

Church Growth

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There has been much discussion among us in recent years about “church growth” and especially about why the church is not growing as rapidly as it did prior to the 1970s. Some point to the Jerusalem church in the early years (Acts 2–6) and seek to recreate the amazing numerical growth of that brief span. There was a marvelous numerical growth recorded in the first half of the 19th century as the plea to restore New Testament Christianity swept through our young nation. Again, the church led all religious groups in growth for a few years in the middle part of the twentieth century. Even now, there are some areas of our world (e.g., India) where the Gospel is most eagerly received.

An observable principle explains both rapid growth periods and non-growth periods: The fields are not equally ripe for harvesting everywhere at all times. Some places are “in season” while others are “out of season” (2 Tim. 4:2). The circumstances in Jerusalem that led to the exceptional growth in a short time will never be repeated. The same is true of the great reception accorded the pioneer restorers. Also, there were some peculiar circumstances prevailing in the middle part of the twentieth century that no longer prevail. While the same Gospel was preached in both Jerusalem and Athens, it did not produce the same results in both cities. It is folly to use Jerusalem's growth as a pattern for now or any other age.

Emphasis on the numerical growth of the church **as an end** is not found in the New Testament. The emphasis is on preaching the Gospel to as many lost souls as possible and letting growth, whether it be large or small (or even none), come therefrom. This is demonstrated both in the wording of the Great Commission and in its execution by the apostles.

Sadly, numerical growth has become the primary goal of some brethren. To them, large numbers equal success for the church. Many now accept large numbers as the sign of God's blessing upon their efforts. Sooner or later, when numerical growth is the end, almost every means of achieving it will be employed. We see it more and more

among the brethren. The building of “family life centers,” the use of singing groups that are professional entertainers and that mimic mechanical instruments with spiritual songs, the preaching of a no-fault, no-guilt “gospel” and a score of other come-ons for young and old are but obvious symptoms of the growth mania. It cannot avoid the rotten harvest of apostasy. Let us plant and water the seed of the kingdom and leave the growth to God (1 Cor. 3:6), rather than trying to force it by worldly procedures.

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