is not simply neutral "methodology"; it is borne out of a theological system which is contrary to an orthodox confession of Christianity and therefore calls for necessary controversy. Any pastor or church leader who tries to move his/her church in the CGC direction should be challenged accordingly. Of course if a church does not have a clearly articulated confession of faith then the CGC will probably raise no questions at all.

Now, at last, we will conclude with a summary statement of our concerns.

## **Conclusion**

The CGC authors assert that the church today is bound in a carnal, impotent, unbiblical structure which cripples its ability to fulfill the great commission. The new church structure they propose is such that it can not be effectively blended with current church structure; rather, a complete transition must take place. This transition is said to represent the Holy Spirit's leading in restoring the church back to a NT form of church life. This form is said to set people free to minister to the needs of all people--both church and unchurched. It claims to do this by decentralizing the man-centered power hierarchy which is said to be currently dominating and oppressing the church.

We have seen the alliances each of the authors has made with aspects of the Word Faith and Third Wave movements. We have also suggested that perhaps Third Wave and Word Faith theology are part and parcel of CGC philosophy. Also, it is apparent that Pragmatism determines acceptable methods and that the reliance on trends in the business community, modern Pop-Psychology and Sociology have led CGC advocates to place meeting "felt-needs" above the

mandate to preach the Word and teach sound doctrine. We have argued that making the practical application of Biblical principles the highest valued use for Scripture fundamentally alters the true Gospel message. The message is altered in that people are directed to be primarily concerned with what God will do for them if they adhere to certain principles/formulas, instead of being directed toward the reality of what Christ has done on their behalf because the only thing they can do of themselves is incur the wrath of God.

It is to the lack of doctrinal conviction in our day that the CGC appeals. Kenneth L. Woodward speaks directly to this issue when he states:

The mainline denominations may be dying because they lost their Theological integrity. The only thing worse, perhaps, would be the rise of a new Protestant establishment that succeeds because it never had any.

*Newsweek*: August 9, 1993

The Gospel according to the CGC authors is not the Gospel that an orthodox Christian confession articulates. Their Gospel de-emphasizes the need for careful Theological scholarship and training in Biblical doctrines; their Gospel emphasizes subjectivism and emotionalism and discourages objective, cognitive disciplines; their Gospel establishes new laws in order to hold people accountable; and perhaps worst of all, their Gospel paves the way for fragmentation of the church through a subtle yet enthusiastic separatism.

The place where the CGC authors would like to take the Church may not be where God would have it to go. We have written "in order to preserve the pure doctrine and to maintain a thorough, lasting, God pleasing concord within the church." We believe that what churches could do in order to bring strength to their areas of weakness and to draw all Christians into a more intimate outreaching community of faith is quite simple. "Preach the Word," Paul said to Timothy:

be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance with their own desires; and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths.

(II Tim 4:2-4) (NASB)

Paul said this because he meant what he wrote in Romans 1:16 & 17:

For I am not ashamed of the Gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to every one who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to

faith; as it is written, "BUT THE RIGHTEOUS man SHALL LIVE BY FAITH." (NASB)

The true, God-honoring church is wherever the Word is rightly preached and the Sacraments are properly administered. The primary purpose of the church is not to grow but rather to deliver to all people as of first importance that Word which the church has received (I Cor 15). The duty of delivering to all people as of first importance the Word which the church has received is our privilege because what people truly need is God's freely given Word of salvation, the righteousness that, by His Grace, He imputes to those who, by faith alone, trust not partly in themselves, but in Christ alone (Eph 2:8,9). In Christ we have something to offer this world we live in, this world of pain and confusion. The doctrinal distinctives of an historic orthodox confession of Christianity are worth passing on. This is where we should go from here.

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