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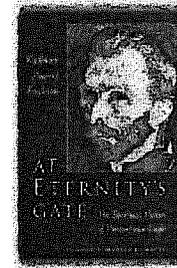
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Ministry Resources

REVIEW ARTICLES



*ETERNITY'S GATE: THE SPIRITUAL VISION
OF VINCENT VAN GOGH*

Kathleen Powers Erickson

Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1998

192 pages, cloth, \$22.00

As any college art teacher will tell you, paintings are meant to be *read*. In painting, the basic elements of the visual arts—line, tone, color, and shape—are melded together by the artist in a harmonious relationship. Each of these elements, as well as how they relate to one another, has something to say to the person who knows their language. Now this is not to say that each will speak with the same intensity or volume. The linear element may be almost non-existent, as in the paintings of Mark Rothko, while the tonal values may predominate in the late works of Rembrandt. Again, it belongs to those who understand the language of art to register these and other like things. And this is not an esoteric understanding that belongs only to the initiated. Even those who “can’t draw a straight line” or who are color-blind may learn, like any other, the basic language of art. The possession of this “art language” enriches its possessor throughout life.

When it comes to “reading” the subject matter of art we are in another world altogether. And what we bring with us may lead to a complete misunderstanding of the work of art and its creator. This is true no matter what it is we are trying to interpret, whether a painting by Degas or the twentieth chapter of the Book of Revelation. If our preconceptions are not identical to the conception of the artist or writer, then our interpretation is bound to be wrong. This happens when

someone looking at Jackson Pollock's "Lavender Mist" says, "A child could do that." It happens in perhaps more subtle ways with the twentieth chapter of Revelation. The fact is, because of what we bring with us to a work of art, we are inclined to read *into* the work as much or more than we read *out* of it.

Things get even murkier when we try to read out of a work of art the creator's personal feelings, motives, and intentions. C. S. Lewis warned against this years ago in interpreting the classics (see Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism* [Cambridge, 1961]; and see the comments of N. T. Wright in *The New Testament and the People of God* [Fortress, 1992], 55-56). One of my painter-friends snorted at the ideas put forth by a local art critic who suggested that her use of antique teacups in a painting was a personal harking back to a genteel childhood. They were nothing of the sort. There were no *antique* teacups; there was no genteel childhood. They were just teacups that happened to be on hand. The painting was "about" light and color, not about the objects. These distinctions (which are commonplace to painters) are frequently missed altogether by art critics who themselves are not working artists. We must use great care, therefore, when we try to draw conclusions about the artist's state of mind from a work of art.

But, if there is any body of work in the history of Western art from which conclusions about the artist's state of mind and intent are possible it is the work of the Dutch painter, Vincent van Gogh. There is a solid reason for this. That reason is found in the more than 650 letters of van Gogh published after his death (see *The Letters of Vincent van Gogh* [London, Thames and Hudson, 1988]). Many of these letters were written while the paintings in question were created and van Gogh frequently and sometimes fully tells us what he was doing or trying to do in their execution. Any trustworthy treatment of van Gogh's work must depend upon his letters.

The author of *At Eternity's Gate: The Spiritual Vision of Vincent van Gogh* fully appreciates this fact. Hers is another biographer's attempt to get at the heart of her subject. More specifically, Kathleen Powers Erickson attempts in this book to

show how "the central and fundamental importance of religion pervades [van Gogh's] artistic *oeuvre*" (179). Against those who assert that van Gogh abandoned religion after his destructive experience in Belgium or others who suggest (on the slenderest of evidence) that van Gogh exchanged his Christianity for a kind of naturalism, Erickson argues that from the beginning of his short career as an artist to its tragic end, van Gogh maintained a form of Christian faith—a *vital* form of Christian faith.

This, I think, she has done. She is well equipped to do so. Trained in art history and holding a Ph.D. in the history of Christianity from the University of Chicago, she has continued her studies in the life of van Gogh and has published articles on him in various journals. Assisted by her former husband, Dr. Robert K. Erickson (a professor of neurosurgery), she has made a thorough study of van Gogh's mental illness, interacting with other van Gogh scholars on this subject. One of the most compelling and satisfying aspects of this book is her detailed treatment of this condition (chapter 4), a condition that has fascinated the public since his death in 1890. Erickson concludes that the painter suffered from temporal lobe epileptiform illness. Among other conclusions related to this, Erickson shows that van Gogh did not suffer from religious mania and that his painting (his use of color or distorted perspective, for example) was not the result of his mental illness (in fact, van Gogh did not paint at all during his periodic mental episodes). She has done a vital service to our understanding of the tormented Vincent at this point.

Erickson has also served the painter and his perpetual host of appreciators well in setting his work in the Western tradition of *religious* art. Here Erickson faces a formidable host of historians taking an opposite view. Fearlessly and cogently she argues that modernist presuppositions, rather than evidence from Vincent and his contemporaries, are at the root of opinions asserting that van Gogh worked from a materialist and naturalist world-view, rather than from a distinctively Christian one. On page after page Erickson hammers home the truth, substantiating her arguments from the *Letters* and

other primary sources, that Vincent van Gogh from the beginning of his public life to its end was a Christian, moved in all and everything he ever did by his personal Christian faith.

What then are the contours, the colors, the shape, the tonal values of Vincent van Gogh's faith? Like many aspects of his life, van Gogh's faith was in a continual state of flux and change.

In its first mature form, Vincent's faith was a version of Dutch liberal Christianity known as the Groningen School (chapter 1). This was the Christianity of those who had the earliest, most formative influence on the young Vincent, such as his father, the Rev. Theodorus van Gogh and his uncle, the Rev. Johannes Stricker. The Groningen position stressed Christian life rather than theology. Where it did venture into theological waters, it stressed man's innate ability to know God, feelings as the means by which this knowledge takes place, Christ as an example to be followed out of our free will, and love as the sum of Christian duty. Major doctrines, like the Trinity, were construed as symbols rather than reflections on an objective reality. At many points Groningen echoed Schleiermacher, especially in its claim that "man's chief vocation was to *create in himself* the consciousness and character of Jesus" (19). Groningen was, thus, not "a strict Dutch Calvinism" (as some writers have suggested, wishing to blame van Gogh's mental distress on this), but a liberal form of Christianity, having nothing to do with Calvin, and little to do with Christ.

Much to his family's distress Vincent moved from this faith to a decidedly evangelical and revivalist form of Christianity sometime in 1874 or 1875, having undergone an experience of being "born again" (chapter 2). While in England he read the sermons of C. H. Spurgeon (he may have attended the Metropolitan Tabernacle and heard Spurgeon preach) and lamented his failure to hear Moody and Sankey, who were then touring the British Isles. During this period van Gogh was most taken with two books (besides the Bible), *The Imitation of Christ* and *The Pilgrim's Progress*. As Erickson shows, these two volumes were to influence him for the remaining

fifteen years of his life. The faith that van Gogh nurtured during this period of time moved more and more toward the ascetic rather than the evangelical. Erickson takes great pains to stress the fact that van Gogh's extremes of self-denial (which finally led to his dismissal as an evangelist by the middle class and respectable leaders of his denomination) have precedents in the history of Christianity. About this, she is undoubtedly right. There is something profoundly moving about Vincent, unwashed, unfed, ill-clothed, and sleeping in his filthy pile of straw. The fact that he was motivated to live this way out of love for the poor miners and their families among whom he worked and out of a sincere desire to create in himself the consciousness and character of Christ is all the more pathetic. We are not surprised, therefore, to see his world collapse when, because of these very things—things that to his mind were most in agreement with the teachings of the poor Man of Sorrows—he was removed from his office as pastor and evangelist. When Vincent's world collapsed in the Borinage, his evangelical faith collapsed with it. It is enough to make the angels weep.

From this time forward Vincent rejected every form of institutional Christianity, including the faith of his fathers and the evangelical faith of Bunyan. His goal over the next few years would be to create a Christian faith that would marry the Jesus of the New Testament with the modernity of nineteenth-century writers and philosophers like Renan, Tolstoy, and Balzac (wedded as they were to the Modernism of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment [chapter 3]). It is quite clear that Erickson is sympathetic with van Gogh's development in this direction. There is more than a hint that she applauds his move away from his earlier "fundamentalism." Everything that she has to say about van Gogh's development as an artist, and especially as a *religious* artist is predicated upon this approval. In fact her predilections are apparent early on. She can approve of the Groningen School, even with its belief in the miracles of Christ, when it is contrasted with Calvinism. She can even appreciate Vincent's evangelical experience as long as that tradition (even Bunyan!) is under-

stood in the ascetic model that he adopted. But a theological, a dogmatic Christianity, a Christianity that preaches *redemption* through the blood of Christ and *renewal* by the Holy Spirit is absent and any sympathy for such Christianity just as absent. This is apparent in her treatment of van Gogh's conception of Christ. Here is a Christ to be followed as an Example, the Poor Man, the Man of Sorrows. But there is no place in her understanding of Christianity (nor in van Gogh's) of the incarnate Son of God who gives his life in death in order to save sinners. Vincent, the gentle, compassionate, sensitive human being that he was, saw in Jesus an Exemplar. There is no evidence that he clearly saw at any time the Lord Jesus Christ of apostolic preaching who saved the human race through his death, burial, and resurrection.

The Christianity that van Gogh fabricated is a pastiche of Groningen, Schleiermacher, Renan, Tolstoy, the four gospels and many other things. It is not the gospel of God. As a human fabrication it rejected the creeds, the church, the sacraments, the ministry, the experience of renewal, and the ethics of the Christian establishment, Catholic, Protestant or otherwise. As such, this rejection was a rejection of Christianity itself, whether viewed from the standpoint of the Bible or of Christian tradition. As such Vincent's Christian faith becomes a thoroughly Gnostic form of Christianity, a heretical form. Viewed from this perspective van Gogh's rejection has a theological name, a terrible name. That name is *apostasy*. Not surprisingly, this rejection involved a great depth of pain, disappointment, and bitterness. None of us who have spent any time in the various communions of the Christian church can fail to appreciate Vincent's agony. But, to appreciate is not to excuse. The whole life of van Gogh is over-shadowed by tragedy, but the last years, the years of apostasy from Christian doctrine and ethics, are the most tragic. We are not amazed that these years ended in suicide. But our lack of amazement does not lessen our sorrow more than a century after the fact.

What is amazing is that in the suffering and loss of these years van Gogh emerged as one of the greatest innovators of painting in the history of Western Art. This is all the more

impressive when we remember two things. One of these is that Vincent started to draw and paint late in life and with very little early promise. Even Theo, his supportive brother (in every sense of the word) found little in Vincent's early work to excite hopes for a successful artistic career. It is well known that even at the height of his powers his work was so unpopular that he sold only one painting. The other thing that we must remember is this: while Vincent studied and worked with various painters (Anton Mauve, Emile Bernard, Gauguin among others), and was around good art most of his life (his family, most notably, Theo, were art dealer working with such internationally known houses as Goupil's; indeed, Vincent himself worked for Goupil's in Paris for a time) he was essentially self-taught. His struggle to draw is well documented in the early *Letters*, and obvious to the trained eye in such drawings as *Prayer Before the Meal*, illustrated on page 78. But, by sheer determination, a determination that literally filled his dreams with drawing and painting, he made himself an artist. Above and beyond this, by working with novel theories of color and with a staggeringly perceptive color sense, Vincent van Gogh conceived a way of painting unknown before him and probably not excelled since. It is color that was his premier gift, color that subjected every other element of the visual repertoire to its power. Finally, at the height of his powers, everything, even drawing, is subjected to and even rejected before the power of *color*. And this is true *even of his spiritual vision*, a vision that remained until the end.

In the end, true to his gnostic vision, driven by his psychic pain, and unhinged by his mental illness, Vincent saw death, not in an apostolic way, as "the last enemy," the obscene horror that so vexed Jesus at the grave of Lazarus. Rather, he saw it as "the way out," or more poetically, as "the gate to eternity." In Erickson's words, "He did not view death as a despairing finale to life, but as a passage from one form of existence into another, higher form" (164). Whatever else this may be, and it has shown itself too often in the history of Christianity, it is not the apostolic faith of the Christian Scriptures and creeds. In the end, at the end (in the plaintive words of Don McLean's

hit of the 1970s, "Vincent,") van Gogh "took his life as lovers often do." Death is the gate to eternity according to the words of Jesus and his apostles. But Jesus spoke not only of the possibility of eternal life, but also of eternal death. Our relationship to him as believing or unbelieving sinners will determine which of these destinies is ours. "He who believes on the Son has life, but he who does not obey the Son shall not see life but the wrath of God remains on him" (John 3:36).

Tragedy and triumph. A tragic life and death. A triumph in the history of art. But, was Vincent van Gogh's life a triumph of faith, and more particularly of the Christian faith?

After pondering the question for years, even after weighing the arguments of this book, I must with sorrow answer, "No." Those of us who know the story of Vincent, those who have read his letters, those who have stood in rapt wonder and joy before the paintings, have wept for him. If Kathleen Powers Erickson is right about Vincent's faith, the form of Christian faith that he created for himself, some of us weep yet again.

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**BLOOD AND FIRE: WILLIAM AND
CATHERINE BOOTH AND THEIR SALVATION
ARMY**

Roy Hattersley
New York, Doubleday, 2000
471 pages, cloth, \$26.95

For most of us, thoughts of the Salvation Army are limited to the jingle of bells in shopping malls in the weeks just before Christmas. If the work of the Salvation Army is more than this in our own time, it was certainly much more in its heyday under the leadership of William and Catherine Booth.

The Salvation Army is the child of William and Catherine Booth. It was born of their union with, and devotion to, one

another. It was born out of their early poverty, endless itinerancy, perpetual opposition both from the church and the world, and dogged determination to take "the Gospel to the people who wanted it least but needed it most." Ultimately the Salvation Army was born of their devotion to Jesus Christ as Lord.

And it is essential to stress the Salvation Army is the child of William and Catherine Booth. In an era where men were prominent and even world famous, the Salvation Army was as much the child of Catherine as it was of her husband. Her role in its founding and perpetuity is given its true place in this new joint biography by Roy Hattersley. Describing Catherine as "one of the most extraordinary women of the nineteenth century," (3), the author is faithful throughout the book to give her well-earned place in the life of William Booth and the Salvation Army.

What we find when we look at the Booths will not be strange to those of us who come from the evangelical-fundamentalist tradition. Here is conversion, devotion, sacrifice, hard work, exposure to misunderstanding and persecution, personal and family failure, and ultimate hope and triumph that most readers of the *Reformation & Revival Journal* know as familiar and expected experiences in biblical Christianity. Hattersley's treatment of these things is not common, however, in the Christian biography we are accustomed to read. This approach may be described as one of *critical sympathy*. I, for one, warmly welcome this, believing that too much evangelical biography smacks of hero-worship, and worse, hagiography. To those who aspire to write of Christian leaders, past and present, Hattersley sets a new and important standard. His sympathy is all the more impressive in light of his giving no evidence of a personal interest in "saving Christianity."

The achievement of the Booths proceeded from their passion—passion for Jesus Christ, his gospel, and the multitudes of unreached people in Great Britain and beyond, especially the unreached poor. This passion came of their both becoming Christians through a definite experience of conversion at an early age. Nurtured in Methodism, this passion was given early and definitive boundaries of discipline and self-denial—

self-denial that the Booths were to take further than their Methodist contemporaries.

Out of this passion the Booths forged a life and a ministry that experienced all the darker consequences of devotion to an unpopular ideal. They were at times poor, homeless, uncertain about their future, harassed by church officials and colleagues, persecuted by the world, plagued by poor health, slandered, misjudged and misunderstood, and all this while they managed to support a family of eight children. Their labors were prodigious, even mammoth.

Their accomplishment was, by any standards, staggering. After years of struggle in various Christian "missions" all over Great Britain, the contours of what would become the Salvation Army began to take shape. In a matter of a scant few years (from 1877 to 1882) the full-blown "army" had set its front line on five continents. Something more than passion and prayer are involved here. An Anglican contemporary in 1882 set forth six factors involved in the Army's success. (1) early rapid success; (2) the employment of all its converts (from the very first) in the Army's work and the consequent multiplications of countless centers of influence; (3) the "ritualism" of banners, titles, uniforms; (4) the value of personal testimony on a level with their audience; (5) use of language understandable by people; and (6) personal ability, administrative power, and devout earnestness of its leaders (278).

And all this was borne and achieved under great limitations. William Booth was a man of limited intellectual prowess, a fact often referred to by his wife-to-be during their courtship. Catherine was intellectually superior to her husband, but suffered serious health problems her whole life. What enabled them to surmount these and other disabilities? William possessed administrative powers and an iron will. Catherine's will was no less steely, and she drove William all her life, and beyond. Add to this a dogged determination issuing from their faith, hope, and love centered in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Many of us have seen these same things in people we have loved and known.

The form of this faith, hope, and love seen in the Booths

has much to say to us who are concerned with revival. Let me suggest a few of these.

The Booths were concerned to *take* the gospel to the lost. They believed men and women to be lost and, equally, they believed that they had an awesome responsibility to take the gospel to them. They viewed themselves primarily as *evangelists*.

They were concerned particularly over the poor, the degraded, and the disenfranchised. While the Methodist connection had become more and more middle-class, equating middle-class standards with the divine will, the Booths saw the sufferings and degradation of the poor as a call from Christ to be among them and to reach them for his sake.

The Booths were concerned to recover the role of women in the church's task of evangelism as represented in the New Testament. While William was slow, and at first, loath to permit women to share in the preaching part of this task, Catherine's determination and persuasion were finally to triumph. Insisting that women might preach as well as men, the Booths opened the way for women to take part in the work of the gospel in a manner hitherto unheard of in English-speaking evangelicalism. They opened the way for women outside, as well as inside, the Salvation Army to take the gospel to the lost. Whether they did this on sound exegetical and theological grounds I will leave the reader to decide.

The perseverance of the Booths is perhaps their most admirable trait. They were a living embodiment of 1 Corinthians 15:58.

As such, the Booths are an encouragement and a rebuke to many Christians within the Reformation tradition.

Having said all this, I regret to add that the atmosphere of this joint-life strikes me as gloomy and airless as a high-Victorian middle-class parlor. There is little about the Booths *personally* that appeals. The photograph on the dust jacket of the book speaks volumes. Even when we grant that people being photographed during the Victorian era were not encouraged to smile (only prostitutes smile in Victorian photographs, though there are photographs of Spurgeon where he is *almost* smiling), after reading this biography, we come to the conclu-

sion that the Booths seldom smiled and were rarely happy, even when relaxed (if they ever were).

What we conclude is that the perseverance and determination we have earlier applauded often deteriorated into an almost manic intensesness that betrayed both Christian trust and joy. This is especially true in their relations with their children. Chapter nine, "Suffer Little Children," (which is a deliberate and distorted pun on the KJV of Jesus' words in Luke 18:16) makes for grim reading. The fact is the Booths treated the family as if it were an army. Indeed, all officers in the Salvation Army were expected to follow this standard. The result was tortuous and damaging to the children, as it will always be. Children are children, not soldiers. And while evangelists may be expected to "endure hardship as good soldiers of Jesus Christ," to expect children to do so is not Christian, but criminal. We are not surprised to hear Catherine say that she would rather see her children in their graves than to see the Salvation Army fail. The tragedy is, after reading other things that she wrote of and to her children, we must take her literally. (All of which makes me wonder again if a certain call to certain ministries precludes marriage and/or children.) The relations of the "General" with several of his adult children only got worse. There were separations on account of perceived "insubordination" that seem to have been taken in stride as inevitable casualties of war. It is a heart-breaking comment by Hattersley concerning his heir to the Salvation Army, Bramwell, "His inheritance was the Salvation Army and a ruined life" (175).

The same might be said of their relationships with colleagues. From the beginning, the Booths show themselves to be impatient of disagreement with themselves and their perception of the will of God. Schism permeates their career like veins in marble. (I have subtitled chapter six of my copy of the book, "The Independent Spirit of Schism.")

All this and much more characterized the life of both William and Catherine Booth. And the causes are not hard to find. The same things are too evident in many evangelical leaders of our own time. These are (and they make a dreary litany) pride, ambition, self-will, self-seriousness, intractabili-

ty, the inability to receive criticism, the presumption that my thoughts and feelings are necessarily the will of God because I have prayed, have formerly been successful, am sincere, etc. The very doggedness of the Booths opened them to a dogmatic spirit that always poisons the well, theologically, practically, and in every other way. They have much to teach us here as well, if only by default.

And such things are prominently displayed in the Booths while they at the same time entertain notions of "Christian Perfection," fostered by their roots in Methodism and confirmed by the extremes of Phoebe Palmer and Charles Finney. Why is it, I am compelled to ask myself on too many occasions, that those prone to adopt various theories of Christian perfectionism are often most obviously proud, ambitious, censorious, schismatic, harsh, insensitive in their personal relationships, and unreachable because they are so sensitive to criticism of any kind?

The issue of perfectionism is only one of many theological issues that might be raised about the Booths. They detested Calvinism, even the happy Calvinism of Spurgeon. They embraced without much thought, besides a pragmatic kind, the new measures of Finney. Out of this theological mish-mash came what Hattersley correctly calls the "revivalism" of the Booths.

This revivalism includes the same old tired elements of the same old tired method. They may be set forth as follows:

- 1) Belief that human action can guarantee a Divine response.
- 2) Preaching that appeals more to the emotions than to the mind.
- 3) A call to immediate response in an altar call or "penitent form."
- 4) A pragmatic rather than a theological basis for accepting various "measures."
- 5) A distrust of the intellectual on any level.

All of this, and more, is sadly documented in these pages. Most of us will not be surprised to find the ghost of Charles

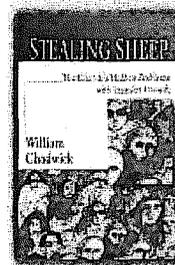
G. Finney lurking behind the pillars of the various Salvation Army mission houses.

But, what may be sadder still, and more serious, is to watch the organization that the Booths created become by its sheer size and speed a thing (almost) out of control. This is ironic in the extreme because William Booth would be considered in our own day as an extreme example of the "control freak." (One example: Each of three sons-in-law changed their names upon marrying Booth daughters; Arthur Clibborn became Arthur *Booth*-Clibborn!) The same things are all too apparent in the evangelical culture of our own time. The early salvationists prided themselves in their "monster" rallies and marches. I would suggest that the Salvation Army itself under the Booths and their children became a monster privately denying (at many points) policy that was publicly affirmed. The compromise, defensiveness, secrecy, double standards, nepotism, authoritarianism, etc., are warnings to ministries that are not directly church-based. Will we ever learn?

Still, I am reminded of the old saying, "God uses crooked sticks to draw straight lines." The Booths, like the writer and the readers of this review, were crooked sticks. "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God and not of us" (2 Corinthians 4:7). We could wish for some of the graces of the Booths and for a measure of their success, but not at the cost of sharing in their tragic defects.

I recommend that everyone who regularly reads the *Reformation and Revival Journal* read this book. There is much here that exposes our lack of zeal for the gospel and love for the lost. There is much that may expose our own pathologies of parenting, of friendship, and of ministry. These kinds of things are always profitable, and such things always precede any true revival. Anything is good that teaches us to say, "Let us examine and probe our ways and return unto the Lord" (Lamentations 3:40).

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STEALING SHEEP: THE CHURCH'S HIDDEN PROBLEMS WITH TRANSFER GROWTH

William Chadwick

Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press
(2001)

187 pages, paper, \$11.99

In the midst of widespread cultural and moral decay, the evangelical church appears to be thriving. But appearances can be deceptive. Beneath the surface of many of today's most successful churches lie the rotting remains of countless collective church carcasses. Even the most bumbling ecclesiastical detective can prove this to be true. Though many churches have experienced swift numerical growth in recent years, this has almost always been at the expense of other churches. The reason is simple: the majority of new members added to church membership rolls are already evangelized. Relatively few new members are actually new converts to the Christian faith. Therefore, the predominant number of new members to any one church are actually leaving other churches. In other words, most of the growth in certain churches is due to "transfer growth" and not to "conversion growth."

William Chadwick labels this phenomenon "sheep stealing." In his book, *Stealing Sheep: The Church's Hidden Problems with Transfer Growth* he argues that "the shifting of saints from one church to another is killing the church" (10). Obviously, it is not killing individual ministries within the church, but it is ultimately bearing no positive fruit in regard to the overall kingdom work of the church. If we are concerned for the church on the whole, we must be willing to recognize this failure and seek to correct it. In order to do this, we must first recognize that "church hopping" is often indicative of a moral problem plaguing the church and not simply the exercise of one's consumer rights.

Chadwick personally identifies with the church growth movement and claims to write "from the perspective of an

insider" (9). In the introductory chapter of his book, he clearly states that he is a "church growth pastor" (9) who is tired of "antichurch-growth arguments" (8). However, ten years of pastoring a church in accordance with his church growth methodologies has left him wary of the constant pursuit of numbers as a sign of ecclesiastical success. Early in the book he confesses:

It is a mistake to build your ministry by raiding the pews of your neighbor. To my utter shame, I have alienated fellow pastors and weakened their ministries by luring away their flocks. . . . For years I have lived a lie, believing that just because our numbers were increasing we were doing the Lord's work. In reality, enabling discontent through escapism, producing distrust among churches and reshuffling membership certificates can scarcely be considered the work of Christ. (9)

According to Chadwick, the emphasis on growth at all costs has transformed sheep stealing into an "art form" (10). Furthermore, it has excited our people's natural propensity to behave as consumers rather than Christians when it comes to their commitment (or lack thereof) to any one church.

Unfortunately, our consumer culture has had a major negative influence on the way people view their relationship to the church.

No longer are people loyal to the church of their historic roots; the consumer mentality has changed the nature of church commitment. Church has changed from a place where one serves to a place where one seeks services. In the selection of a church home, denominational affiliations are secondary to the question, "Does this church meet our needs?" (19)

Because of this,

People have ceased to invest in the long-term, stable relationships that were the backbone of successful church bodies in the past. Today we have moving church bodies filled with church

shoppers and ecclesiastical consumers, joining churches for personal gain and leaving them for the same reason. (20)

This desire to consume is so strong that the average church does not need to aggressively seek "transfer growth" in order to create interest from other churchgoers. Instead, it merely needs to commit to having the best grounds, best programs, best accessibility—in other words, offer a better product than the church down the road—in order to attract consumers.

The unspoken benefits of church expansion through transfer growth are greatly desirable. When success is measured numerically, and rapid numerical growth is the goal, transfer growth provides the "best assets" in the shortest space of time—a phenomenon Chadwick calls "cheap growth" since it requires no serious effort in either evangelism or discipleship (83). "Building a church on true conversion experience takes time, energy and resources; even when it is successful, developing a disciple who contributes to the ministry may take many more years" (22).

Although there has been no overall significant growth over the last two decades in the evangelical church's collective numbers, transfer growth creates the illusion of kingdom growth for a few select churches. The problem is simply this: some churches grow while others decline, and since the appreciable number of evangelicals has not risen, the growing churches are expanding at the expense of other churches. This is the danger of transfer growth for "[t]ransfer growth by its very nature can occur only if there is transfer decline somewhere else" (69).

Large numbers easily create the illusion of God's favor resting upon a ministry. But numbers should not be the standard for success or failure. Chadwick blames the church growth movement for accepting our capitalistic culture's use of numbers, giving them "the authority to define success or failure in a ministry" (81). In order to truly interpret the numbers, we must begin to distinguish between "conversion

growth" and "transfer growth." We must not assume that all increase in numbers is "conversion growth" for even in the best of churches the ratio of conversion growth accounts for only 50% of new members. In most churches the ratio of conversion growth is less than 10-20% of new members. This means that the other 80-90% of new members to any church are former members of other churches. These high figures indicate how widespread the acceptance of "church hopping" and "transfer growth" are in the evangelical church in America. To suggest, like Chadwick does, that this is indicative of a moral failure is to incriminate a large number of people who value their personal choice and consumer rights over corporate solidarity and long-term loyal commitment.

One of the most helpful chapters from a pastoral perspective is the chapter on the hidden costs of stealing sheep. Chadwick lists seven costs—all of them brimming with pastoral insight. I highlight the first two.

Sheep stealing cripples churches through extensive transfer decline. The average church in America consists of approximately 100 members. If a new church in any area grows by 2000 people in the space of 10 years and its transfer growth rate is only 50% (a very conservative number), then 1000 of the 2000 people have left other churches to become part of this growing new church. This means that ten other churches have either died or countless numbers of churches have had their membership severely impacted by the growth of one church. Obviously, the possibility for hard feelings among local churches is high. This diminishes partnering opportunities with other churches for fear of losing even more members to another church's ministry.

Sheep stealing kills the vision and passion of church leaders. Many pastors invest great amounts of time, energy and love in the lives of their parishioners, hoping for a reciprocal commitment from them. To lose these members to other churches after so much personal expenditure is difficult. It is hard not to take this rejection personally. Sadly, it is usually the most problematic parishioners that take up most of any pastor's time and it is generally these same parishioners who are easily

swayed to move on to greener pastures. Over time, constant rejection creates cynicism and hard hearts. The pastor learns to insulate himself by remaining clinically detached and professional in the presence of newcomers. Eventually this deadens not only the pastor's heart, but also the pastor's vision for leading his church. It is hard to create a people committed to a common mission because of the constant turnaround of members.

In order to truly benefit the kingdom of God and not one particular church, we must be willing to call "church hopping" and "sheep stealing" sin. Refusing to attach one's self to one body in loyal and loving commitment is not indicative of mature Spirit-led love. Growing at the expense of other churches is stealing and must not be tolerated or left unchallenged.

Chadwick offers many practical suggestions in the final chapter of his book for discouraging "church hopping" and reducing "sheep stealing." Clearly, there are situations that demand a change of church, although the situations are probably more rare than most are willing to recognize. One of the most obvious situations that allows for authentic transfer growth revolves around a parishioner's change of location.

Ultimately, Chadwick argues that authentic transfer growth should be about "rescuing sheep" not "stealing sheep" (157). Some sheep need to be rescued from churches where the gospel is not preached or where false teaching and heresy abound. Some need to be rescued from abusive church settings. But each situation is unique and must be approached with wisdom, discernment, and caution.

"Growth for the sake of growth is wrong. *How* a church grows matters" (30). The orientation of transfer growth "is not the good of God's kingdom but the prosperity of one individual or church" (30). Building a church primarily on transfer growth is hurtful to the church-at-large and potentially damaging to a local church. Those who easily transfer into a church usually find it easy to transfer out at their convenience. We can take it for granted that those on the elusive search for "better worship," "better preaching," or "better pro-

grams" will never rest in one place for long. Our consumer culture has impacted our people far more than they realize. We must help them to identify this "worldliness" that pervades their thinking and choices.

Perhaps the greatest negative facet of transfer growth is the expenditure of evangelistic energy to win sheep from other folds rather than the lost to Christ. One clear indicator of whether a church is growing primarily through "transfer growth" or "conversion growth" is to assess the number of baptisms performed. "As our ministries grow, let's be sure that we are not contributing to the demise of another church. When new members join our congregations there should be baptisms, or else we are facilitating yet another spin on the church merry-go-round" (11).

Chadwick has done the church a great service in clearly demonstrating the hidden dangers of transfer growth. Now may God grant his church the boldness to speak against our culture's dominant values of consumer choice and comfortable options by courageously pointing out the sinfulness of church hopping and sheep stealing. If this personal confession turned theological challenge establishes a mutual consensus on the moral error of sheep stealing, then it may initiate dialogue among sister churches that will have far-reaching implications in the future. Perhaps we will even start growing again!

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