

An Old Paradigm For Reaching America

— W.W. McEad —

A paradigm, according to the American Heritage Dictionary, is: “A set of assumptions, concepts, values, and practices that constitutes a way of viewing reality for the community that shares them, especially in an intellectual discipline.”¹

One of the reasons why church planting by Bible-believing churches in America has fallen so far behind the burgeoning population growth is because of a paradigm shift that took place in the early part of the 20th Century.

EARLY AMERICAN CHURCH HISTORY

Most of us have probably heard, at one time or another, the assertion that Colonial America was a vibrantly Christian nation. However, among the four-million people in this country in 1790, those who were professing believers and who attended any kind of a church comprised only 5% of the total population.² By 1820, a remarkable change had taken place. Due primarily to the aggressiveness of the Methodists and Baptists in the ministry of church planting, the country had nearly 11,000 congregations for its population of 9.6 million people. This means there was a church for every 875 people. Just 40 years later, the number of churches had grown to 54,000, with a population of 31.5

million people. In 1860 there was one church for every 610 citizens of this country.³ The growth rate of the church planting movement exceeded the growth rate of the population.

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That was only the beginning. Between 1860 and the beginning of World War I, the number of churches quadrupled to 212,000, while the nation's population grew to 85.4 million.⁴ The multiplication of churches far outstripped the growth of the population and then provided one church for every 430 citizens.

The Protestant evangelical church was multiplying at such a rate because its leadership was very deliberate in

following an evangelistic strategy of reaching more people for Christ by establishing multiplied thousands of new churches. When they considered the Great Commission, given to the Church by the Lord Jesus, the paradigm with which they approached the task included the church planting values and practices of the early Church in the Book of Acts.

BUT SOMETHING CHANGED

Something sinister happened however during the first eighty years of the 20th Century. The Protestant Church in America, that great church planting juggernaut, changed its paradigm. In what appears on the pages of history as an about-face, they began to focus on increasing the size of the churches that already existed instead of planting new ones. Most church groups made severe cuts in their church planting activity and redirected those resources to build up established works. At that point in time, church planting in America began to fall off the pace in its ability to stay ahead of the population growth. In 1906, for every net increase of the population in increments of 280 people, there was one church planted. In 1989, the ratio was one church for every increment of 685 people.⁵ If that trend continues, the Christian church in America is soon to

be an endangered species.

It cannot be ignored that one of the keys to the spread of Christianity in America and to the vitality of the Christian church was a ministry paradigm that prioritized the planting of new churches.

WHY THE SHIFT?

The paradigm shift came about as the result of a number of different forces at work in the social, economic, political and religious factors in American development. It is not the purpose of this article to examine those factors. But it is worthy to note that the spirit of America at that time was one of progressivism. This spirit helped to shift the paradigm of the church: from a missionary fervor motivated to snatch sinners from hell's fires, to a mission that was oriented more toward reform and improvement of what currently existed.⁶ Many in the Church no longer viewed the nation and its people as a mission field in need of salvation, but rather as a society that needed encouragement toward self-realization and improvement. It was no longer redemption ... it was reform.

Those who are earnest about maintaining a high regard for biblical principle and precept will evaluate that spirit of progressivism and cry, "Foul"! The notion that America needs social reform and improvement of what currently exists, that Americans need to be encouraged toward the self-realization of their full potential is anathema to us! What America needs is the Gospel of Christ, the Good News for sinners in desperate need of being rescued from sin by the transforming grace of Christ. Is that not the mission today for those of us who are truly in the service of Christ?

THE LESSON FOR TODAY

How ironic that much of the evangelical church, while being so discerning as to the nature of the spirit of 20th century America, is not so discerning as to the nature of the paradigm shift today. If we are genuinely concerned for the welfare of America and her citizens, should we not learn from the example of history? History, both New Testament history and Colonial American Church history,

testifies that the way to reach America for Christ is through the clear evangelistic strategy of reaching more people for Christ by establishing multiplied thousands of new churches.

Certainly, church growth is a valid and biblically sanctioned pursuit. But the kind of church growth that is biblically mandated (Matthew 28:19-20; Acts 1:8) is that which is focused upon bringing as many people as possible into the family of God through faith in Christ and then integrating them into a reproductive church so that they can, in turn, reproduce themselves. The Great Commission mandate is for an ever growing number of believers, in an ever growing number of places (i.e. churches), reaching an ever growing number of people for Christ. Instead the Church in America today is going down a dead-end, pursuing an ever growing number of people in a single place. That is not Great Commission activity.

The spirit of VISION AMERICA is one which says if we reject those philosophies and world views which birthed the paradigm shift in the American Church, we would do well to reject that new paradigm as well.

VISION AMERICA is only a small part of the massive revival of church planting that is needed in America today. But it is OUR part and our part is what God will hold you and me, and IFCA churches accountable for. Will you take up YOUR part?

Working together we can make a difference in hundreds, perhaps thousands of communities. Working together we can make a difference for thousands, perhaps millions of souls. We don't need a new paradigm to do it; we need to reclaim and reinstitute the old one! The plan is His. We are the called. We are the commissioned. The harvest is ready. Together, let us labor till the Master comes!

ENDNOTES

1 "paradigm." *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition*. Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004. (accessed 12 Sep. 2008; Dictionary.com <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/paradigm>).

2 Paulus Scharpff, *History of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids,; Eerdmans, 1966), p. 312

3 Lyle Schaller, *44 Questions for Church Planters* (Nashville Abingdon Press, 1991), pp. 14-26

4 Ibid, p. 16

5 Ibid, 16-25

6 Robert Handy, *A Christian America* (Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 132