

CHURCH GROWTH SCHOLAR ADVOCATES RADICAL CHANGE IN NEW MILLENNIUM

By Cameron Crabtree

Note from Pastor Kevin: As you read the following article, ask yourself the question, "If the God we serve never changes [Hebrews 13:8], why is it that the church which espouses to serve Him must "undergo radical change" all the time? Is it because we are in the last days where Paul warned us there would be a form of godliness, but that people would deny its power, which is the unchanging, biblical, Jesus (2 Timothy 3:5)? Jesus told us to be aware of false teachers in the last days. It is obvious to me that the teachings of Eddie Gibbs might be good for religious business, and the continued success of the mega churches, but those who follow his message must do so at the expense of the precious gospel of Jesus.

Heb 3:12-15 Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; but exhort one another daily, while it is called "Today," lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end, while it is said: "Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion." (NKJ)

The evangelical church in North America must undergo radical change with new kinds of leadership in order to fulfill its redemptive mission in the postmodern context of the next century, a church growth scholar told conference participants at Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary.

"This ongoing process of dying in order to live should not unnerve us if we are reading the scriptures right, for crucifixion followed by resurrection is at the very essence of the ministry of Christ," said Eddie Gibbs, professor of church growth at Fuller Theological Seminary.

Speaking during the annual meeting of the American Society for Church Growth at Golden Gate Seminary's Mill Valley, Calif., campus, Nov. 12-14, Gibbs warned churches must embrace transitions or "forfeit the possibility of exercising a transformational ministry within changing cultures."

In the shift from a modern era emphasizing rationality and unified progress to a postmodern era characterized by pluralism, ambiguity and relativism the church is facing a context in which former concepts of self-identity and purpose are being challenged.

"The church itself will need to go through a metamorphosis in order to find its new identity in the dialectic of gospel and culture," he said. "This new

situations is requiring churches to approach their context as a missional encounter."

He said the cultural changes with which church leaders must grapple are:

- *Global*. "There is nowhere to run to."
- *Rapid*. "There is no time to reflect."
- *Complex*. "There is too much information to absorb."
- *Comprehensive*. "They affect every area of life."
- *Unpredictable and discontinuous*. "They cannot be planned for."

Most ministry leaders, Gibbs said, are ill-prepared for these new realities.

"For the church to become a missional church, a new kind of leader will be required," Gibbs argued. "It will not simply be a matter of people with traditional mind sets acquiring new ministry skills to supplement what they already know."

Such tension provides opportunity for spiritual growth, he said.

"As Christians we must recognize that uncertain times provide a fertile context for our faith to grow," he noted. "We have to learn to trust God in the midst of perplexing circumstances which are full of paradox and ambiguity." Gibbs labeled some of the ministry models in church growth thinking as only tactical attempts to breathe new life into old structures.

"I rejoice at new movements, but ... we have yet to see renewal movements at any place in the western world that has, in fact, turned the tide of (declining) church attendance," Gibbs noted. "The significance of those movements have been in the reconfiguration of what is already there."

According to pollsters, North American continues to be as religious as ever, Gibbs said. "But the significant new factor is the increasing number of people who are seeking answers to the basic questions of life outside of traditional churches," he said. "This is especially true of younger generations, wherein the majority are beginning their search outside of Christianity or with a 'religious cocktail' of their own mixing."

The church growth scholar predicted stressful and confusing days ahead for churches throughout North America.

"Some churches will simply entrench and fire salvos over their protective ramparts and other churches will become subverted by the cultures they are seeking to engage," he predicted. "Still others, hopefully in increasing numbers, will demonstrate a true incarnational ministry which entails becoming immersed in the culture as a challenging and transforming

presence, welcoming people as they are, but at the same time not condoning destructive and degrading lifestyles."

This last statement is the true venom behind the deception he espouses. I have read much of the double speak and cleaver transformational language used by those who want to subvert the church. If you take out the trickery of the above, he is saying:

Some churches will continue to preach that one must be born again and live a holy life of obedience to Jesus, as an act of love and friendship toward the Jesus who saved them. These churches will drive people away with their narrow-mindedness and close their doors for lack of attendance. They will also fire off shots of warning at those who are perverting the truth. Other churches will become just like the world in all its forms of decadence. But the churches that will survive will bring people in as they are, entertain them enough to get them to come back, while not allowing them to practice their idolatry on church grounds.

Gibbs advocated leaving church growth models from the last two decades behind: "In the 1970s and 1980s, when church growth thinking took its cue from the world of secular management, it placed great emphasis on long range planning, emphasizing the four principles of the managerial task -- plan, lead, organize, and control -- that mind set is disastrous in the late 1990s when the unpredictable is always happening and tomorrow always arrives ahead of schedule and when control hierarchies collapse because they have become too sluggish, disempowering and at times even abusive."

Much like the church in the first century, churches in the new millennium will have to operate from the margins of society, without power, prestige or privilege, Gibbs added. "In postmodern society, church leaders ... must be apostolic in that they are venturing into new territory as well as reclaiming lost ground to bring people to Christ and to multiply missional communities," he said. "The confidence, technique-based ability to manage the present and face the future have been replaced by the need to seek God's wisdom and strength afresh for the novel and unanticipated challenges that face us in our ministries.

"The church in the twenty-first century must be one which empowers its members, is faithful to the gospel and has a growing understanding of its radical and subversive nature," Gibbs declared. "The effective leaders in the churches of tomorrow will not be power seeking controllers but relation-building equippers and mentors."

Gibbs cited several "marks" that should characterize evangelical churches in

the new millennium:

- Lives out the transforming message of the gospel in its corporate life.
- Empowers its members to contextualize the gospel in every segment of society.

That is, allows the members to define what the “gospel” means to them.

- Partners and networks with other churches which share their missional vision across the evangelical spectrum.

That is, agrees that all truth is god’s truth and that no one has the truth. As long as people “name the name of Christ” (however you want to define Christ), we should be willing to work side by side with them for moral good.

- Proclaims the gospel of Jesus Christ as the only hope for humankind with urgency, boldness, compassion and sensitivity.

But the gospel of Jesus Christ must be redefined to be palatable to the changing society.

- Worships God in three persons, encountering his transcendence and imminence.
- Develops communities of reconciliation and transformation.
- Trains a new generation of leaders who can lead the church into the twenty-first century.

"In today's tumultuous and fragmented world, it is far from clear what the church in the twenty-first century will look like," he said. "Given the degree of social fragmentation we witness around us, it is unlikely that any one model will prevail. Rather we will see emerging a variety of models ... that will contradict many of the things we have assumed as we extrapolate our church growth theories from just one impressive megachurch or promising new movement.

"We should adopt a more prayerful and humble stance and we cannot ignore what is happening more globally," he concluded. "God is at work, sometimes in the most unlikely places, yet we need a God-given vision as never before -- but one which arises out of our theological convictions and missional commitments."

May the Lord Jesus help those who love Him to contend for the true faith, as the world rapidly heads toward the time of great apostasy.

II Th 2:3 Let no one deceive you by any means; for that Day will not come unless the falling away (apostasy) comes first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition, (NKJ)

2 Tim 4:2-5 Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables. But you be watchful in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry. (NKJ)