

MEMBERSHIP MATTERS

GBC EQUIPPING HOUR | DECEMBER 1, 2019



Class 7 – Failed Systems of the Past

PURPOSE: Determining what biblically warrants a given congregation formalizing their church membership, as it becomes a springboard for genuine church growth.

Introduction

What the church does *not* need now: another book critical of the church. Criticism can easily give way to mudslinging and it is easy to find oneself caught in the middle with hardly any say on matters. One book which avoids aimless infighting while being an encouragement to pastors desiring to end well in the ministry: *The Trellis and the Vine* by Colin Marshall and Tony Payne.

Provisionally the book was published at just the right time, 2009. Previously in the 1990's the evangelical church was riding on a high with megachurch movements associated with names like Rick Warren and Bill Hybels becoming increasingly in vogue. Before long church leaders were developing large, state-of-the-art facilities with their congregations whispering to themselves, "If you build it, they will come."

But at the turn of the millennium a new movement took over: the emergent church. At its helm were names like Brian McLaren and Rob Bell who seemed to intuitively perceive the excesses of the megachurch. Smaller, *missional*, and highly informal home *cell churches* soon became the in-thing. Out went old structures, and with it good old creeds. By the end of the first decade (circa 2010) the emergent church died out with some of their leaders coming out as liberal theologians.

In retrospect, in all fairness, both movements had their strengths. The megachurch movement obviously had a good sense of "trellis," or structure to serve new incomers with. The emergent church had a good sense of "vine," being down-to-earth with individuals on a grassroots level. But they both also fell short of seeing the strong interdependency between the "trellis" and the "vine" components of church life.

I. **The Emergent Church**

A. All Vine Work But Hardly Any Trellis

Desiring God Q & A with John Piper: What is the Emergent Church?

Q: What concerns you most about the emergent church?

A: The single greatest concern for me is their attitude towards doctrine. Stylistic things are neither here nor there. They come and go: whether you meet in a home or meet in a church, sit in a circle or sit in rows, paint on the walls or not—they're all just peripheral issues. They're the wineskins, not the wine. The issue is their attitude towards truth. I'm deeply concerned about it, and I think that it will be the undoing of the emergent church as it has come to be. They don't believe that truth itself is an objective propositional thing that has a yes and a no. Nothing is ever either/or, good or bad, right or wrong, ugly or beautiful. It's all vague.

B. Not Inherently Bad: Spontaneity & Something Different

In both the Old Testament and the New Testament there are examples of lively, spontaneous responses to something amazing God was doing in the midst of his people (e.g., Exodus 15, Acts 2). Similarly, the structure and some functional aspects of gatherings seem to be allowed to develop over time (e.g., from tabernacle to temple to synagogues to houses). But never in such cases did orthodoxy play second fiddle to orthopraxy.

C. The Reality: Vines Don't Do Well Without Something Solid To Push Up From

Time and time again it has been shown, not just in the emergent church but in other church movements trying to emulate them, that if there is no firm foundation of doctrine and doctrinally-minded people the whole thing dissolves. Come later: *a new form of disillusionment*.

II. Intense Megastructures

A. All Trellis Work While Neglecting the Vines

One of the most subtle sins, which can creep up on any well-meaning Christian, is the sin of unbiblical priorities.

- It happens in marriages when one spouse tries to please the other only by buying her more stuff.
- It happens in families when parents place a higher premium on academic achievement than on purity and fidelity to Christ and the Scriptures.
- It happens in the workplace, when working to please the boss overshadows ones working as unto the Lord in worship to Him (Colossians 3:23).
- And it happens in the church, when the rush to have activities for the sake of activities overshadows patient one-on-one discipleship (e.g., contrast the flustered Martha with the content Mary in Luke 10:38-42).

B. What About New Births, Baptisms, Weddings & Funerals?

How big is too big? And when are there too many programs running the “show”? There isn’t one way to answer such questions; but a good thing to ask: how natural is it to call a fellow congregant, “brother” or “sister”? Large megachurches may need a larger *pause* button on their console so that people can take time to “mourn with those who mourn” (Romans 12:15)... before rushing to the next main event.

C. The Reality: Vines Will Suffocate Under Too Big a Trellis

Common tensions: schedules vs. souls; programs vs. people; desperation for numbers vs. discipleship.

III. How All This Relates to Church Membership

Going back to the book *The Trellis and the Vine*, the main point of the book is that the trellis is for supporting vibrant vine-work. If the trellis just sits there by itself then it's really not fulfilling its purpose.

Church membership is the backbone of the trellis. When people agree to work with the doctrinal statement and the church leadership they are entering a kind of structure.

In the past, people have sometimes become church members solely for the purpose of voting the direction of the church. But that's not a true trellis. A true trellis is geared more for discipleship, where a stronger believer is helping a weaker believer. Both speak the same language of the doctrinal statement so there is no barrier between them when they meet and talk. Conversations develop, there are times of correcting, times of encouraging, and through this the vine grows.

Membership Matters Course Outline:

- Introduction
- Local Church as a Growing Structure
- Local Church for Building Up a People
- Vital Leadership Roles
- Examples of Accountability in the NT
- More Examples of Accountability in the NT
- Unique Cases & Cautions with Membership
- (Thanksgiving Break – No Equipping Hour)
- Failed Systems of the Past
- *Trellis and the Vine* Book Review - Part 1 of 2
- *Trellis and the Vine* Book Review - Part 2 of 2