

# FURTHER REFLECTIONS



## Communicating the Gospel from Within

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A basic premise in effective communication is that the intended message makes sense to the hearer. When it comes to areas of theology, we tend to focus on what we *say* more than what will be *heard*. One of the biggest problems is when a messenger does not realize how major cultural differences are creating distance between him and those who hear.

That is why people like Donald McGavran talked about this issue in the book *The Bridges of God* more than 50 years ago: *people like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic or class barriers*, or, to put another way, *people like to come to Christ with others that are like them*.

Of course, others said it in different ways before McGavran, but the basic approach when reaching a group that is unreached is:

1. A believer needs to cross cultural barriers between where the church has taken root and where it hasn't.
2. As the gospel takes root and begins to grow, the new believers study the Word to figure out how best to spread truth within their culture/people.

The less we assume about how gospel truth must be communicated, the more new believers are free to think of their own ways of communicating truth. In its simplest form, some have described this as a two-step process: 1) Focus on the Word; and 2) Let *it* speak and not our cultural "Christianity" or our theological formulations (the way we state Biblical truth).

I'm not suggesting that we change our theology, and I realize that in many situations, the quality of Bible translation and the background of the

hearers can make this two-step process difficult. I *am* suggesting that new believers should have the freedom to formulate their own Biblical theology. We don't hand them a ready-made church or theology in a box.

It is interesting that as McGavran grew older, he was less and less interested in "Church Growth." He saw many of his followers spread their version of his theories, applying them to existing churches. Toward the end of his life, he told Vern Middleton (his student and later biographer) that he no longer wanted to use the phrase *Church Growth*. Rather he wanted to talk about *Evangelism*.

That was, in his mind, a way to talk about *both* the process of sharing the gospel *and* discipling or mentoring someone. In his thinking, church growth never means "merely" having people make decisions. During in his field experience in the 1930s and 1940s in India, when he was studying "mass movements to Christ" with J. Waskom Pickett, McGavran changed the terminology. He noted in *The Bridges of God*, "We do not use the term 'mass movements.' This unfortunate term implies unthinking acceptance of Christ by great masses."<sup>1</sup> That is *not* what the "people movements" he and Pickett researched were all about.

One of the underlying concepts became known as the Homogeneous Unit Principle. He argued that people are *homogeneous* in their language or culture. Some have reacted to the principle over the years, believing it to be less than ideal for the Church to be "race-based." But that was not what McGavran was suggesting, as much of the Church Growth literature

demonstrates. He was talking about how people come to Christ in the first place, *not* what the church might look like after that process starts in any given people group. In *Understanding Church Growth*, he talked about the need to apply common sense, because "the creation of narrow Churches, selfishly centered on the salvation of their own kith and kin only, is never the goal."<sup>2</sup>

As we consider how to apply McGavran's thinking today, a natural extension is that we encourage new believers to decide how they will live out their faith in obedience to the Scriptures. If a people group is unreached, then (naturally) the first person from that culture will likely hear Biblical truth in a manner different from the way he or she may prefer to communicate Biblical truth. Often new believers inherit some "Christian" baggage from the culture of the cross-cultural messenger. Sometimes they can get over that, and sometimes others they lead to Christ pioneer a new way of sharing that fits the host culture.

Giving new believers latitude in Biblical obedience seems to fit the parable of the yeast, which we can summarize as 1) Get a small amount of yeast in the dough and 2) It will permeate *inside* the dough.

We should not try to force the yeast to do its work. We need not over-analyze what should happen next. We trust in the Holy Spirit and focus on the message of the Word. It will flow from there in God's timing. ¶

<sup>1</sup> *The Bridges of God*, 1955, World Dominion Press, p. 14.

<sup>2</sup> *Understanding Church Growth*, 1970, Eerdmans, pp. 242-243.