

A Clash Of Views Between Bavinck and The Church Growth Movement Regarding Yearning for Numerical Growth

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This paper compares and analyzes the difference between Herman Bavinck(1854~1921)'s view and the view of the Church Growth Movement which is represented by Donald A. McGavran(1897~1990), C. Peter Wagner(1930~), and Winfield C. Arn(1923~) regarding 'yearning for numerical growth'. Through this comparative analysis, it deals with whether desiring for numerical growth can be regarded as an essence of the church. The limit of Kevin DeYoung, David Wells, John MacArthur, Michael Horton, etc. who have criticized theology of church growth from Reformed perspective, exists in the fact that although they have criticized it mainly from the perspective of harmful influence of modernism and postmodernism on today's church, they have not heavily treated the problem of it within ecclesiology. In order to overcome this limit, this paper compares the view of the church growth scholars (especially McGavran) on numerical growth with that of Bavinck on the basis of their ecclesiolo-

gies and comparatively evaluates the CGM's exegesis of Scripture and that of Bavinck regarding whether longing for numerical growth belongs to the essence of the church. In the final part, it adds practical meaning of this issue by analyzing contemporary situation of Korean Church.

Key Words: Bavinck, CGM (Church Growth Movement), McGavran, numerical growth, ecclesiology, essence of the church.

I. INTRODUCTION

In the ecclesiology of the Church Growth Movement,¹⁾ “yearning for numerical growth”²⁾ is “an essential characteristic of the true church”³⁾ for the reason that the essence of the church is more institutional than spiritual.⁴⁾ This ecclesiology of the CGM clashes with that of Herman Bavinck with regard

1) Hereafter, CGM

2) “Yearning for numerical growth” is the representative and core expression of the CGM's mind. For instance, in his masterpiece *Understanding Church Growth* McGavran says: “God yearns for the salvation of all his children; God himself desires that multitudes be reconciled to himself in the Church of Christ.” See Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, ed. C. Peter Wagner, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 30, 46.

3) An essential characteristic is understood to be a necessary, but non-trivial characteristic of a thing, which cannot lose this property as long as it exists. See Hans Dieter Betz, Don S. Browning, Bernd Janowski, and Eberhard Jüngel, ed., *Religion Past & Present: Encyclopedia of Theology and Religion*, 4th ed. (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 4:560. Thus, “an essential characteristic of the true church” is a necessary and existential characteristic of the true church without which the church cannot be considered as the true church.

4) The CGM does not say that the church is purely institutional, but that the church is more institutional than spiritual. See McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 63.

to the essence⁵⁾ of the true church.⁶⁾ Above all, true church's essence is originally spiritual to Bavinck. This conviction implies that desiring for numerical growth cannot be essential in his ecclesiology. Here, the question arises whether longing for numerical growth is included in the essential characteristics of the true church.

Since the 1970s, the CGM, which yearns for explosive numerical growth,⁷⁾ has had a considerable influence on innu-

5) Essence is the whatness of a being, which makes the being precisely what it is; for example, the essence of Peter, Paul, and John is their humanity. See Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1985), 105.

6) In a word, the essence of the true church is the people of God. The two persons, Donald A. McGavran and Herman Bavinck, who will be mainly treated in this paper, agree with this definition, but in concrete understanding about the essence of the true church, their thought are clearly divided; Bavinck considers the people of God as 'true believers', while McGavran considers the people of God as 'multitudes of people'. See Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003), 4:281; McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 28.

7) In the concept of the CGM, 'numerical growth' originally did not mean 'gradual growth', but 'explosive growth'. Inasmuch as McGavran considered yearning for numerical growth as faithfulness to God, he accentuated numerical growth as possible as he could by using diverse expressions, such as "maximum finding", "multitudes of people", "tremendous increase", "fantastic increase," and "numerous as the sands of the sea." See McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 7, 19-22, 28, 30, 53, 294; Paul Benjamin, *The Growing Congregation* (Lincoln, IL: Lincoln Christian College Press, 1972), 32. However, some of the CGM's leaders recently accommodate the concept of 'gradual growth' after having been confronted with many criticisms. See Gary L. McIntosh, *Biblical Church Growth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003), 17.

merable churches throughout the world.⁸⁾ Leaders of this group argue that the Lord wants his sheep found; thus their ecclesial purpose is to find, not to search.⁹⁾ Their motto is: quality goes hand in hand with quantity.¹⁰⁾ In order to raise the importance of the numerical growth as one of the ecclesial essence, they have stressed the institutional aspects of the church, such as administration, statistics, and leadership.¹¹⁾ When they have been confronted with diverse oppositions, they have persistently tried to settle yearning for numerical growth as an essential characteristic of the church. Thus, the CGM's effort has exposed a clearer line. They have argued that 'yearning for numerical growth' is included in the marks and attributes of the true church.

These arguments of the CGM regarding the essentiality of the church can be epitomized into three parts.

First, all the leaders of the CGM insist that desiring for numerical growth is an essential characteristic of the church since

8) For example, the mega-church movement was at least partially influenced by the CGM through such figures as Bill Hybels of Willowcreek Community Church. It pays close attention to "seekers" and their needs—looking more to the business world than to social science as a source of methods. More recently, in response to the changing needs of a new generation expressed by such groups as Emergent Church, church growth methods are again being rethought. See Betz, Browning, Janowski, and Jüngel, ed., *Religion Past & Present: Encyclopedia of Theology and Religion*, 3:96.

9) Donald A. McGavran and George G. Hunter III, *Church Growth: Strategies That Work* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1980), 19; Eddie Gibbs, *I Believe in Church Growth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 179.

10) McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 6; C. Peter Wagner, *Church Growth: State of the Art*, ed. Winfield C. Arn and Elmer Towns (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1986), 34.

11) Donald A. McGavran and Winfield C. Arn, *Ten Steps for Church Growth* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1977), 61–63, 110.

they perceive that God puts the highest priority on bringing humans into relationship with Jesus Christ.¹²⁾ For “the more found, the better pleased is God.”¹³⁾ Second, Charles Edward van Engen as well as Donald A. McGavran, considers longing for numerical growth as a mark of the true church.¹⁴⁾ Third, McGavran and Peter Wagner call the leaders of the CGM, apostles.¹⁵⁾

Unlike the CGM’s view, Bavinck says, the essence of the church is originally spiritual.¹⁶⁾ This means that the essence of the church is true believers fellowshiping with Christ and receiving his benefits through the Holy Spirit and faith.¹⁷⁾ On this spiritual essence of the church, yearning for numerical growth,

12) McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 40; Winfield C. Arn, *The Pastor’s Church Growth Handbook* (Pasadena, CA: Church Growth Press, 1984), 13; Paul Benjamin, *The Growing Congregation*, 71; C. Wayne Zunkel, *Church Growth Under Fire* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1987), 121.

13) McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 21.

14) Engen, *The Growth of the True Church: An Analysis of the Ecclesiology of Church Growth Theory*, 461; Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), 46.

15) McGavran and Hunter, *Church Growth: Strategies That Work*, 19; C. Peter Wagner, “My Pilgrimage in Mission,” in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 23, no. 4 (1999): 164.

16) Not until the sixteenth century was a fundamentally different concept of the church posited by the Reformation as an alternative to that of Rome. Luther and Calvin commonly distinguished between an invisible church and a visible church in order to talk about the spiritual characteristic against Roman Catholics, that the essence of the church is put on the invisible thing, namely, on the fellowship with Christ and his benefits through the Holy Spirit and faith. And the Reformed identified the essence of the church much less with its institutional aspects than the Lutherans. See Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:275, 287, 291. Also, see John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1960), 2:1015.

17) Bavinck argues: “Those who do not have an authentic faith may externally belong to the church; they do not make up its essential character; though they are in the church, they are not the church; the essence of the church consists in believers alone.” See Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:298, 307.

which is closely connected to the institutional aspect of the church, can hardly be grounded. Also, to Bavinck, desiring for numerical growth cannot be one of the essential characteristics of the true church for it is not spiritually oriented.

For the contemporary Reformed critics of the CGM who are in line with Bavinck's ecclesiology, the CGM's argument – longing for numerical growth is an essential characteristic of the true church – perverts the essential concept of the church.¹⁸⁾ Their criticisms of the CGM's ecclesiology could be compacted into three categories.

First, Kevin DeYoung and David Wells indicate that the ecclesiology of the CGM, which came from the mission fields, does not appropriately explain the essence of the church. It is not Biblical and it is too situationally inclined.¹⁹⁾ Second, John MacArthur and Michael Horton argue that the CGM, which sticks to desiring for numerical growth, deteriorates the essence of God's Word and Christian doctrine in order to accommodate to non-Christians and take them into the church.²⁰⁾ Lastly, according to Os Guinness and Gary Gilley, the CGM

18) For instance, David Wells states: "The idea that there is a religious market is not new nor is the seeker churches' understanding about how the church grows. This is really updated version of Donald McGavran's theory from the mission field, now adapted to the home front... It is true that the church is in the marketplace of ideas, products, and experiences but to play the rules of this marketplace is to invite disaster." See David F. Wells, *Above All Earthly Powers: Christ in a Post-modern World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 288–93.

19) Kevin DeYoung, *Why We Love the Church* (Chicago: Moody Pub, 2009), 137; Wells, *Above All Earthly Powers: Christ in a Postmodern World*, 288.

20) John MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel: When the Church Becomes like the World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1993), 78; Michael Scott Horton, *Christless Christianity: The Alternative Gospel of the American Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008), 56.

brings about the misuse of the institution and the office of the church due to their misconceptions of the essential attributes of the church.²¹⁾

The arguments of both the CGM and its critics regarding the essentiality of the church can be relegated to one question: “is yearning for numerical growth an essential characteristic of the true church?” Until now, most critics of the CGM mainly treated the thoughts of the CGM as one of the representative cases of the harmful influence of modernism and postmodernism affecting today’s church to be more secular and idolatrous. But, they did not profoundly perceive the relation between yearning for numerical growth and the essentiality of the true church within ecclesiology. For example, although David F. Wells, a well-known critic of the CGM, treats the relation of the two in his books, he does not heavily elaborate it within ecclesiology.²²⁾ However, in order to achieve an authentic answer to the above question, concrete ecclesiological approaches regarding the relationship between longing for numerical growth and the essence of the church are certainly necessary. This paper begins with this critical view and desires

21) Os Guinness, *Dining with the Devil: The Megachurch Movement Flirts with Modernity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1993), 13–14; Gary E. Gilley, *This Little Church Went to Market* (Darlington, UK: Evangelical Press, 2005), 134.

22) In the following his books, Wells mainly treats the harmful influences of modernism and postmodernism on today’s church, while he does not deal with ecclesiology of the CGM itself heavily. His book’s titles say about this: *Above All Earthly Powers: Christ in a Postmodern World* (2005), *The Courage to Be Protestant: Truth-Lovers, Marketers, and Emergents in the Postmodern World* (2008), *No Place for Truth, or, Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (1993), *Losing our Virtue: Why the Church Must Recover its Moral Vision* (1998).

to serve believers in grasping a precise ecclesiological answer to whether yearning for numerical growth is an essential characteristic of the true church.

The aim of this paper is to prove that yearning for numerical growth is not an element of the essential character of the true church because the essence of the church is originally spiritual, the mark of the true church is only God's Word including baptism and the Eucharist, and all the attributes of the true church are also spiritual.

In order to research the problem effectively, I will primarily confine this discussion to comparing and analyzing the ecclesiological assertions of Donald A. McGavran and Herman Bavinck regarding these themes.²³⁾ McGavran was a pioneer of the CGM,²⁴⁾ and gave it an ecclesiological basis. He taught people and wrote many of his books with fellow leaders of the CGM, such as Peter Wagner and Winfield Arn, who still have a broad impact on today's church.²⁵⁾ Bavinck is known for his works such as *Reformed Dogmatics* that deepened Reformed theology and gave Reformed theologians clear criteria to com-

23) Therefore, these books are the primary sources: McGavran's *Understanding Church Growth* (1990) (This book is considered as the text book of the theology and ecclesiology of the CGM), McGavran's *Bridges of God* (1955), McGavran and Arn's *Ten Steps for Church Growth* (1977), etc.; Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics* (2003).

24) Erwin Fahlbusch, Jan Milic Lochman, John Mbiti, Jaroslav Pelikan, and Lukas Vischer, ed. *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 1:538.

25) For example, Winfield C. Arn says: "I found that Dr. Donald McGavran and C. Peter Wagner were team-teaching a course applying world principles of Church Growth to the American scene. I immediately became a part of that group." See McGavran and Arn, *Ten Steps for Church Growth*, 12.

prehend much of the contemporary phenomena of the church. Specifically, Bavinck's ecclesiological perspective, which already provided a theological basis for the above mentioned Reformed critics of the CGM, will help believers evaluate the ecclesiology of McGavran and the CGM. Additionally, I will focus on their understanding of scriptural evidences about the essence of the church because the problem is intimately connected with the exegesis of Scripture, and because both McGavran and Bavinck appeal to texts in Scripture as the foremost authority for their claims.

II. DOES YEARNING FOR NUMERICAL GROWTH HAVE ITS GROUNDS ON THE ESSENCE OF THE CHURCH?

The CGM must hold that the essence of the church, as the basis of yearning for numerical growth, is more institutional than spiritual for the legitimacy and realization of their theory. In contrast to the CGM, Bavinck believes the essence of the church is spiritual, and the institutional aspect of the church merely supports the spiritual aspect of the church. Thus, there is no place to settle the issue of desiring for numerical growth as the essence of the church. Therefore, clarifying the essence of the church will provide a significant clue to comprehending the ecclesiological characteristic of longing for numerical growth. For these reasons, I will display and compare the thoughts of the CGM and Bavinck regarding whether yearning for numerical growth has its foundation on the essence of the

church. Next, I will aim to answer the question by assessing their interpretation of the texts in Scripture regarding the essence of the church and desiring for numerical growth.

1. What Grounds Are There for Yearning for Numerical Growth?

In order to determine whether desiring for numerical growth is included in the essence of the church, we must first determine the grounds of longing for numerical growth. Are there grounds for considering it as the essence of the church?

For the CGM, yearning for numerical growth has the essence of the church as its foundation because the essence of the church is more institutional than spiritual. They argue that while the word “spiritual” is too abstract to express its meaning, the word “institutional” gives believers concreteness about the concept of the church and the grounds to fulfill its commission.²⁶⁾ This tendency of the CGM also displays that the essence of the church exists in the “doing” of the church, rather than in the “being” of the church.²⁷⁾ Thus, they place an emphasis on installing new plans and new systems to figure out the diverse situation of many churches, and count members of local churches systematically. The final aim of these actions is for the church to grow numerically, which is directly connected with the accomplishment of God’s will and his glory.²⁸⁾

26) For example, McGavran and Arn contend: “The Body of Christ—the church—is a concrete entity; and the church is the normal Body of Christ.” They also argue that the Body needs to be described accurately and scientifically in its various parts to extend and perfect the normal Body of Christ, which means numerical growth.” See McGavran and Arn, *Ten Steps for Church Growth*, 61–63.

27) McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 32.

28) McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 21–22.

Specifically, when they argue that the church is more institutional, they have the conviction that if people are first connected and settled in the institutional church without barriers, it is highly possible for them to become true believers. For instance, the CGM has two main principles: the homogenous unit principle and understanding the mechanism of conversion. The former means that people like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers; the latter means that the chief barrier to conversion is sociological, and not theological. When combining the two principles, the core thoughts of the CGM are revealed: “Once the barriers to conversion were removed, such as requiring a person to cross the lines of race, class, language, or education, then conversion would happen naturally.”²⁹⁾ With this conviction, the CGM argues that desiring for numerical growth takes its roots in the essence of the church, especially in the institutional essence of the church.

In contrast to the CGM’s view, for Bavinck, the essence of the church is spiritual. This means that the essence of the church is the communion of the saints, which does not include those who do not have an authentic faith (although non-Christians may still externally belong to the church).³⁰⁾ Therefore, when the church is called “the church”, “the whole [the church] is called after the part [true believers].”³¹⁾ In any case, the church is, and unchangeably remains, “the gathered company of true

29) Wells, *Above All Earthly Powers*, 288–93; Donald A. McGavran, *The Bridges of God* (London, UK: World Dominion Press, 1955), 8–10.

30) Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:298.

31) Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:303.

Christ-believers.”³²⁾ This is due to the fact that the church is “a realization of election,” which is the “election in Christ to calling, regeneration, faith, justification, sanctification, and glorification (Rom. 8:28).”³³⁾ Believers share these spiritual and essential benefits from the Holy Spirit all together through faith. Therefore, Bavinck’s primary concerns about the church are not focused on the institutional aspect of the church or numerical growth, but on the spiritual essence of the church.

For example, Bavinck is relatively silent on the issue of the numerical growth of the church. Why? Is it because his era and his country already had so many believers and churches? No. It is because he thinks that numerical growth is easy to play the role of a fake mark of the true church.³⁴⁾ When he occasionally expresses his feelings on the church of his generation, he feels gloomy, not because the Reformed churches in the Netherlands and in the whole world is weak in number,³⁵⁾ but because the truth and doctrine of Scripture erode.³⁶⁾ Rather, in *Reformed Dogmatics*, he criticizes “Roman Catholic Christians look for an essential mark of the true church [catholicity]” in numerical power of their members.³⁷⁾ While finishing the chapter ‘Essence of the Church,’ he says:

The infallibility of the church consists in the fact that Christ, as king of his church, will see to it that on earth there will al-

32) Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:303.

33) Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:298.

34) Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:322.

35) Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:325.

36) Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:437.

37) Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:322.

ways be a gathering of believers, however small and unimpressive it may be, which confesses his name and finds all its salvation in him.³⁸⁾

In sum, the necessity of evangelism could be a common denominator between the CGM and Bavinck to some degree, while the dissimilarity is significant for the following reasons. For the CGM, yearning for numerical growth has its grounds in the essence of the church in that the church is more institutional; for Bavinck, it cannot have its grounds there in that the essence of the church is spiritual.³⁹⁾ The former focuses on “doing,” and the commission of the church; the latter focuses on “being,” and the true believers. The former thinks that people who are connected to the institutional church are apt to become true believers; the latter thinks that their conversion definitely depends on God and that there are hypocrites in the institutional church who cannot define the true character of the church.⁴⁰⁾ The former wants to pursue the numerical growth of the church to the fullest by using new plans, new systems, and calculations based on the institution of the church; the latter wants to hold to the identity of the church that is based on the communion and fellowship of true believers to the fullest extent. This keen conflict between the two brings

38) Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:324–25.

39) Admittedly, for Bavinck, the church also has an institutional aspect, which, however, only supports the spiritual aspects, especially by means of grace, namely, the pure administration of the Word and the sacrament (baptism and the Eucharist). Here, his stressing point is on the supporting role of the institution of the church, which, however, is also the important aspect of the church. See Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:295, 305, 373.

40) Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:306.

us to question what Scripture says about this.

2. Does Yearning for Numerical Growth Have Biblical Foundation Regarding the Institutional Aspect of the Church?

Now, the point of the controversy can be narrowed down to whether yearning for numerical growth has biblical foundation regarding the institutional aspect of the church. Let us scrutinize the interpretations of McGavran and Bavinck about scriptural texts regarding this question. It will greatly help in getting an answer to this question.

In order to support his argument, McGavran says that although God was displeased with King David for taking a census of the people (2 Sam. 24:1–10), God himself commanded a precise numbering in Num. 1:2–3.⁴¹⁾ He, citing and explaining verses such as Acts 1:15; 2:41, Matt. 16:18,⁴²⁾ Gen. 12:2,⁴³⁾ repeatedly argues that the Lord commanded the counting of his people, giving institutional grounds for the church (especially the offices of the church), and to expect the explosive numerical growth of the church. Thus, leaders and believers of the church must yearn for an explosive numerical growth of the church. The numbers in the Acts of the Apostles, such as 120, 3000, and 5000, are necessary models for recording the numbers of people attending a service of the church.⁴⁴⁾ Through these interpretations, McGavran argues that desiring for nu-

41) McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 67–68.

42) McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 8.

43) McGavran and Arn, *Ten Steps for Church Growth*, 106–7.

44) McGavran and Arn, *How to Grow a Church*, 17–18.

merical growth has strong biblical basis with regard to the institutional aspect of the church.⁴⁵⁾

On the contrary, for Bavinck, the data which appear in Scripture, especially in the Acts of the Apostles, were not given as a model for explosive numerical growth and calculation. Rather, they display an exceptional work of the Holy Spirit at the birth of the church in New Testament times.⁴⁶⁾ Bavinck also says: “The earthly prosperity of the church is always temporary, alternates with persecution and oppression, and can equally well be advanced against the truth of the church (Matt. 5:10; 16:24, John 16:33; Acts 14:22; 2 Tim. 3:12).”⁴⁷⁾

When assessing these two interpretations, although McGavran’s interpretation has dynamic aspects, Bavinck’s interpretation about the texts is more accurate than McGavran’s. This is because the effect of evangelism and the number of church members are variable as Bavinck says. For example, although thousands of people are connected to the church through Peter’s preaching, no one came back from Stephen’s preaching. As for Peter’s case, it was rather a special occasion that happened by the Lord’s special plan and was led by the Holy Spirit. Generalizing Peter’s case, and considering the Pentecost event as a repeated occurrence, is not supported by Scripture. However, McGavran makes the mistake of a hasty generalization, especially in the texts regarding numbers (120, 3000, 5000, etc).

How about the case of King David and the cases in Numbers?

45) McGavran and Arn, *How to Grow a Church*, 22

46) Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:340.

47) Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:309.

The case of King David's census of the people was a rather general case, whereas the examples in Numbers are the specific ones. This is because, for the former, a census of the people started from David's own mind, but for the latter, from God's will and special plan was it initiated. Specifically, there was no plan to make Israel grow numerically in the two censuses in Numbers; God's plan was to prepare Israel for God's war (Num 1:3). Admittedly, McGavran says that the important part is the motive for numbering. However, Scripture says that even sincere believers can be easily corrupted by secular ambition.

Therefore, we can say that McGavran's contention that yearning for numerical growth has its grounds on the institutional essence of the church has a fragile biblical basis.⁴⁸⁾

48) Regarding a biblical basis of Bavinck's argument that the essence of the church is spiritual and is the communion of true believers which does not contain those who do not have a genuine faith, especially see Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:298. Here Bavinck states with an accurate interpretation of biblical texts: "[T]here is no doubt that according to Scripture the characteristic essence of the church lies in the fact that it is the people of God. For the church is a realization of election, and the latter is election in Christ to calling, justification, and glorification (Rom. 8:28), to being conformed to the image of God's Son (8:29), to holiness and blessedness (Eph. 1:4ff.). The blessings granted to the church are primarily internal and spiritual in character and consist in calling and regeneration, in faith and justification, in sanctification and glorification. They are the goods of the kingdom of heaven, benefits of the covenant of grace, promises for this life and, above all, for the life to come. On these grounds, the church is the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:27; Eph. 5:23; Col. 1:18)....The members of the church are called branches of the vine (John 15), living stones (1 Pet. 2:5), the elect, the called, believers, beloved, brothers and sisters, children of God and so forth. By contrast, those who are not really such are viewed in Scripture as chaff (Matt. 3:12), weeds among the wheat (13:25, 38), bad fish in the net (13:47), people without a wedding garment at the wedding (22:11), called but not chosen (22:14), bad branches in the vine (John 15:2), non-Israel though descended from Israel (Rom. 2:28; 9:6), evildoers who have to be put away (1 Cor. 5:2), vessels of dishonor (2 Tim. 2:20), such "who went out from us because they were not of us" (1 John 2:19), and so forth. All this makes it incontrovertible that in its essence the church is a gathering of true believers. Those who do not have an authentic faith may externally belong to the church; they do not make up its essential character. Though they are in the church, they are not the church...."

III. IS YEARNING FOR NUMERICAL GROWTH AN ESSENTIAL CHARACTERISTIC OF THE TRUE CHURCH?

Given the belief that yearning for numerical growth has its grounds in the essence of the church, main leaders of the CGM argue that desiring for numerical growth is an element of the essential character of the true church. It is a mark of the true church or an attribute of the church, namely, apostolicity. However, Bavinck asserts that the mark of the true church is Scripture alone, and all the attributes of the true church aim to unite the church spiritually.⁴⁹⁾ Here, the question arises whether longing for numerical growth is an essential characteristic of the true church. To answer to this question, first, I will compare the assertions of the CGM to Bavinck's with a focus on their views of the marks and apostolicity of the church. Second, I will trace whether yearning for numerical growth is an essential characteristic of the true church from a general perspective, to help a comprehensive understanding of this issue. Lastly, I will investigate the CGM's interpretation of the main texts of Scripture to grasp a biblical answer. Here, I will add my interpretation of Scripture and my understanding of the situation of today's church.

1. Is Yearning for Numerical Growth a Mark of the True Church?

The CGM does not stop at stressing the institution of the church. They have more elaborately tried to upgrade desiring for numerical growth into a mark of the true church. Repre-

49) Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:319-20.

sentatively, McGavran considers it as a mark of the true church:

The congregation which is not engaged in proclaiming Christ to men and persuading them to become His disciples and responsible members of His church may be a religious club, but it is not the Body of Jesus Christ. His Body is filled with His Spirit and engaged in finding lost men.⁵⁰⁾

McGavran's argument is based on his view of God's will; he thinks that God's will does not stop at searching for his people, but it proceeds to harvesting (finding) his people, namely, to numerical growth. Thus, for him, the numerical growth of the church is the final goal of proclaiming and nurturing.⁵¹⁾ Therefore, he is saying that the church, which does not have a long-term for numerical growth, is not the body of Jesus Christ.⁵²⁾ This argument means that yearning for numerical growth is a mark of the true church.⁵³⁾

In contrast to this argument, Bavinck contends that the mark

50) Herein lies the important aspect. In order to avoid criticism of the CGM, Peter Wagner, who is a successor of McGavran in the CGM, eliminated this part and added the aggressive contents about the critics of the CGM. However, the main flow of the book is identical. See Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), 46; McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (1990), 25.

51) McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (1990), 29.

52) The CGM often considers yearning for numerical growth as a criterion of "discerning the body," that is, as a mark of the true church, which is directly related to all the essential characteristics of the church. Specifically, McGavran and Arn talks about "discerning the body" as follows: "Christians must be concerned with the Body, with winning men to Christ ... and multiplying congregations; if we fail in this, then one day there will be no Body." See McGavran and Arn, *Then Steps for Church Growth*, 62.

53) This argument is more elaborately settled by Van Engen, one of the theologians of the CGM. See Engen, *Growth of the True Church*, 322.

of the true church is Scripture alone, in which baptism and the Eucharist (and discipline) are included.⁵⁴⁾ This contention means that Scripture is the sole criterion that is placed on the church, and it means that every believer can evaluate the church through Scripture alone, the only canon. Therefore, to consider desiring for numerical growth as a mark of the true church can never be permissible.

This conflict of views between the CGM and Bavinck regarding the marks of the true church is the most significant conflict, from Bavinck's standpoint. This is because for Bavinck, if the CGM took the right to claim that yearning for numerical growth is a mark of the true church, it would be the same thing as taking the authority of Scripture which is the sole mark of the true church. Here we need to think of the fact that in Protestant theology, the marks of the true church even have a higher position than the church because the marks are the constant criterion to judge all churches as true or false. Therefore, it is vulnerable that desiring for numerical growth, which is various, can be a mark of the true church. Scripture alone is proper for the complete and unchangeable criterion, the mark. Now, we also need to think that, if it happened to raise longing for numerical growth to Scripture as another mark, eventually, it would occupy a more superior position than Scripture. Additionally, even if the CGM does it unintentionally, its result would undermine the authority of Scripture.⁵⁵⁾ For these rea-

54) Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:312.

55) Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:469.

sons, the argument of the critics of the CGM, such as MacArthur and Horton, indicates the damage of the authority of Scripture, truth, and Christian doctrine by the CGM.⁵⁶⁾

2. Is Yearning for Numerical Growth a Nucleus of Apostolicity?

The CGM has tried to place yearning for numerical growth as the essence of the church through calling their top leaders, “apostles.” In Protestant theology, the core of apostolicity does not generally exist in the succession of places and persons, but in the succession of Scripture and Christian doctrine. However, Peter Wagner, who is the main successor of McGavran, argues that top leaders who pilot their movement need to be called apostles. He is not talking about the word “apostolic,” but “apostle.”⁵⁷⁾ McGavran also displays this view. He argues: “God meets minister, as he met John Wesley, and they become apostles. He invades the hearts of lay people, as he did that of John R. Mott, and they spend entire lifetimes proclaiming Christ and multiplying churches.”⁵⁸⁾ In order to confirm the authority of the CGM and their leaders, the attempt to relate desiring for numerical growth to the church’s apostolicity was

56) MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel: When the Church Becomes like the World*, 78; Horton, *Christless Christianity*, 76.

57) For example, Wagner says: “It is a fact that thousands of leaders of the New Apostolic Reformation here in our nation and in virtually every part of the world, some of them extraordinary leaders and mega-church pastors, find the traditional educational system of seminaries and Bible schools totally inaccessible. The Wagner Leadership Institute will have no academic requirements for entrance into any of its programs; the faculty will be successful and effective “apostles,” prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers.” See Wagner, “My pilgrimage in mission,” in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 23, no. 4 (1999): 164.

58) McGavran and Hunter, *Church Growth: Strategies That Work*, 19.

theologically elaborated by Arthur F. Glasser.⁵⁹⁾

From the perspective of Bavinck's ecclesiology, this is a serious problem not just because McGavran, Wagner, and Glasser do not acknowledge the discontinuation of the office called "apostle," but also because they bring hierarchical concepts to church office, as the Roman Catholics do. For Bavinck, the roles of apostle are given to the church, not to particular individuals.⁶⁰⁾ Moreover, apostolicity is chiefly connected with Scripture and the doctrine of the church, in that the most important role of apostles was the writing of Scripture.⁶¹⁾ For this reason, apostles were placed at the foundation of the church. Thus the apostles as the founders of Scripture and Christian doctrine are different from leaders of the CGM as pursuers of numerical growth.

Just as Roman Catholicism has tried to support the authority of the Pope and its institutional church by using apostolicity, so the CGM has tried to support the authority of their leaders and churches by using it to pursue numerical growth. This attempt of the CGM is hugely problematic because in Protestantism, apostolicity is originally not the succession of persons and places, but the succession of Scripture and doctrine, and because the CGM uses apostolicity to pursue numerical growth

59) In his review article, "Church Growth and Theology," in McGavran's festschrift, *God, Man and Church Growth*, Glasser argues: "The CGM is seeking to hold high the goal of planting churches that manifest the apostolic mark; only the emergence of a fully apostolic church marks the completion of the missionary task in a country." See A. R. Tippet, ed. *God, Man and Church Growth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1973), 63.

60) Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:340.

61) Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:324.

on flimsy Biblical grounding. Additionally, as Guinness and Gilley indicate, the CGM's misunderstanding of apostolicity instigates misuse of the church's office and institution.⁶²⁾ Therefore, we can say that yearning for numerical growth is not a core of apostolicity, and we need to keep it in mind that the core of apostolicity exists in the connection among the church, Scripture, and Christian doctrine.

3. Is It Proper to Consider Yearning for Numerical Growth as an Essential Characteristic of the True Church?

Now, let us consider whether yearning for numerical growth is an essential characteristic of the church from a general perspective, that covers the common ideas of all the leaders of the CGM and the critics of the CGM.

Although each of the leaders of the CGM has diversely accentuated points about desiring for numerical growth, all of them consider it an essential characteristic of the church. They claim that numerical growth links up with the increase of true believers after a lengthy time of preaching and discipleship training.⁶³⁾ Thus, they strongly insist that, as for the essence of the church, quantity has the same significance as quality. Furthermore, they argue that if local churches follow their theology and methodology, these churches could certainly experience explosive numerical growth, except in very rare cases. Therefore,

62) Guinness, *Dining with the Devil*, 13–14; Gilley, *This Little Church Went to Market*, 134.

63) McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 6; Wagner, *Church Growth: State of the Art*, 119.

they assert that longing for numerical growth, and experiencing real growth, are just problems of a pragmatic faith.⁶⁴⁾

The critics of the CGM argue that their results have proven to bear poor fruit because in reality, less and less church members are able to answer simple questions about salvation.⁶⁵⁾ In other words, they indicate a vainness in the CGM's assertion that quality goes hand in hand with quantity. According to Ralph, H. Elliot, the most dangerous fact of the CGM is that their method gains success to some degree, in many cases, by means of secular methods.⁶⁶⁾

Counterattacks to the Reformed critics by the CGM are vigorous. First, the CGM argues that the Reformed pessimistic remnant theology is proper to rare cases alone. The minority, if it is to be creative, must not only generate productive ideas, but convert the majority to them and the church must grow.⁶⁷⁾ Second, the critics of the CGM are close to rationalism without "doing."⁶⁸⁾ Lastly, they assert that the critics of the CGM do not show ardor towards evangelism and remain only within their own denominations and churches. The Reformed only stress the sovereignty of God without stressing human responsibilities.⁶⁹⁾

There are re-counterattacks from the critics of the CGM. First, the remnant theology is not pessimism, but boldness to confront the reality, because it is not to see the reality as one

64) McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 284.

65) Wells, *Above All Earthly Pow'rs*, 303.

66) Ralph H. Elliott, "Dangers of the Church Growth Movement: Is It Possible to Maintain our Identity as the Church and Be a 'Successful' Institution at the Same Time?" *Christian Century* 98, no. 25 (August 1981), 801.

67) McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 121-22.

68) McGavran and Arn, *Ten Steps for Church Growth*, 22.

69) McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 119-20.

wants, but to see it as it is.⁷⁰⁾ Second, the church has to know what it is before it can know what it should do; acting must be a natural outgrowth of being.⁷¹⁾ Lastly, it is a misconception that if the church accentuates the sovereignty of God, evangelism will then be weak. This is because, if one sincerely believes in the sovereignty of God, he or she will evangelize more constantly, with rightly proclaiming the Gospel, without sticking to immediate results.⁷²⁾ These sharp clashes between the CGM and the Reformed critics of the CGM lead us again to the question how Scripture says about yearning for numerical growth.

4. Is Yearning for Numerical Growth an Essential and Biblical Characteristic of the True Church?

Now we need to ask whether Scripture really supports the CGM's assertion that yearning for numerical growth is essential in ecclesiology, in any way. Let us search for a biblical answer to this question, with consideration for the situation of today's church.

First of all, understanding "The Great Commission," will give us an important clue in grasping a characteristic of yearning for numerical growth. Leaders of the CGM shout: "are there more essential things than the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19–20) and saving the numerous people who are going to the eternal catastrophe?"⁷³⁾ However, in the context of the Great Commission, the emphasis lies in God's dominion (Matt.

70) Wells, *Above All Earthly Powers*, 305.

71) Guinness, *Dining with the Devil*, 137.

72) MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel*, 80.

73) McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 26, 40.

28:18) and his being with us (Matt. 28:20), as well as in the command “go and make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:19). The words also cannot be limited to evangelism but have a comprehensive meaning, because Jesus Christ says to “teach them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:20).

Leaders of the CGM also argue that according to Scriptural principle, the places that do not accept the gospel are not yet prepared for a harvest. Thus the church should concentrate their evangelical efforts to the more prepared open-minded areas. Furthermore, for an effective harvest, the church needs to focus on the city-mission.⁷⁴⁾ However, this concept cannot be accepted as a general principle of Scripture because many texts of Scripture say that believers should enduringly plant though their fruits are not yet obvious. This is because, although there are severe places or stubborn hearts, if God opens those hearts, they will open, and because the value of one person (sheep) cannot be compared with the value of many people (sheep) (Matt. 18:12).

When colligating the contents that we have searched for until now, we can confirm that desiring numerical growth is not an essential characteristic of the true church. We can also confirm this fact by observing the current reality of the church of South Korea, that McGavran and Vaughan use as a representative model of explosive numerical growth.⁷⁵⁾ The situation has

74) McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 68.

75) McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 5; John N. Vaughan, *Mega-Churches and American Cities: How Church Grow* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1993), 19.

turned one hundred and eighty degrees. In other words, the church of South Korea is afflicted with a serious disease of numerical growth lacking the established dogmatics and deep spirituality. Furthermore, it has decreased numerically as well. Ethical problems which are related with sex and money have continuously been witnessed especially in well-known mega-churches in which the church McGavran and Vaughan enthusiastically praised is included. Pastors and elders of these churches relate to those problems. Many criticisms on those problems come even from the general Press. A large number of local churches in South Korea are wandering reluctantly, and they cannot give up the illusion of numerical growth, especially of explosive numerical growth.⁷⁶⁾ In the end, the misconception of longing for numerical growth is taking a foot of the churches in South Korea. Therefore, although it would be a fearful thought, we have to keep in mind that when the church grows numerically, there is no guarantee that there will also be an increase of true believers.

IV. CONCLUSION

Until now, we have searched for whether yearning for numerical growth is an essential characteristic of the true church. The answer to this question can be abridged into the following six sections.

76) In South Korea, there are also a few Church Growth Research Center which are connected to mega-churches, and has affected the church of South Korea broadly. For example, see the internet websites of 'Institute for Church Growth' (www.pas-tor21.net) and '21st Century Church Growth Institute' (www.churchgrowth21.com).

First, although having merits of particular evangelism and rapid accommodation to social changes, the ecclesiology of the CGM that came from mission fields is not appropriate in revealing the essence of the church. It is too inclined to the state of the mission field and its analysis of the situation is inaccurate and exaggerative.

Second, desiring for numerical growth cannot have its institutional grounds in the essence of the church because the evidences of Scripture are too poor, and because the essence of the church is originally spiritual.

Third, longing for numerical growth is not a mark of the true church because the mark of the church is God's Word alone.

Fourth, yearning for numerical growth is not a core of apostolicity inasmuch as the essence of apostolicity exists in the succession of Scripture and Christian doctrine, not in the succession of places and persons.

Fifth, desiring for numerical growth is not an essential characteristic of the true church, in any way, because Biblical and situational evidences are feeble; and because all the characteristics of the true church are spiritual, and exist for the spiritual unity of believers.

Sixth, the essential concerns of the Scriptures about the church are not on numerical growth, but focus on the identity of the church, namely, what the church is.

These conclusions of this research indicate that according to Bavinck's advice, we should rethink the reason why leaders of the Reformation, as well as the Reformed tradition, distin-

guished between the invisible church and the visible church. Their distinction between the two teaches us that Protestants did not originally stick to the numerical growth, but they pursued the spiritual essence of the church.⁷⁷⁾ Now and in the future, we also have to pursue the real essence of the church, and we have to consider and grasp the values that the Reformation had already grasped, such as delight of salvation, obedience to truth, yearning for the glory of God, and dreaming of the true church.

77) For, example, leaders of the Reformation, such as Luther and Calvin distinguished between the invisible and visible church, which is an evidence of the fact that they pursued the spiritual essence of the church. See Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:287.

[초록]

수적 성장을 갈망함에 대한 바빙크와 교회성장운동 간의 견해 충돌

태동열 (그랜드래피즈한인교회, 미국 칼빈 신학교 조직신학 박사과정)

본 논문은 개혁주의 신학자 헤르만 바빙크(1854~1921)의 ‘수적 성장을 갈망함’에 대한 견해가 도널드 맥가브란(1897~1990), 피터 와그너(1930~), 윈필드 안(1923~)으로 대표되는 교회성장운동의 이에 대한 견해와 서로 어떻게 다른 지를 비교 분석한다. 이 비교 분석을 통해 수적 성장을 갈망함이 과연 교회의 본질이 될 수 있느냐 하는 문제를 다룬다. 기존에 교회성장학을 개혁주의권에서 비판했던 캐빈 드영, 데이빗 웰즈, 존 맥아더, 마이클 호튼 등의 한계는 그들이 주로 모더니즘과 포스터모더니즘의 오늘날 교회에 끼친 부정적 영향이라는 관점에서 교회성장학을 비판했지만 교회론의 맥락에서 엄밀하게 그 문제점을 분석하지 못한 데 있다. 이 한계를 극복하기 위해 본 논문은 교회성장학자들(특히 맥가브란)과 바빙크의 수적 성장에 관한 견해들을 그들의 교회론에 근거해서 비교하고, 수적 성장을 갈망함이 교회의 본질에 속하는지와 관련된 교회성장운동과 바빙크의 성경해석을 비교 평가한다. 끝부분에는 이 문제와 관련된 한국교회에 대한 분석도 넣음으로 실천적인 의미도 가미한다.

주제어: 바빙크, 교회성장운동, 맥가브란, 수적 성장, 교회론, 교회의 본질

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