

CHURCH GROWTH

I. INTRODUCTION.

A. The Great Commission Of Our Lord Was, And Is, A Mandate For Church Growth. (Matt. 28:18-20)

1. In the commission there is also the formula for church growth.
 - a. The living word (seed) is to be preached (planted) throughout the world. (Matt. 28:19; Luke 8:11)
 - b. Those begotten by the word are to be baptized into Christ and are added to His church. (Matt. 28:19; James 1:18; Acts 2:38, 41, 47)
 - c. The members of His church are to be taught to observe all that Jesus commanded. (Matt. 28:20)
 - d. The Creator and sustainer of life (Col. 1:16; Heb. 1:3) will be with His church always. (Matt. 28:20; 16:18)
2. Life and growth are inseparably linked in the spiritual, as well as the physical world.
 - a. The life is in the seed.
 - b. The living word is the seed of the kingdom.
 - c. The seed will reproduce after its kind.
 - d. We must hold forth the word of life to the lost world. (Phil. 2:16)
 - e. God will give the increase. (1 Cor. 3:6)

B. The Phenomenal Growth Of The Early Church Was Not By Accident.

1. The church had been planned before the foundation of the world.

2. The response on Pentecost was the result of centuries of preparation of the Jews.
3. The rapid growth throughout the world was the result of centuries of preparation of the world.

II. AIM.

- A. To Look At Church Growth.
 1. In prophecy.
 2. In parable.
 3. In pattern.
 4. In preparation.
 5. In practice.
- B. To See That The Phenomenal Growth Of The Church Was Not By Accident.
- C. To See Some Of The Factors In The Growth Of The First Century Church Which We Must Have For Church Growth Today.

III. OUTLINE.

- A. A LOOK AT CHURCH GROWTH.
 1. In prophecy.
 - a. Prophecies of the Old Testament.
 - 1) In King Nebuchadnezzar's dream, the small stone cut without hands, which grew to fill the whole earth, signified the small beginning and tremendous growth of the church. (*Dan. 2:34-35*)
 - 2) The God of heaven was to set up a kingdom which would never be destroyed. (*Dan. 2:44-45*)
 - 3) The Son of man was to be given dominion, glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations and languages should serve him. (*Dan. 7:13-14, 27*)

- 4) The mountain of the Lord's house was to be established and all nations were to flow unto it. (*Isa. 2:2-3*)

b. Prophecies fulfilled in the New Testament.

- 1) All these prophecies were fulfilled in Christ and the church. (*Eph. 1:20-23; Heb. 12:28; Phil. 2:9-11*)
- 2) Beginning at Jerusalem in *Acts 2*, the gospel was preached to the then known world. (*Col. 1:23*)
- 3) Everywhere the gospel was preached, churches were established. (*1 Cor. 4:17*)

2. In parable.

a. The mustard seed. (*Matt. 13:31-32; Mark 4:30-31*)

- 1) The church had a humble beginning.
 - a) With a King born in a stable and crucified on a cross between two thieves.
 - b) With only twelve humble men responsible for its beginning and development.
- 2) From this humble beginning, the church grew into a worldwide kingdom, while the great Roman Empire fell.
- 3) "That in a contest then to the death, continuing through three centuries between the wonderfully organized power of Rome and the wholly unarmed church, it was the church which conquered, has been the problem of history for explanation, because the struggle lasted too long for the result to be ascribed either to fortune or to individuals." Thompson, The Parables and Their Home.

b. The leaven. (*Matt. 13:33*)

- 1) This parable portrays the hidden and immeasurable influence of the church upon the moral and spiritual life of the world.

- 2) The basic moral principles that Christ taught were slowly incorporated into human legislation, compelling recognition in the life of virtually every society and nation.
- c. The seed growing of itself. (*Mark 4:26-29*)
- 1) If we are faithful to plant, we do not have to worry about the growth of the kingdom.
 - a) Just as we do not understand the power of life in the seed, we do not understand the power of life in the word.
 - b) We do not know how growth takes place. (*ver. 27*)
 - c) Our only responsibility is to plant, water and harvest.
 - 2) Growth cannot be forced by our agonizing worry, skillful manipulation, or clever "gimmickery" - only the Word of God can cause spiritual growth.
 - 3) What a challenge it is not to trust in our own ability or methods, but to trust in God and His living Word!
3. In pattern.
- a. The sowing of the seed of the kingdom among all nations was to begin at Jerusalem. (*Luke 24:47; Acts 1:8*)
 - b. From Jerusalem the word was to be preached in all Judea, Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth. (*Acts 1:8*)
 - 1) All efforts were concentrated in Jerusalem until the great persecution following the death of Stephen. (*Acts 8:1*)
 - 2) All (except the apostles) were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. (*Acts 8:1, 25*)
 - 3) Antioch in Syria became the great center of world evangelism.

- 4) Paul, and other missionaries, established churches in great centers of influence: Corinth, Ephesus, Thessalonica, Philippi and Athens.
- 5) Finally, Paul was taken as a prisoner to Rome, the very heart of the great Roman Empire, where he preached for two years. (*Acts 28:30-31*)
- c. Paul was able to say that the pattern of growth of the church had been followed in his own lifetime. (*Col. 1:13*)

4. In preparation.

- a. Before the temple (a type of the church) was built, all the material was collected and prepared so that the building itself was completed without the sound of hammer in its construction. (*1 Kings 6:7*)
- b. Even more effort went into preparation for the establishment of the church.
 - 1) Preparation of the world which contributed to church growth.
 - a) As a result of the conquests of Alexander, the Koine' Greek, the most effective vehicle ever developed for expressing thought, became the spoken and written language of most of the known world.
 - b) The educational level of the time made the reading of the scriptures and the epistles to the churches possible.
 - c) Even though there was a great interest in Greek philosophy, it left unanswered the deep questions of the human soul.
 - d) Almost every known god had some worshippers in the Roman Empire, because men were burdened with the sense of sin and the need for knowledge and fellowship with the true God.
 - e) Law and order prevailed throughout the empire because of the great Roman system of law and government.

- f) The famous Roman roads which spanned the empire, and the Mediterranean sea which was patrolled by government ships, made "going into all the world" preaching the gospel possible.
 - g) The Jews had been dispersed into every part of the Roman Empire.
 - (1) Everywhere they went, they built synagogues in which to assemble to worship the true God.
 - (2) Paul, and other missionaries, always went first to the synagogues to preach the gospel. (Acts 13:14, 44; 14:1; 17:1-2, 17; 18:4, 19)
- 2) Preparation of the Jews which contributed to church growth.
- a) The law served as a schoolmaster to bring the Jews to Christ. (Gal. 3:24)
 - b) Moses and the prophets prepared the Jews for the coming of the Messiah.
 - (1) Moses spoke of a new prophet whom the Lord would raise up. (Deut. 18:18-19)
 - (2) Isaiah spoke of the increase of the government of the Prince of Peace. (Isa. 9:6-7)
 - (3) Isaiah spoke of the one who was to have laid upon him the iniquity of us all. (Isa. 53)
 - (4) In most of the sermons recorded in the book of Acts, the speaker refers to Jewish history and prophecies of Old Testament scripture. (Acts 2:16-36; 3:12-26; 4:8-12; 7:2-53; 8:32-35; 13:15-43; 17:1-3, 10-11; 18:28; 26:22-23, 27-28; 28:23-29)

5. In practice.

a. The Jerusalem church.

1) The "building material" in the Jerusalem church was one of the factors contributing to its growth.

a) The leaders of the church in Jerusalem.

(1) Eleven men chosen and trained by Christ Himself were in Jerusalem at His command.

(2) One hundred and twenty devoted followers of Christ were waiting with them.

(3) The twelve apostles were empowered by the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost to speak and to perform miracles to confirm what they spoke.

b) A multitude of devout Jews from every nation under heaven were in Jerusalem.

(1) These men were there to observe the Pentecost in obedience to the law of God.

(2) They were familiar with the scriptures - Peter had only to refer to the Psalms and the prophets in his sermon.

(3) They had been alive during John's preparatory work.

(4) They had known Jesus in life and death.

(a) They had witnessed the miracles He had done. (*Acts 2:22*)

(b) They had heard Him teach with authority.

(c) They had demanded His crucifixion. (*Acts 2:23*)

(d) Some may have been among the 500 who had seen Him after His resurrection! (*1 Cor. 15:6*)

- c) From this audience, there were 3,000 responses - 3,000 baptized and added to the church. (*Acts 2:41*)
- 2) The teaching and fellowship in the Jerusalem church contributed to its growth.
- a) The apostles continued teaching all things Jesus had commanded to be observed. (*Matt. 28:20; Acts 2:42*)
 - (1) The Lord's Supper - regular commemoration of the death, burial and resurrection of Christ. (*Acts 2:42; 20:7*)
 - (2) Prayer - frequently meeting together to pray. (*Acts 2:42; 4:23-31*)
 - b) The preaching and teaching of the word was confirmed by miracles. (*Acts 2:43*)
 - c) There was a close fellowship among the believers. (*Acts 4:32*)
 - (1) They were together daily in the temple. (*Acts 2:46*)
 - (2) They ate their meals together. (*Acts 2:46*)
 - (3) They shared their possessions and goods. (*Acts 2:44-45; 4:34-35*)
 - (4) The Lord's prayer (*John 17:20-21*) was fulfilled (*Acts 4:32*) and the world believed! (*Acts 5:14*)
- 3) The way problems were handled in the Jerusalem church contributed to its growth.
- a) The problem of persecution.
 - (1) They refused to be intimidated by the authorities who arrested

them and commanded them not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus. (*Acts 4:20; 5:29*)

(a) They prayed to God for courage and boldness. (*Acts 4:18-31; 12:12*)

(b) They rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name. (*Acts 5:41*)

(c) They ceased not to teach and preach Jesus. (*Acts 5:42*)

(2) The great persecution, after the stoning of Stephen, caused the disciples to be scattered throughout Judea and Samaria, Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch of Syria. (*Acts 8:1; 11:19*)

(a) They went everywhere preaching the word. (*Acts 8:4*)

(b) Many hearing, believed and were baptized. (*Acts 8:12; 11:20-21*)

(3) After the angel of the Lord smote King Herod, who had killed the apostle James and imprisoned Peter, "But the word of God grew and multiplied." (*Acts 12:24*)

b) The problem of discipline.

(1) The strict discipline of Ananias and Sapphira (administered by God through Peter) shows us the promptness with which sin must be rebuked if the church is to grow.

(2) This example should dispel vain delusions concerning discipline.

(a) The delusion that by exercising forbearance and mercy we will have a better

chance of saving a sinner in the church than if we cast him out.

(b) The delusion that discipline will scare everybody away from the church and that that will be the end of church growth. (*Acts 5:11-14*)

c) The problem of partiality in benevolence.

(1) Seven men were appointed to see that no one was neglected.

(2) Not only were men appointed to take care of the problem, but all the men appointed had Greek names. "The Hebrews, though in the majority, selected all the men from the minority, from the very party in which had arisen the murmuring, thereby smothering the murmuring under a deluge of generosity." McGarvey, J. W.

(3) Peace was maintained and growth sustained by the way this problem was handled.

d) The problem of racial prejudice.

(1) When rumors reached Jerusalem that Peter had stayed in a Gentile's house in Caesarea, Peter was called upon to explain his actions. (*Acts 11:1-3*)

(2) Peter gave a detailed report of the incident and the Jews held their peace and glorified God. (*Acts 11:18*)

4) The organization of the Jerusalem church was a factor in the stability and growth of the church during persecution and poverty.

a) Elders had been appointed before the disciples were scattered. (*Acts 11:30; 15:6*)

- (1) Paul speaks of Peter, James and John as pillars in the Jerusalem church. (*Gal. 2:9*)
 - (a) James was one of the spokesmen at the council in Jerusalem. (*Acts 15:6, 13*)
 - (b) Peter and John spoke of themselves as elders as well as apostles. (*1 Pet. 5:1; 2 John 1*)
- (2) These three were probably among the first elders in Jerusalem.
 - b) The appointment of the seven men to take care of benevolence recorded in *Acts 6:3*, seems to correspond to the work of deacons in the instructions to Timothy. (*1 Tim. 3:8-13*)

b. The Antioch church.

- 1) The lack of racial prejudice was a factor in the growth of the Antioch church.
 - a) The church was established by some of the disciples who were scattered by the persecution in Jerusalem. (*Acts 11:19*)
 - (1) Both Jews and Greeks were converted. (*Acts 11:19-21*)
 - (2) After hearing of this mixed fellowship, the Jerusalem church sent Barnabas to investigate. (*Acts 11:22*)
 - (3) Barnabas saw the grace of God in the conversion and fellowship of both Jews and Greeks, and was glad. (*ver. 23*)
 - b) Barnabas, showing his lack of prejudice, became one of their teachers, and many were added to the church. (*Acts 11:23-24*)
- 2) The teaching of Barnabas and Saul contributed to the growth of the Antioch church.

- a) Barnabas, a good man full of the Holy Spirit and of faith, taught them all to remain faithful to the Lord. (*Acts 11:23*)
 - b) The work was so fruitful that he went to enlist the help of Saul of Tarsus, who spent a year with him at Antioch, teaching the new converts, who were the first to be called Christians. (*Acts 11:25-26*)
 - c) When the problem raised by the Judaizers concerning the relationship between the law and the gospel arose, Paul and Barnabas were sent to Jerusalem to settle the question. (*Acts 15*)
- 3) The financial help which the disciples, each man according to his ability, determined to send to Jerusalem during the famine, showed the growth in the grace of giving of the members of the Antioch church. (*Acts 11:29-30*)
- 4) The church at Antioch did not remain a mission church for long, but became the great missionary church.
- a) From the five prophets and teachers in Antioch, the Holy Spirit designated that Barnabas and Saul were to be sent out as missionaries.
 - b) After preaching in Cyprus and Asia Minor, they returned to Antioch to report all that God had done with them. (*Acts 14:27*)
 - c) From Antioch, Barnabas and Mark went out on another mission to Cyprus.
 - d) Paul and Silas made a tour through Asia Minor and into Europe. (*Acts 15:36 - 18:22*)
 - e) Paul returned again, and from Antioch left on his third journey. (*Acts 18:23 - 21:16*)

B. FOR LACK OF TIME, WE WILL NOT TRY TO FOLLOW THE GROWTH OF EACH CONGREGATION IN THE NEW TESTAMENT, BUT FROM

THE STUDY OF THE PROPHECIES, PARABLES, PATTERN, AND PREPARATION RELATING TO CHURCH GROWTH, AND FROM CHURCH GROWTH IN ACTUAL PRACTICE IN JERUSALEM AND ANTIOCH, WE SEE THAT THE PHENOMENAL GROWTH OF THE CHURCH WAS NOT BY ACCIDENT.

- C. FROM THIS STUDY WE ALSO SEE SOME OF THE FACTORS IN THE GROWTH OF THE FIRST CENTURY CHURCH WHICH WE MUST HAVE FOR CHURCH GROWTH TODAY:

God's Word Was Preached, Believed and Obeyed. (*Acts 2:14, 41; 3:12; 4:4; 5:42; 10:34, 48; 11:20-21; 16:31-32*)

Righteousness Was Demanded Of Its Members.
(*Acts 5:1-11; 8:13, 18-24*)

Organized Local Work.
(*Acts 11:30; 15:6; 14:22-23; Acts 6:3*)

Worshiped And Worked Together.
(*Acts 2:42-45; 11:26, 29*)

Trusted In God.
(*Acts 4:24-30; 5:29; 12:5*)

Helped One Another.
(*Acts 2:45; 4:32-35*)

IV. CONCLUSION.

- A. The Phenomenal Growth Of The Church Was The Result Of The Preparation Of The Soil - The World.
- B. The Growth Of The Church Was The Result Of The Life In The Seed - The Living Word.
- C. The Growth Of The Church Was The Result Of Faithful Planting And Harvesting.
- D. Church Growth Today Will Be Brought About By Following The Same Formula.