

## Church Growth By The Gospel Or By Gim-micks?

On the first Pentecost following the resurrection of the Lord, the church of Christ exploded in to existence. Under the supernatural influence of the Holy Spirit, the apostles, for the very first time, proclaimed the full facts of the gospel message — namely, that Jesus of Nazareth had been crucified and buried, but that He had been raised from the dead and was now in Heaven.

When the Jews who were assembled on that occasion heard these glad tidings, they exclaimed: "*What shall we do?*", expressing an interest in obtaining pardon for their complicity in the death of the Messiah. The inspired response was: "*Repent and be baptized, everyone of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit*" (Acts 2:38).

We are subsequently informed that those who happily embraced the apostolic message were immersed, and "*there were added in that day about three thousand souls*" (2:41). The church was off to a roaring start. In fact, the body of the saved grew "day by day" (2:47). Within a very short time, the number of men alone was about 5,000 (Acts 4:4). The book of Acts includes several references to the fantastic growth of God's people through the next few decades. It has been estimated that by the end of the second century A.D., those who professed Christianity in the Roman Empire numbered some 60 million souls (Hurlbut, 68). Whether many of these were genuine Christians might be questioned. Nevertheless, it is beyond dispute that the early church experienced a phenomenal growth.

As one reflects on the rapid spread of the gospel in the apostolic era and compares that excitement with the almost snail-like pace of the current church (at least as it is in America), one is bound to wonder: "What are we doing wrong?" "Why isn't the church growing today as it did in the 1st century?" We fervently long to see the church dramatically expand today. What on earth can we do to remedy this situation?

It is at this point that a certain disposition develops in some — that almost borders on panic. We are so desperate to see the church move forward with great momentum that we become vulnerable to high pressure tactics and bizarre methods of evangelism; methods that actually do not effect genuine church growth. They are, in fact, harmful. Ultimately they leave us disillusioned and in a state of disarray. Perhaps it would not be inappropriate to illustrate this point with a couple of current examples.

## ***Modern Examples Of Church Growth Gimmickry***

Several years ago, a number of congregations that sensed a greater need for evangelistic fervor became enchanted with a fad known as the "Crossroads Movement." Without going into detail, it is sufficient to note that this movement boasted of a tremendous number of conversions, which naturally made it appealing to brethren.

What many failed to recognize, however, was that this concept was a humanly devised bondage system of regimented church growth which robbed its devotees of both personal and evangelistic liberty in a number of ways. In many respects it was similar to the Watchtower system in its methodology. Its destructive thrust is clearly revealed in the fruit it has produced — scores of churches were left in a state of shambles! This is a terrible price to pay for misguided zeal.

Another ideology in vogue these days is the "ministering-to-the-whole-man" concept. It is really the subtle notion that the gospel is not intriguing enough to capture the honest person's attention. Therefore, some churches are implementing multifaceted programs which provide a variety of community services. One can read of churches offering aerobic exercise classes, weight-loss clinics, art sessions, community movies, sports activities, entertainment, etc. Such programs are designed to serve as "bait" for the gospel.

There are two observations that can be made concerning such matters. First, there is not the remotest indication that the original disciples, under the leadership of inspired teachers, resorted to this type of gimmickry in an attempt to facilitate the spread of Christ's message. Second, it has become painfully apparent that the "gospel" these groups are preaching is but a thin veneer of solid truth. Considerable sound doctrine has been filtered out, and a new denomination is being evolved.

## ***What Is The Solution To Church Growth?***

What, then, is the solution to our growth problems? We believe that the matter can be partially addressed as follows.

First, there is certainly no denying the fact that we have fallen far short of the "evangelistic zeal" that we should have. As a general rule, there is precious little emphasis upon "learning and teaching" the word of God. Many Christians are not even slightly burdened about proclaiming the saving word — either at home or abroad. We "clock in" and "clock out" on the Lord's day, and our religion is mostly on the shelf at other times. We have snuggled

down with a comfortable gospel. We absolutely must work more diligently to correct this evil in the kingdom of Christ.

Second, the idea has been advocated in some sectors that God will not hold accountable those who are never exposed to the gospel. Allegedly, they will be judged simply by whatever "light" they possess. It hardly seems necessary to observe that such a concept is totally at variance with the New Testament, and it can do nothing but retard church growth. Nevertheless, it has made an impact upon the thinking of some.

Third, a disposition that is sympathetic to sectarianism has invaded the mentality of many church members in recent years. Some are just not sure whether people outside the church are lost or not — provided they are at least nominally "religious." The notion that "there are Christians in all churches" has become rather common due to the influence of several leading preachers. When this type of attitude sets in, the spirit of evangelism dies.

We would not, therefore, excuse the apathy of the modern church. We can do better at winning those who are estranged from the Creator! We absolutely must recognize that there will never be another Pentecost! We should be aware of the fact that the unique conditions which existed at the time of the church's birth will never be duplicated. This is not resigned fatalism; it is informed realism. Please consider the following factors.

### ***The Explosion Of First Century Church Growth***

God's system of redemption, gloriously manifested on Pentecost, had been in the planning since the dawn of creation. Thereafter, by means of Jehovah's direct activity, providential intervention, gradually unfolding revelation, etc., the world was carefully cultivated for the coming of the Savior. Paul notes that "*when the fulness of time came, God sent forth his Son*" (Galatians 4:4). That suggests there was a precise chronology designed to insure the successful inauguration of the gospel. Those exact ideal conditions simply do not exist today.

Second, the church came forth in an age of the supernatural. Surely it will be conceded that the miracles of the first century, which attracted vast multitudes, created more immediate and dramatic interest than the written word does today. This is not to minimize the power of the scriptures in any way; it does, though, recognize the nature of human beings.

Third, it should be noted that the gospel's reception can greatly vary from time to time, and from place to place, depending upon societal conditions. For instance, there is clearly a greater inclination to accept religious values

when times are “hard” as opposed to economically prosperous periods. This is repeatedly illustrated in the history of Israel. In eras of great ease, the people waxed fat and ignored God. In times of rigor, the tendency was to look upward for divine assistance. This has been illustrated even in our own nation. The church probably grew more vigorously back in the depression era of the 1930s than at any time since. Even today, reception of the gospel seems to be much more accelerated in countries like India and Africa than in wealthy America. Social and economic factors can either facilitate or hinder the acceptance of the gospel.

What then are we saying? Merely this — let us be evangelistically militant, but let us also be realistic. Let us have confidence in the power of the word, hence, sow the seed as richly and abundantly as we are able. But let us remember that, “*God gives the increase*” (1 Corinthians 3:7). Let us not become so frustrated that we resort to cheap techniques which do nothing but detract from the pristine beauty of the gospel message.

Adapted From Wayne Jackson