

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #90: SOME THOUGHTS ON CHURCH GROWTH

By John Temples

I assume that you want your home congregation to grow. I hope you're not like the church member who said, "I like a small, intimate church--I want the congregation I attend to stay small." As one preacher said, that's "stinking thinking"! That is like saying, "My son (or daughter) is so cute; I hope they never grow up." Or, "I hope my business stays small--I don't want much income." No, we usually don't think like that; we wish for more souls to be saved and for our congregation's borders to be enlarged.

When we talk about church growth, we usually mean numbers (baptisms, attendance, contribution, etc.). It's hard not to use this indicator. Another normal part of a sermon or discussion on church growth are references to the book of Acts. And if you want numbers, Acts has numbers!

- "Then those who gladly received his word were baptized, and that day about 3,000 souls were added to them" (Acts 2:41).
- "Many of those who heard the word believed; and the number of the men came to be about 5,000" (Acts 4:4).
- "And believers were increasingly added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women" (Acts 5:14)
- "And the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem; and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith" (Acts 6:7).

But let me show you something interesting: Acts does speak of numbers of disciples, but it also mentions another indicator of church growth. Sometimes in Acts, Luke does not talk about the church numbers growing, but about *the word of God growing*. We just read one of those references, Acts 6:7: "And the word of God spread [increased, KJV]." Acts 12:24 tells us, "But the word of God grew and multiplied." And 19:20--"So the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed."

What does this expression--"the word of God increased/grew"--mean?

It is not talking about the church receiving more revelation, although that was happening through the apostles. Rather, it is speaking of *the word having a wider influence and a deeper effect in people's minds and hearts*. It is talking about members growing in the word.

Real church growth comes not just when the numbers go up, but when the members become more in love with the word, more knowledgeable of the word, and more led by the word in their everyday lives.

Let me ask you: Which is a truly "growing" church (one in which the Lord is pleased)--a church that has a large attendance but most of the members don't know beans about the Bible or real undenominational Christianity; or a church where the vast majority of the members are fluent in the Scriptures and truly apply them to everyday life?

Let me give you an illustration. The daughter of a dear friend of yours is in the ICU. Your friend does not know whether her daughter will live or die. You go to visit her. What are you going to talk about? At this point, this woman does not care:

- Whether your church has 20 members or 200 members.
- Whether your church has this program or that program.

And this certainly is not the time to debate baptism or instrumental music! What does your friend want-- and need--from you? She wants you to give her something from the Bible that will offer her hope. At that moment, she needs to see you as a Christian who is full of the word--able to apply the word of God to the trials of everyday life.

Do we need to pray and work for our numbers to increase? Absolutely. But we need to work just as hard to have our members become more fluent in the word, living the word before each other and before unbelievers.

While we're in the book of Acts, notice the preface: "The former account I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach, until the day in which He was taken up, after He through the Holy Spirit had given commandments to the apostles whom He had chosen...." (Acts 1:1-2). "The former account" is Luke's gospel. And when you read the introduction to Luke, you see that it too is addressed to the "most excellent Theophilus." Who was this Theophilus? From these two brief references, we can deduce some things about him:

- He was a faithful Christian. (His name means "lover of God.")
- He was a student of the Bible, a person to whom Luke could freely quote Scripture.
- He was most likely a Gentile. He has a Greek name, and Luke's gospel is addressed in general to Gentiles.
- He probably was some kind of prominent or wealthy person. The title "Most Excellent" was usually used to refer to powerful and influential government officials (compare Acts 23:26).

Consider when Theophilus lived, when Luke wrote his gospel and Acts and addressed them to him. Based on the date of Paul's imprisonment mentioned in Acts 28, Acts can be accurately dated to the year 63 or 64. Since the gospel of Luke is called "the former treatise," it was written some time before Acts, but not a long time.

Why is this important? It means that the church was about 30 years old when Luke wrote. Theophilus was a "second-generation" Christian. He was almost certainly not personally acquainted with Jesus, since Luke states that his purpose in writing was to correct some second-hand information and to give the Christians of his day accurate information about Jesus. Many of the first Christians (particularly residents of Jerusalem at the time of Pentecost) knew Jesus personally, heard Him preach, and witnessed His miracles. Theophilus and his generation had not.

Theophilus would be a leader of the church into the decades of the 60s, 70s, and beyond. That would be a time of trouble and persecution. It would be a time, Jesus said, when "the love of many would grow cold" (Matthew 24:12). There would be no more 3,000-baptism days. That is why Acts talks about growth in numbers in

the early chapters and growth of the word in later chapters. What would be crucial for Theophilus and his contemporaries would not be church attendance numbers, but how real the word was in the lives of the members. Theophilus needed that “blessed assurance” we sing about.

Another crucial negative factor in church growth is a scandal or crisis. It’s remarkable, though, that every time Luke mentioned the word of God growing, the church was experiencing some kind of crisis or dire situation. Let us go back and look at each of the three times Luke talked about the growth of the word and see what was occurring.

Acts 6:7--“And the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem.” What was happening at that time? The first crisis in the church, the neglect of non-native Jewish widows in the daily distribution of food (Acts 6:1). Normally, when a church has a crisis, it loses members; here, it gained members. Why? Because the crisis was handled speedily and decisively, because the word of God was held up as the ultimate and inviolate standard of church life and government, and because the apostles involved all the members in solving the problem.

Acts 12:24--“But the word of God grew and multiplied.” This happened after Peter was imprisoned by Herod, after which an angel struck Herod dead. These events--a prominent church leader being jailed and a popular politician being struck dead by an angel of God--could have caused dismay among the members and widespread odium among unbelievers. Yet again, Luke says “the word of God grew and multiplied.” The result was newfound fear and respect for God, His word, and His church, and an increase in church membership.

Acts 19:20--“So the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed.” This was in Ephesus, a hotbed of heathenism. The impact of the word there was so powerful that it led many who practiced Satanic arts to burn their books of spells and give up their pagan practices.

And here’s something REALLY interesting: those who came confessing Satanic practices were not pagans, but church members! Acts 19:18-20 says, “And many

who had believed came confessing and telling their deeds. Also, many of those who had practiced magic brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all.” All whom? All the church, presumably. This shows us that although the church was growing rapidly number-wise, the word of God had not yet “prevailed” with them--it had not really changed their hearts. They continued to maintain their pagan ties and/or to practice their former pagan rites in secret. But when they saw a demonstration of the true power of the word of God--to cast out demons--they gained the proper fear of the word’s power and allowed it to change their lives. Again, what was the growth factor here? Not just an increase in numbers, but the realization that God’s word is true, powerful, and inviolate, and that we must get serious about its teachings.

I sincerely hope your congregation will grow in numbers. But there’s more to growth than numbers, I hope that *the word of God will grow*--that the members will grow in their confidence, love, knowledge, assurance, and influence, basing their lives solidly on the word of God, the Bible. --John Temples