

Introduction to Donald McGavran's Thoughts On the Church and Denominations

John M. Morris
Assistant Professor of Missions
Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary
Fort Worth, TX
jmorris@swbts.edu

Donald Anderson McGavran (1897-1990) was arguably the greatest missiologist of the twentieth century. *Christianity Today* ranked his magnum opus, *Understanding Church Growth*, as the second most influential book that shaped evangelicalism in the last fifty years.¹ The principles he described continue to be both relevant and controversial in missiology. For example, McGavran's receptivity principle is biblical, and yet it has been denied or deemphasized by some Southern Baptist missiologists.² Unfortunately, some people have misunderstood some of McGavran's principles, and other people have confused McGavran's classic Church Growth Movement with the popular Church Growth Movement or with the Third Wave Movement.³

In 2007, David Hesselgrave alluded to one of McGavran's last concerns before his death in 1990: "The burden of one of his letters and its accompanying essay was that churches and missions devote entirely too much effort to achieve structural unity at the expense of biblical mission."⁴ Hesselgrave recently sent the letter and essay/article to Keith E. Eitel. In the letter of January 12, 1987, McGavran said, "I am sending to you an article of my own which I would dearly love to see published in some magazine."⁵ In reference to the unity issue, he asked, "Is there any way in which we can urge our brothers and sisters who are now worshiping structural unity to return to carrying out the Great Commission and 'being all things to all men in order to win some'?"⁶

¹"The Top 50 Books That Have Shaped Evangelicals," *Christianity Today*, October, 2006, 55.

²John Michael Morris, "An Evaluation of Gospel Receptivity with a View toward Prioritizing the Engagement of Groups and Individuals for Evangelism and Church Planting" (Ph.D. diss., Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, 2009), 83-135.

³Sonny Tucker, "The Fragmentation of the Post-McGavran Church Growth Movement," *Journal of Evangelism and Missions* 2 (Spring 2003): 25-34.

⁴David J. Hesselgrave, "Will We Correct the Edinburgh Error? Future Mission in Historical Perspective," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 49 (Spring 2007): 135.

⁵Donald A. McGavran to David J. Hesselgrave, 12 January 1987.

⁶Ibid.

One interesting aspect of the 1985 article is McGavran's mention of inerrancy: "Both of them believe that Christ is indeed God and Savior, and the Bible is indeed the inspired, infallible, inerrant Word of God."⁷ In the past, McGavran had used the word "infallible" to describe the Bible.⁸ Some people consider "inerrant" to be synonymous with "infallible," but other people consider "infallible" to mean that the Bible is without error in matters of faith and practice but that it may be in error in matters of science and history. Inerrantists believe that the Bible is not in error in any sense. McGavran's use of the stronger term is significant.

McGavran's thoughts in the 1985 article are extensions of some of his thoughts expressed in two chapters of the 1984 book, *Momentous Decisions in Missions Today*.⁹ Some of his statements in the 1985 article are virtually identical to his statements in the 1984 book.¹⁰ McGavran was familiar with interdenominational relationships. His maternal grandparents and uncle were British Baptist missionaries in India, and he was a Disciples of Christ missionary there.¹¹ McGavran did not believe that the denominations are sects; rather, he believed that denominations are spiritually unified in Christ. While discussing Romans 15:7 in his 1984 book, he disagreed with the idea of structural unity:

Fifty thousand true Particular Churches do not break the unity of the Church. . . . Structural unity is not what this passage of the Bible teaches. . . . These are truly ecumenical decisions. . . . They allow the multiplication of Particular Churches while maintaining unity in Christ. They believe in One Body *and* many members.¹²

⁷Donald A. McGavran, "The Church, the Denominations, and the Body," September, 1985, 6.

⁸McGavran, *Ethnic Realities and the Church: Lessons from India* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1979), 200; *Ten Steps for Church Growth* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1977), 82; *Momentous Decisions in Missions Today* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 19, 71, 95; idem, *Back to Basics in Church Growth* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1981), 13, 125-126; idem, *The Satnami Story: A Thrilling Drama of Religious Change* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1990), 74.

⁹Chapter 8: "Ecumenical Decisions" and Chapter 23: "Fragmenting or Upbuilding the Body."

¹⁰For instance, as to which groups should be considered part of the body of Christ, in the book he says, "If they confess Christ according to the Scriptures and count the Bible as their rule of faith and practice, they are valid Christians" (1984, 70). In the article he says, "Provided any part of the Church believes in Jesus Christ as God and Savior and the Bible as its only rule of faith and practice, it may hold variant opinions in regard to all other doctrines. Provided that all doctrines are truly based on scriptural authority, they may be held" (1985, 5). In regard to unacceptable groups, in his book he mentions belief in "Marx, Krishna, or Mohammed" (1984, 71), and in his article he mentions "Venus, Marx, or Krishna" (1985, 7).

¹¹Gary L. McIntosh, *Evaluating the Church Growth Movement* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 26.

¹²McGavran, *Momentous Decisions*, 70-71.

He similarly stressed spiritual unity in his 1985 article when he said that the denominations “are all equally parts of Christ’s body.”¹³

In a 2011 e-mail interview, McGavran’s daughter, Pat Sheafor, gave her recollections (and those of her older sister, Helen) of his perspective on doctrinal issues:

Both Helen and I saw and remember Dad’s moving to a much more ecumenical view as his work in church growth involved both studies of how churches in various parts of the world grew and as students from a multiplicity of denominational backgrounds came to study at the then School of Church Growth at Fuller Seminary. . . . I know that Dad believed firmly in baptism by immersion, as do I—for me and my house. Our Disciple/Campbellite background goes deep. But I don’t think Dad had any problem with believing that persons who have been ‘sprinkled’ were also believers and Christians. If I am remembering the article you sent—my sense is he is pretty clear on there only needing to be two basic tenets—belief in the Bible as God’s word and in Jesus as God’s son and one’s personal savior. If his article is saying anything, it says to me that in the latter years of his life his doctrinal beliefs were much more accepting of the whole of Christ’s body, the church. . . . As Dad aged, and he started the School/Institute of Church Growth when he was 65, his wisdom about church growth and his generosity of doctrinal belief expanded.¹⁴

In 1984, McGavran seemed certain that the number of denominations would increase: “Particular Churches have multiplied throughout the earth and will multiply still more as the myriad classes, tribes, and cultures of men turn to faith in Christ.”¹⁵ He used David Barrett’s *World Christian Encyclopedia* as a source for his statistics: “David Barrett says that in the six continents are found 20,800 denominations.”¹⁶ He made a similar statement in the 1985 article: “David Barrett, the Anglican scholar, in his famed *World Christian Encyclopedia* (1982) says that there are 20,800 denominations in the world (p. v). . . . The number of denominations will unquestionably increase.”¹⁷ Later in the 1985 article, however, McGavran seemed unsure as to whether the number of denominations would increase: “It may be that in the next thirty years the 20,000 denominations will diminish to 12,000.”¹⁸ Ten years after McGavran expressed his uncertainty, Barrett’s *World Christian*

¹³McGavran, “The Church, the Denominations,” 3.

¹⁴Pat Sheafor, e-mail message to author, 22 January 2011.

¹⁵McGavran, *Momentous Decisions*, 70.

¹⁶Ibid., 69. The first footnote on page 69 cites the *World Christian Encyclopedia*.

¹⁷McGavran, “The Church, the Denominations,” 1.

¹⁸Ibid., 9.

Encyclopedia indicated that the number of denominations had increased to 33,090.¹⁹

McGavran concluded the 1985 article by calling for the acceptance of the spiritual unity of different denominations.²⁰ Thus, a member of one denomination can acknowledge a spiritual kinship with members of other denominations while believing that his denomination is the most biblically-correct group. Christians can love their brothers and sisters in Christ from other denominations without ignoring doctrinal differences. His attitude was reflected in other School of World Mission faculty members: "Each member of the faculty, coming from a different denomination himself, also was inclined to believe that these other denominations, though *validly* Christian, were not quite as *correctly* Christian as his own."²¹ McGavran's point in the 1985 article is valid. We can love the members of truly Christian denominations as fellow members of the body of Christ and tolerate their doctrinal differences, but at the same time we can respectfully discuss doctrinal distinctives and seek to persuade people of the truth of our theological positions.

¹⁹"Global Statistics: (1970) 16,075 denominations with 1,130 million members; (1995) 33,090 denominations with 1,769 million members." David B. Barrett, George T. Kurian, and Todd M. Johnson, *World Christian Encyclopedia: A Comparative Survey of Churches and Religions in the Modern World*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 2: 658.

²⁰McGavran, "The Church, the Denominations," 10.

²¹*Ibid.*, 2.