

# Evaluating the Megachurch Movement

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by Charles W. Martin In his January 14, 2005 report, George Barna reported on "Pastors Reveal Major Influencers on Churches." In the study 614 senior pastors were asked to identify up to three individuals whom they believe have the greatest influence on churches and church leaders in America. While the pastors named more than 300 different individuals, only 10 leaders were listed by 4% or more of the clergy. Among the top ten were the seeker-sensitive pastors of several megachurches churches, including Rick Warren and Bill Hybels. Although Barna did not choose to emphasize it in his report, it is noteworthy that only 6% of the "influencers" of the larger churches are Christian educators or theologians. The term "megachurch" generally refers to any congregation with a sustained average weekly attendance of 2,000 persons or more in its worship services. In the United States there are presently about 800 Protestant megachurches, and another 1,700 Roman Catholic megachurches. There are also megachurches located throughout the world, especially in Korea, Brazil, and several African countries, although no exact account exists for this worldwide phenomenon. The largest megachurches in America average 20,000 in attendance, and several churches in South Korea claim over 250,000 attenders.

In his January 14, 2005 report, George Barna reported on "Pastors Reveal Major Influencers on Churches." In the study 614 senior pastors were asked to identify up to three individuals whom they believe have the greatest influence on churches and church leaders in America. While the pastors named more than 300 different individuals, only 10 leaders were listed by 4% or more of the clergy. Among the top ten were the seeker-sensitive pastors of several megachurches churches, including Rick Warren and Bill Hybels. Although Barna did not choose to emphasize it in his report, it is noteworthy that only 6% of the "influencers" of the larger churches are Christian educators or theologians. The term "megachurch" generally refers to any congregation with a sustained average weekly attendance of 2,000 persons or more in its worship services. In the United States there are presently about 800 Protestant megachurches, and another 1,700 Roman Catholic megachurches. There are also megachurches located throughout the world, especially in Korea, Brazil, and several African countries, although no exact account exists for this worldwide phenomenon. The largest megachurches in America average 20,000 in attendance, and several churches in South Korea claim over 250,000 attenders. Although large congregations have existed throughout Christian history, there has been a rapid proliferation of churches with massive attendance since the 1970's. Some researchers suggest this church form is a unique collective response to distinctive cultural shifts and changes in societal patterns throughout the industrialized, urban and suburban areas of the world. The megachurch and church growth movements have long been criticized as being a secularized evangelicalism that prizes success and worldly acclaim over theology and biblical fidelity, although not all megachurches categorize themselves as "evangelical." However, most of the Protestant megachurches in America do have a "conservative" theology." This is true even of those within mainline denominations. Not surprisingly, the majority of Protestant megachurches are affiliated with either the Southern Baptist Convention, the Assemblies of God, or they are nondenominational. Recent research completed in March 2001 by the Hartford Institute for Religion Research and Dr. Scott Thumma on megachurches in America indicates that in terms of the theology of the megachurch congregations, the term their leaders selected to best fit their membership's orientation are as follows: Evangelical (48%), Charismatic (14%), Pentecostal (11%), Moderate (12%), Traditional (8%), Seeker (3%), Fundamentalist (2%), and "other" (3%). Thumma noted that roughly 25% of the megachurches are Pentecostal and Charismatic, with 26% reporting they regularly use speaking in tongues in their services. In terms of location, over 60% of megachurches are found in the southern Sunbelt, 32% in the West, and 21% in the Midwest, but only 6% in the Northeast. The states with the greatest concentration of megachurches include California, Texas, Florida, and Georgia. Thumma observed that megachurches are predominantly a phenomenon of the suburbs of very large and rapidly growing cities, such as Los Angeles, Dallas, Atlanta, Houston, Orlando, Phoenix, and Seattle. He found 63% are located in or around cities of 250,000 or more, and only 23% are found in cities between 50,000 and 250,000. These large churches often occupy prominent land tracks of between 50 and 100 acres near major traffic thoroughfares, and generally they have sprawling parking lots and sanctuaries that are able to accommodate the vast numbers of worshippers they attract. The average megachurch has a weekly attendance of 3,857. Thumma says that megachurches are both an old and new phenomenon, as 57% of the churches he surveyed were originally founded before 1961. On the other hand, nearly two-thirds of the congregations moved into their current locations after 1970, with 20% moving in the last decade. Even so, the fact of the megachurch is largely recent, as the majority of these congregations report that their tremendous growth has taken place in the past 25 years. In fact, 70% reported that their rapid growth came within the tenure of their current pastor, with 1987 as the average year the current pastor was called. All the megachurches surveyed offer an opportunity for worship on Sunday mornings, 20% also have a Friday service and nearly half have a service on Saturday. Sixty-five percent have a Sunday evening service. The average attendance on Sunday mornings is 2,913 people. Ninety-three percent offer two or more services on Sunday morning, 48% have three or more. A majority of congregations reported that worship always or often includes sermons (100%), organ and/or piano music (97%), string or wind instruments (79%), time for people to greet each other (93%), an invitation to salvation (60%), prayers for healing (45%), and speaking in tongues (17%). Thumma notes in passing that 60% of these churches "always or often" have an altar call. He also notes that the worship and music style in a large number of megachurches appears to have a contemporary and electronic component in the service always or quite often. Other elements found in megachurch worship services include 72% use visual projection equipment, 80% use electronic keyboards, guitars, and drums, 43% use some recorded music during the service, and 22% use dance or drama on a regular basis. As for the preaching found in these churches, according to the survey, the sermons preached most often focus on God's love and care, salvation, spiritual growth, and practical advice for daily living. The topics least preached on include the end times or second coming of Christ, stewardship of time and

money, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Regardless of the topic, however, the sermons usually are personal stories or experiences from the pastor, illustrations from contemporary media, and a "personal explanation" of the Scripture (narrative preaching) rather than expository preaching with references to literary or scholarly sources. When Thumma asked the megachurches about their theology, 92% said the Bible is absolutely foundational as a source of authority and 88% said the Bible is the most important authority for their congregation's worship and teaching. Only 8% cited historic creeds, doctrines, and traditions as being important, 6% said the inspiration of the Holy Spirit was important, and 6% said their one source of authority is the congregation's vision and purpose. Thumma described the senior pastors of megachurches as having an authoritative style of preaching and administration. Despite the fact that the megachurches surveyed have between 5 and 25 associate ministers, not to mention hundreds of full-time staff, the senior pastor is viewed as the singular dominant leader of the church. The vast majority of megachurches employ intentional efforts to enhance congregational fellowship. These efforts include home groups and interest-based groups. Most of the megachurches promote intense personal commitment for a large percentage of their members, even though they contain a large percentage of anonymous spectators each week in their services. However, often this "commitment" or "association" has nothing to do with traditional conversion. Although some observers and researchers argue the era of megachurches is drawing to a close, the total number has increased from about 350 in 1990 to over 600 in 2000, and today there are over 800 megachurches in America. However, even as megachurches were increasing through-out the 1990s and into the new millennium, the megachurch movement - that some see as being birthed by the church growth movement - has its critics. For example, Gailyn Van Rheenen served as a missionary to East Africa for 14 years, taught missions and evangelism at Abilene Christian University for 17 years, and is currently director of Missions Alive, an organization which trains Christian leaders for evangelism and church planting in urban contexts. While Gailyn is neither for or against megachurches, he admits to monitoring their theologies, strategies, and structures, and seriously questions whether or not they are the wave of the future. He warns: Great growth gained using the seeker model will dwindle unless these churches become distinctive, counter-cultural communities of faith. Large numbers alone do not equate success. Churches who plant new churches every two or three years will likely have more cohesion than megachurches, unless these churches are extremely intentional about discipling and community development (Gailyn Van Rheenen, *Evaluating the Church Growth Movement: Five Views*, edited by Paul Engle and Gary McIntosh, Zondervan, 2004, 61). In the same book, Howard Synder, professor of the history and theology of missions at Asbury Theological Seminary, shares some of his reservations about megachurches: The main cautions I would raise about mega-churches are two: First, a focus on megachurches reinforces the tendency to be awed by the spectacular and to think that when it comes to churches, bigger is better. This tendency is not cured simply by entering a disclaimer that "these larger churches are not necessarily better churches" [quoting Elmer Towns; cf. John Benton's *The Big Picture for Small Churches*, Evangelical Press, xxx]. Second, the megachurch focus obscures the fact that most church growth historically does not come from huge churches but from small to medium-sized congregations. That is, overall, the church grows more from dynamic smaller churches that multiply themselves than from the numerical growth of mega-churches. Thus, the focus on megachurches tends to put the emphasis in the wrong place (Synder, in *Evaluating the Church Growth Movement*, 62-63). However, the most critical evaluation of megachurches is that provided by Os Guinness in his book, *Dining with the Devil: The Megachurch Movement Flirts with Modernity* (Baker, 1993), a book which bluntly talks about the mega-church movement as being "secularized evangelicalism" that is more concerned with success and worldly acclaim over theology and biblical fidelity. In his more recent *Prophetic Untimeliness: A Challenge to the Idol of Relevance* (Baker, 2003), Guinness makes much the same point again, exposing how many "evangelical" churches have bowed to the "idol of relevance" and trendiness. He says many megachurches today, and those smaller churches whose leaders make every effort to follow in the footsteps of them, are so busy trying to keep up with postmodernism, that they are constantly conforming to what the world says it needs in order to be relevant. In both books, Guinness warns against the over-emphasis being placed on being seeker-sensitive and audience-friendly. In these works, and in his 1994 *Fit Bodies, Fat Minds: Why Evangelicals Don't Think and What to Do About It* (Baker, 1994), Guinness bemoans the fact that many evangelical leaders today show an almost complete ignorance of where many popular evangelical ideals have originated. The idea seems to be, "As long as what we do gets more and more people in the church, it must be okay." What Guinness says has been echoed in different ways by other evangelical writers. For example, in *Willow Creek Seeker Services: Evaluating a New Way of Doing Church* (Baker, 1996), sociologist, theologian, and historian G. A. Pritchard expanded on his 1994 Ph.D. dissertation (North Western University), warning about the long-term dangers of Willow Creek's unconventional perspective and strategy of conversion and commitment, both of which are present, but not viewed nearly as important as making people feel comfortable and getting them to actively participate in "church." What Pritchard, Guinness and others have observed about seeker-sensitive megachurches is seen in a slightly different light by David F. Wells. What Wells observed when he reflected on these same developments is found in his 1993 book, *No Place for Truth, or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Eerdmans). Like Guinness, Wells warns that churches can grow for all the wrong reasons. He says Christians need to be more serious about the issues of truth and theology, and how these things affect not only our worship services, but our local churches, and the larger Church. Unfortunately, again, as Guinness notes, truth and theology are the two things that are the first to be discarded when a church begins to embrace anything that will work (pragmatism). We need to be aware that the extravagances of the church growth movement and its stepchild, the meagachurch movement, are not new in themselves. The temptation to attract people to the gospel of Christ by something other than the power of the Spirit is mentioned by Paul in 1 Corinthians 2:1-5. He said he intentionally did not use "lofty words" or human wisdom, he did nothing that would humanly draw them to Christ, rather he depended solely on the Spirit's power. Why? So that their faith "might not rest in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God" (1 Cor. 2:5). Many people today apparently do not know the difference. But there have always been those in the church with insight and discernment who did. In his book, *Evangelicalism Divided*

(Banner of Truth, 2000), Iain Murray quotes Thomas Scott's *The Offense of the Cross*: Leave out the holy character of God, the holy excellence of His law, the holy condemnation to which transgressors are doomed, the holy loveliness of the Savior's character, the holy nature of redemption, the holy tendency of Christ's doctrine, and the holy tempers and conduct of all true believers: then dress up a scheme of religion of this unholy sort: represent mankind as in a pitiable condition, rather through misfortune than by crime: speak much of Christ's bleeding love to them, of His agonies in the garden and on the cross; without showing the need or the nature of the satisfaction for sin: speak of His present glory, and of His compassion for poor sinners; of the freeness with which He dispenses pardons; of the privileges which believers enjoy here, and of the happiness and glory reserved for them hereafter: clog this with nothing about regeneration and sanctification, or represent holiness as something else than conformity to the holy character and law of God: and you make up a plausible gospel, calculated to humor the pride, soothe the consciences, engage the hearts, and raise the affections of natural men, who love nobody but themselves. And now no wonder if this gospel (which has nothing in it affronting, offensive, or unpalatable, but is perfectly suited to the carnal unhumbled sinner, and helps him to quiet his conscience, dismiss his fears, and encourage his hopes), incurs no opposition among ignorant persons, who inquire not into the reason of things; meets with a hearty welcome, and makes numbers of supposed converts, who live and die as full as they can hold of joy and confidence, without any fears or conflicts.... What wonder if, when all the offensive part is left out, the gospel gives no offense? What wonder if, when it is made suitable to carnal minds, carnal minds fall in love with it? What wonder if, when it is evidently calculated to fill the unrenewed mind with false confidence and joy, it has this effect? What wonder if, when the true character of God is unknown, and a false character of Him is framed in the fancy, - a God all love and no justice, very fond of such believers, as His favorites, - they have very warm affections towards Him?...I would not give needless offense. Let this matter be weighed according to its importance. Let the word of God be examined impartially. I cannot but avow my fears that Satan has propagated much of this false religion, among many widely different classes of religious professors; and it shines so brightly in the eyes of numbers, who "take all for gold that glitters," that, unless the fallacy be detected, it bids fair to be the prevailing religion in many places (Thomas Scott, *Scott's Letter and Papers*, edited by John Scott, 1824). More recently, in his book, *What Did Jesus Do? The Unbiblical Nature of the Seeker-Centered Message*, Ray Comfort says he decided to listen closely to his dentist's admired minister to see why he loved him so much. He writes: He told his congregation that God loved them. He told them that God valued them. He cared about them. They were special to Him. He approved of them. He wasn't at all mad at them. They were made in His image. They were God's own masterpiece. There is no one like them. God accepted them. He had a plan for them. He would never give up on them. He wasn't concerned about their weaknesses, their faults, or their mistakes. If they messed up, it didn't matter. They needed to simply ask God for forgiveness. They were of great value to Him. In a thirty-minute sermon, fifteen or twenty times he said that God accepted them. He was like a preaching thesaurus, saying the same thought (that God approved of his hearers) a hundred different ways. Obviously every pastor should regularly speak of God's love to his flock, but something wasn't quite right with this sermon. Why does any congregation need to be reassured of God's love? Why do they need to be told again and again of God's approval? The answer is clear. They have never seen the love of Calvary's cross. At the end of his sermon, he said that he never preached without addressing the unsaved. His challenge to them revealed why his congregation were so evidently insecure about God's love. He simply said, "Make Jesus Lord of your life. I'm not talking about religion. I'm talking about life and peace and happiness." During a quick sinner's prayer, he did pray, "I repent of my sins," but there was no mention of the cross. Not even a hint of it. Neither was there any reference to judgment day, no moral law, and no hell (Comfort, *What Did Jesus Do?*, Genesis Publishing Group, 2005, pre-released portion). Once again, as has often been the case in the history of the church, sometimes the most popular message being proclaimed is actually a different gospel. *The Writings of Mary K. Baxter* by Charles W. Martin

Books written by those who have died and gone to heaven, or hell, and later returned earth, or by those who say they have received visions of heaven and/or hell, are quite numerous. Among these, the writings of Mark K. Baxter (*A Divine Revelation of the Spirit Realm*, Whitaker House, 2000; *A Divine Revelation of Hell*, Whitaker House, 1993; and *A Divine Revelation of Heaven*, Whitaker House, 1998) have all been very popular. The same can be said for similar writings, even though they often contradict one another. For example, Don Piper's *90 Minutes in Heaven* (Revell, 2004) was in its fifth printing in January 2005.

What are we to make of these people's experiences? In his popular work, *Heaven* (Tyndale, 2004), Randy Alcorn states regardless of how sincere these people appear to be, we must always carefully compare what they say they have experienced with Scripture itself, because the Word of God has more authority than our personal and private experiences, no matter how real and genuine they may be in our minds.

This is wise advice in light of the fact that those who claim to have visited heaven and/or hell constantly contradict each other. Some of those who have made these kinds of claims have been exposed as fakes, such as Betty Malz, whose book, *My Glimpse of Eternity*, was printed by Guideposts, Chosen Books, and Revell in 1977-1978.

As for Baxter's book entitled *A Divine Revelation of Heaven* (Whitaker House, 1998), she recounts her visitation to heaven, which came some time after she was allowed to visit hell, both, she says, at the command of Jesus, although as most any student of the Bible knows the idea of anyone going to hell and leaving is in direct contradiction to the teaching of Scripture (Luke 16). Baxter's books have become bestsellers. She explains that Jesus told her that her trips to hell and heaven are His very purpose for her life, as is her sharing her experiences with others through the writing of books, so that the unbelieving world may know there truly is a heaven and hell, and that Jesus was sent by the

Father to save unbelievers from the horrors of hell and prepare them for a home in heaven.

The implication of Baxter's alleged commissioning by Jesus implies that Scripture is ineffective in its ability to "let the world know that there is a heaven and hell," and that Jesus was sent by the Father to save those who follow Him from the torments of hell. The issue boils down to this: Is all we need to know about heaven and hell found in the Bible or is it not? For 2,000 years orthodox Christianity has taught that the Bible is God's divine revelation to man, and that revelation ended with John's vision found in Revelation, the last book of the Bible. If the world needed more than what is found in the Bible, we would undoubtedly have a larger canon of Scripture, and John would not warn his readers in the last few verses of Revelation 22 (18-19) about adding to the words of his prophecy.

Indeed, this is one of the reasons evangelicals condemn Christian Scientists, Mormons, and all other groups who proclaim extra-biblical writings as being equally inspired and having equal authority with Scripture. The canons of the Old and New Testaments are officially closed. God has revealed Himself through the written word of Scripture and His Son, Jesus, the living word. No other inspired or revelatory word is needed or promised in Scripture. Each year members of the Evangelical Theological Society must sign the doctrinal statement of the society, which, in part, says, "The Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written and is therefore inerrant in the autographs." This means that Calvin's Institutes, Wesley's sermons, or the writings of anyone else, even someone who, like Baxter, claims to be directly representing God, does not speak with anything like the authority of Scripture.

However, for the sake of argument, let's accept at face value for a moment that Baxter's claim of having received a "divine revelation" is true. Again, for the Christian who is a careful student of the Bible, even this bit of laxity is difficult to do, because what Baxter relates right away appears to be more human in its origins than Scriptural. If we allowed that what she says is true, then we would also have to conclude that God is confused and open to contradicting Himself.

Further, in 2 Corinthians 12:4 Paul says heaven's glories are inexpressible, that is, beyond words. Baxter would have us believe otherwise, because she strongly implies she can give us more than God already has revealed. This is a not\_so\_subtle denigration of the Scriptures. If true, it would imply that God has been holding out on us - at least until the coming of Mary Baxter. Of course, Christian Scientists, the Jehovah's Witnesses and many others make a similar claim.

Thus, at best, Baxter's books can be classified as science fiction splattered with Bible verses to prop it up and give it some credibility. Like her earlier volume on hell, *A Divine Revelation of Hell*, it is filled with biblical inaccuracies, imagi-nation, and myth. Baxter simply follows in the train of the 18th century occultist and mystic heretic Emanuel Swedenborg. Swedenborg's work, *Heaven and Its Wonders and Hell*, tells us not only of his finding secret meanings in every word of Scripture (which he called Arcana), but also of his purported trips to both heaven and hell.

For the Christian, there are numerous volumes on heaven that are much more biblically based and accurate. I have already mentioned Randy Alcorn's *Heaven*. An older work that is still valuable is Wilbur Smith's *The Biblical Doctrine of Heaven* (Moody, 1968). Those who are John MacArthur fans will appreciate his book, *The Glory of Heaven* (Crossway, 1996).

The major problem with Baxter is she observes things in heaven and hell that have no basis in Scripture. These include a special planet for aborted babies, as well as for animals. She also tells of seeing a file room where angels bring accounts of people's lives so that God can scrutinize them.

As more people abandon the Bible and place greater emphasis on experience, even when it is not supported by Scripture, we should not be surprised to find books like those of Baxter being bestsellers. Paul's warning to Timothy about a coming time "when people will not endure sound teaching" started in the early church, and heretical teaching can be quickly found in every century of the church up through the present. More important, often heresies in the church are more popular and people find such teaching more helpful than orthodoxy. This is one of Satan's greatest deceptions - that heresy very often appears more true than truth itself. In fact, heretical teachings are almost always more satisfying and more appealing than biblical doctrine.

One of the great strengths of Randy Alcorn's book is he simply emphasizes what the Bible tells us about heaven. That is, that it is a real place, the home of God and our ascended Lord Jesus Christ, as well as angels, and believers go there at death. Whether we think in terms of the present heaven or the new heavens and earth, that is, the new heavenly city of Jerusalem descending to earth so that the final and eternal state is on a new earth where at last God makes His home with redeemed men, heaven is an immense place. It is a place of joy, pleasure, and unending bliss. In heaven there is no sickness, pain, or death. Alcorn simply helps his readers to meditate on these fantastic and glorious truths that are found in both the Old Testament and the New Testament.

One of the most troubling aspects of Baxter's writings is she places her writings on an equal level with Scripture as being nothing less than the absolute word of God, not unlike the vision given to John in the last book of the Bible. But unlike the Bible we have, what Baxter provides us with is something better, more exciting, more revealing and more

wonderful that Scripture itself. Again, we need to remember that all cultic groups have their own extra-biblical revelations, their own specially chosen prophets and seers.

Some reviewers link Baxter's poor exegesis skills with her charismatic theological leanings. Although this sounds a bit unfair, it is true that she sees in heaven a hall of platinum with rooms full of unclaimed blessings. Miracles and healings are unclaimed blessings which, if we do not get them, it is all our fault for leaving them unclaimed. Baxter encourages us that all we have to do is "believe," saying nothing about God's will or God's grace being sufficient for Paul's "thorn in the flesh" with which he suffered.

Baxter also implies that angels are omniscient, that is, these created beings share what evangelicals call an "incommunicable attribute" of God. Orthodox theology has never taught this idea, and it could well be argued that to assign divine attributes to one of God's angels, whether righteous or evil, is to be guilty of idolatry.

In one disturbing portion of her book on heaven, Baxter sees an "angel pouring what looked like fire" on the head of the preacher. She also observes angels touching the hearts of unsaved persons and setting them free. However, in the New Testament we read in John 6:63 that only "The Spirit regenerates or gives life." The Holy Spirit is the agent of the new birth. We are also told in the New Testament that it is Jesus Christ who delivers us through the power of the Holy Spirit, not angels (Colossians 1:14, 1 Peter 1:18\_23, Revelation 1:5). Thus, once again, in Baxter's account, angels are given prerogatives that only belong to the Godhead, a very dangerous error, as in Colossians 1:18\_19 Paul warns against attributing too much to angels and insists that we keep Christ in His proper place of preeminence. Hebrews 1 accents the vast difference between Christ and angels.

Baxter claims to have made ten visits to heaven. At one point while in heaven she discovered people had to be fitted for their crowns - an interesting phenomenon since in His omniscience God knows every hair on our heads, but not our crown size. She also observes that heaven has Victorian furniture which, no doubt, will please many antique buffs. Perhaps her claim of another style of furniture with elaborate designs on it is for non-Victorian furniture lovers. Unlike Randy Alcorn's fictional works, which relate in one way or another to heaven (i.e., *Edge of Eternity*, *Safely Home*), in this case what the reader has is not even good fiction.

In his survey of "alleged trips to the other side," William Alnor rightly emphasizes readers of these books need to develop a checklist for discerning what the Bible actually teaches. Alcorn's *Heaven*, together with the Bible itself, is a good place to begin to develop such a checklist. Regrettably, Alnor's book, *Heaven Can't Wait* (Baker, 1996), is now out-of-print. Today there are many vision-borne teachings being proclaimed and accepted. These include the teachings of Benny Hinn, Morris Cerullo, David (Paul) Yonggi Cho, Kenneth Hagin, and Oral Roberts. Christian television goes out of its way to provide such people with a pulpit, and noticeably absent is any critique whatsoever of the dangerous teachings being broadcast.