The Megafall of the Megachurch

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We often think that biblical prophecy reveals things that are yet future. In many cases that is absolutely true. The rapture, the tribulation, Kingdom age, and final state are all future. Yet, this must not blind us to the fact that prophecy is being fulfilled today. In many cases, in our own churches, denominations, and seminaries.

In this survey we want to consider the megachurch movement (MCM). While we are certainly on scriptural grounds when we desire local churches to grow, we are also on scriptural grounds when we express concern over the methods used to grow megachurches. Megachurches are large, very large, numbering in the thousands. Is this proof of a mighty revival, or proof of end-time apostasy and a MEGAfall?

The Ecumenical Roots of the Megachurch Movement

The megachurch is like a mighty tree—lots of branches, and also roots that go deep. Those roots go down to the modern church growth school. In 1965, Donald A. McGavran, known as “the father of the church growth school,” was asked by Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California, to establish the School of World Mission.

One of McGavran’s best-known and most influential students is C. Peter Wagner, former professor of church growth at Fuller Seminary’s School of World Mission. McGavran and Wagner established the school as an influential organization within the evangelical, pentecostal, and charismatic movements internationally. In 1982 Wagner teamed up with John Wimber, the founder of the Vineyard Movement. They created a new course at Fuller called “Signs, Wonders and Church Growth.” Wagner and Wimber are associated with Kingdom Now theology, territorial spirits, the third wave of the Holy Spirit, the World Prayer Center and Global Harvest Ministries, and the new apostolic reformation.

Wagner was one of the founders of the Lausanne Committee on World Evangelization. The First International Congress on World Evangelization met in 1974, and brought together over 4,000 evangelicals. It was headed by Billy Graham and brought together religious leaders from over 150 nations. The theme of the congress was “Let the earth hear His voice.” The congress was initiated by Billy Graham. It was to be a follow up to the 1966 World Congress on Evangelism.

These meetings were very impressive but they were all marked by a desire to reach the most with the least. In their attempt to evangelize tribes, nations, and vast regions of the world there was a definite willingness to hold back on doctrine. Doctrine divides, and such grandiose schemes could not tolerate division.

The False Premises of the Megachurch Movement

Every movement is based on foundational truths that direct and energize that movement. These are often called premises, or core beliefs. There is nothing wrong with having premises. However, the MCM has several false premises that are driving the entire movement in the wrong direction.

False Premise 1: God’s will for every local church is numerical growth. No doubt, numerical growth is reported in the Bible, but nowhere is it commanded. “And there were added unto them about three thousand souls” (Acts 2:41). Significantly, none of the churches in Revelation 2–3 are ever rebuked by the Lord for not growing numerically, nor are any of the churches that are commended ever commended for church growth.

This simple, but profound truth must not be missed. The church at Ephesus was commended for its testing of those who claimed to be apostles, but rebuked for cold-heartedness toward the Lord (Rev. 2:2,
4). To the church at Smyrna Christ says, “Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.” He does not say, “Add numbers to your rolls and you will receive a crown of life.”

According to this premise, small churches are failures and are out of the will of God. But look at Noah—he preached for one hundred and twenty years and only eight souls were saved. Was Noah a failure? Look at Jeremiah. He was thrown into a dungeon. Regarding Ezekiel God said: “Also, thou son of man, the children of thy people still are talking against thee…. They hear thy words, but they will not do them. … And, lo, thou art unto them as a very lovely song of one that hath a pleasant voice, and can play well on an instrument: for they hear thy words, but they do them not” (Ezek. 33:30–33).

**False Premise 2: The needs and opinions of lost people should determine the strategy of the church.** Since the gospel is viewed as a commodity to be marketed, good marketing principles must be applied. What kind of a “sell” does this involve? Appealing to felt needs. “Scratch ‘em where they itch” is the idea. Also, “the customer is always right.” In preaching the gospel, however, the “customer is always wrong—dead wrong.” Jesus said, “Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3).

But should society really dictate our standards? Let’s answer that question with another question: “What is the moral tone and climate of our country?” Consider this. On November 3, 1992 the people of the United States of America voted into the most powerful office on earth a man who had smoked pot, dodged the draft, and espoused the sexual morals of a pot-head. Americans today not only tolerate, but have also institutionalized divorce, abortion, homosexuality, and feminism. This is powerful proof, among many other proofs, that the Word of God must determine our standards.

**False Premise 3: The Lack of Adequate Church Growth Worldwide Proves the Need for a New Reformation.** One of the undeniable statistics frequently cited by megachurch leaders is that the majority of churches in America do not see a single addition through conversion in a typical year.

In order to reverse this trend we are told that we must reject our conventional and traditional thinking about church. Hence...

- We need a stage with a movable lectern to replace the wooden pulpit;
- A rock band to replace the piano and organ;
- Casually-dressed and happy audience to replace reverent worshippers;
- Multimedia presentations and a friendly “talk” by a casually-dressed worship leader to replace anointed Bible preaching.

Megachurch leaders will tell you that the “Protestant Reformation” involved doctrine, but this new reformation will focus on practice and living. Megachurch leaders tell us that instead of having a “holy-huddle” mentality, we should reach the world for Christ. This, they believe, requires us to put aside our petty differences and major on what is really important—feeding the poor and healing disease.

Rick Warren’s Global PEACE Plan is a good example of this new reformation. The P in Warren’s acronym stands for “Plant Churches; the E for “Equip Leaders”; the A for Assist the Poor”; the C for “Care for the Sick”; and the E for “Educate the Next Generation.”

**False Premise 4: Man’s “sacred need” for self esteem will bring this new reformation.** Megachurch leaders affirm the alleged sacred right of every person to self esteem. They affirm that once a person believes that he or she is an unworthy sinner they will never be able to accept the grace of God. Talking about those who are “saved” and those who are “lost” is counterproductive. Therefore, there can be no church growth, and no dynamic Christians who will change the world, unless people are taught to “love themselves.”

Where in the Bible is this taught? In Matthew 22:36–40 Jesus said: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. . . . And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.” We are told that we must love God, we must love our neighbors, and we must love ourselves. Isn’t that what this passage teaches?

But please notice: there are only two commandments here. We are not commanded to love ourselves. “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.” “As” indicates a present state of existence; it is not a command to a new reality. When the apostle wrote: “Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it” (Eph. 5:25), the apostle was not indicating that Jesus must love the church. He was indicating that the Lord Jesus Christ already loves the church. The fact that Jesus gave Himself for the church is proof of this.

The Bible doesn’t teach us to hate ourselves, but neither does it teach us to automatically love ourselves. Scripture warns us not to think too highly of ourselves, but rather to think of ourselves soberly (Rom. 12:3; Gal. 6:3–4). Sober evaluation should be made not on the basis of how one is doing in comparison with others, but by comparing oneself to scriptural standards. Such standards stress humility, not boosting one’s self esteem.

The Bible never warns us of the alleged danger of undervaluing oneself, but megachurch leaders sound this “warning” all the time.

**False Premise 5: Appeal to felt needs.** Human beings have many needs. Some of those needs are “felt needs,” and some are not. A junkie has a need for a “fix.” This is strongly felt, but it is not a valid need. Today people have many felt needs. People believe that they need fame and fortune. Yet such felt needs can be dangerous. Jesus asked, “For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” (Mark 8:36). Catering to people’s felt needs may actually provide them with the stumblingblocks that may hinder their true spiritual progress.

In John 6 we learn how Jesus dealt with felt needs. Jesus had miracu-
Jesus did not change His message as a result of His losing followers. The people were so impressed that they sought to forcibly take Jesus and make him King (vs. 15).

After that, Jesus walked on water and ended up with His disciples on the other side of the Sea of Galilee. The motivation to have felt needs met was so strong that the people followed Him in small boats. This was an “itch” that He “scratched.” But once at Capernaum Jesus revealed their true designs. He knew that they were seeking Him not because they saw the signs, but because they ate the loaves and had their bellies filled (John 6:26). The “signs” were proof of His messiahship, but they were more interested in bread. The felt need for food is very strong. After all, imagine how much work and labor Jesus could save them.

Jesus knew that they were thinking about bread; i.e., felt needs. He told them not to work for the food that perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life. This led Jesus to proclaim that He is “the bread of life” (John 6:41). But they grumbled and complained, just as Israel grumbled and complained in the wilderness.

It seems that no matter how wonderful a gift God provides, people are still not happy. When a person’s mind is on felt needs, they are never satisfied with God meeting their real needs.

And then Jesus told the people the absolute truth—and it floored them. “No man,” He said in John 6:44, “can come to me except the Father, which hath sent me, draw him, and I will raise him on the last day.” Jesus did not promise bread. He promised resurrection life.

Jesus never creates within our hearts a desire for bread. Our ultimate hope is in the future. Megachurch leaders don’t like to speak of the future. They claim that no one has felt need for “the pie in the sky.” So how did Jesus respond to felt needs?

1. Jesus did not cater to their wishes for bread.
2. He refused to tell them what they wanted to hear.
4. Jesus did not change His message as a result of His losing followers . . . and neither should we.

The Unscriptural Methods of the Megachurch Movement

“Catching fish on their terms means letting your target determine your approach.” So, like the fisherman who has a tackle box loaded with all kinds of lures and baits, the pastor, or church leader, has his own tackle box of tricks and gimmicks to lure the unchurched.

Megachurch leaders argue that the unchurched are not looking for truth. Rather they are looking for relief. This means that in our postmodern world people are more interested in what works for them (in terms of their felt needs and priorities) rather than in what is true.

If we hold to this view and encourage it by our shoddy methods of evangelism, we will encourage people to believe anything that gives them relief. Getting drunk, or getting high, will provide relief—but only for a short time.

“Studying the Bible has no practical results.” Pastors and mission leaders are viewed as problem solvers. They are looking for practical solutions to everyday problems. How-to messages are very popular. Messages on Bible doctrine are viewed as theoretical, erudite, and far above the intellectual abilities of most people.

People in today’s society, we are told, do not really care about Bible truth, or Bible doctrine. So why train leaders in theology and Bible when the goal is to get more people to come to the services and the Bible may actually hinder the process?

Seminaries that have already transitioned into megachurch and church growth thinking major on therapeutic courses. Marriage and family courses are much more popular than Bible courses. The latter will only be attended by students who are forced to take them. Is there any wonder why there is so much Bible ignorance in today’s pulpits?

“The Church must target tribes and nations.” Donald McGavran was one of the first to apply the results of studies by anthropologists and sociologists to church growth. One of the terms that came out of his thinking is “homogeneous unit.” People are less resistant to coming to church if they can go as a group to a church where everyone else is like them. Hence, we have to find the interests and needs of a “target group” by doing studies and surveys.

Megachurch leaders understand the Great Commission to mean that the church should “disciple whole nations” in the sense of ministering to large groups of people. Along with this kind of a philosophy comes the idea of “mass conversions.” Can’t you just see Constantine sprinkling “holy water” on his subjects?

“Come to Jesus and you will find fulfillment.” No one in the Bible ever used this approach, though it is quite popular today. If people are told that by coming to Jesus they will find personal fulfillment and purpose they are being offered something that is not unique to biblical Christianity.

Most religions offer meaning and purpose. The cults promise meaning and purpose. Even fanatical Islam provides purpose (exterminate Americans, Christians, and Jews). It certainly provides motivation (70 virgins in heaven with rose-petal lips). Radical Islam provides focus and direction (give your life to slaying the infidels). It also will provide satisfaction (you will be satisfied when you realize that you have terrorized millions of people all over the world).

“You’ve got to be a management guru.” Fortune magazine is for CEOs, investors, and entrepreneurs. It recently featured several articles on megachurch leaders. (Now why would a publication targeting CEOs, investors, and entrepreneurs talk about megachurch leaders?). In one article, author Marc Gunther, writes about Rick Warren: “America’s new superstar pastor wants to re-brand evangelical Christianity. He’s got the management genius to do it.” Gunther cites a businessman who
said: “Forget any opinions you have about religion and just look at the guy as a CEO, and you’ve got to be impressed.”

The Great Dangers of the Megachurch Movement

The three greatest dangers that we face from the MCM are its sublety, its successfulness, and its stated intentions. The old liberalism of the early 20th century viciously attacked key doctrines of the Christian faith and even ridiculed them. The MCM, on the other hand, basically avoids them. Whereas the old liberalism attacked the idea of biblical conversion, the MCM avoids biblical conversion. Whereas the old liberalism ridiculed the new birth, the MCM avoids it. It is this sublety that makes it hard for many Christians to see the dangers of the MCM. On the surface it appears that nothing is being denied. People are led to believe that the message is the same, and that it is just the method of getting the same message across that is different.

But in addition to its sublety there is its successfulness. If your goal is numbers, the MCM has been successful. The movement has some really large churches to boast over. Scriptural warnings regarding the MCM, therefore, fall on deaf ears. If a man consistently catches twelve-pound bass, he is not very likely to want instructions about bass fishing from someone who only catches two-pounders.

The stated intentions of the MCM are grandiose. Who can argue with healing the sick and feeding the hungry? And aren’t those church leaders who have established viable relationships with national leaders in third world countries so that “ministry” can be facilitated to be admired?

Leadership Network recently featured a report entitled “Innovation 2007 Showcases New Directions in North American Churches.” It reported on four primary sections of its new strategy. It spoke about “the huge societal needs and challenges to which the church must respond. Quick, at-a-glance statistics and summaries reveal, for example, startling facts on poverty, AIDS, and literacy—as well as telling trends in church attendance, giving, and pastors’ use of their time” (www.leadnet.org/news_02132007.asp). Big plans to meet the needs of the suffering multitudes are hard to argue against.

Where is the MCM taking us? Into the emerging church movement, a movement characterized by an extremely flexible approach to the Bible and Bible doctrine. It seeks to bring together the diverse traditions and beliefs of a broad spectrum of Christians while at the same time seeking to remain orthodox. Emerging church leader Brian D. McLaren has written several books. In this author’s opinion the two most notorious are A New Kind of Christian and McLaren’s magnum opus entitled A Generous Orthodoxy: Why I Am a Missional, Evangelical, Post/Protestant, Liberal/Conservative, Mystical/Poetic, Biblical, Charismatic/Contemplative, Fundamentalist/Calvinist, Anabaptist/Anglican, Methodist, Catholic, Green, Incarnational, Depressed-yet-Hopeful, Emergent, Unfinished Christian.

In chapter two, McLaren speaks of the “Seven Jesuses” and explains that his understanding of who Jesus really is has been enhanced by the different perspectives taught by different Christian groups. But we wonder how generous you can get and still be orthodox. We only want one Jesus—the real One! McLaren’s “generous orthodoxy” is MEGAnonsense. This can be seen in his attempt to fit narrow Calvinism into his generous scheme. The “L” in “Limited Atonement” becomes “Limitless Reconciliation.” I doubt if Calvinists would like McLaren’s stretch.

The Prophetic Fulfillments of the Megachurch Movement

In Revelation 17 we are presented with “the great (mega) whore,” and according to verse 3 she is riding on a “scarlet coloured beast, full of names of blasphemy.” She is “the mother of harlots” and the source (“mother”) of spiritual harlotry. Here we have an alliance of apostate religion and world government. An important question, therefore, is: Do we see any indication today of the formation of this alliance?

In his four-part “Religion and World Government,” Dr. Dennis Cuddy writes: “There have been a number of religious leaders over the years who have advocated world government” (www.newswithviews.com/Cuddy/dennis78.htm).

In this provocative study, Cuddy takes the reader from the Federal Council of Churches, co-founded by Walter Rauschenbusch (aka “the father of the social gospel), which later morphed into the “socialist-dominated World Council of Churches,” to the dramatic changes of the Roman Catholic Church emanating from Vatican II and its embracing of Islam and other non-Christian religions, as articulated in Nostra Aetate (“In Our Time”).

The developing world socialist government is seeking to elevate a power elite that will deftly guide the world into an era of peace and solidarity, strengthened by an invisible government, directed by a worldwide religious entity. Cuddy quotes Martin Erdmann who wrote, “the principal method chosen by the Group to bring about that ‘organic union of nations in commonwealth embracing the whole world’ was to persuade the general public by various means of mass communication, and in particulars through the activities of the churches, to accept a world federation ‘as the only final basis of freedom and enduring peace.’”

The characteristic beliefs of the MCM, along with its attendant downplaying of Bible truth, can easily lead one to believe that the Beast of Revelation 17 is being deftly guided by the megachurch movement.

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