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How Do Churches Grow?

by Paul Earnhart

There is a great need today for Christians to remember what their business is in the world. You would think it impossible for disciples of Jesus Christ to forget that He "came into the world to save sinners" (1 Tim. 1:15), "to seek and save that which was lost" (Lk. 19:10) -- but it has been managed. Local churches now, as of old, can fall prey to a sterile orthodoxy that lacks both passion and compassion (Rev. 2:2-5). Christians who do not "live for the lost" in both their individual and collective lives have become as useless as road dust and can no longer justify their existence. The Lord has not been unclear about that (Mt. 5:13).

It is for this reason that my heart has thrilled at what seems to be a resurgence of evangelistic fervor among the disciples I know. It may indeed be yet no larger than a man's hand, but it is there and it is filled with promise. This is as it should be, for there is a desperate need for us to be about our Father's business both at home and abroad, remembering all the while that this will be accomplished not by some institutional scheme, but by the awakened concern of individual saints who have come to know their Savior better and to love Him more.

Given the fragile infant nature of this new evangelistic stirring among us, it may be premature and even risky to be issuing warnings, but memories of the past serve to edge with concern the joy I feel at this emerging sense of compassion for lost souls. I can still remember the ground swell of missionary zeal that arose in the churches following the upheaval of a world war which scattered Christians from their previously narrow circles to new places in their own country and abroad. A rising post-war prosperity joined with a new awareness of the size of the world produced an explosion of evangelism. The churches grew in numbers and wealth, and a heady spirit of self confidence took hold of many disciples as they moved from their modest meeting houses on "the wrong side of the tracks" into larger and more impressive buildings.

It was an exhilarating time, but it was also a dangerous time. From a people compelled by humble circumstances to trust in the Lord, we were transformed into a proud-spirited institution that gloried in its new-found social status. Even as men were fanning out across the world to tell the story of a simple undenominational discipleship, the gospel was in process of being lost to presumptuous pride. Human wisdom introduced "better methods" of accomplishing God's
(con't next page)

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How Do Churches Grow? (continued)

purposes and accommodations were made with the society to which the churches were more closely linked. It didn't have to happen and it shouldn't have happened, but we do well to note that it did happen.

My present joy at every new manifestation of zeal for perishing sinners is undiluted, but how bitter it would be to see this godly earnestness subverted by a repetition of old folly. So, while we are calling our brethren to the harvest field, let us give equal attention to the soundness of our faith and lives. This will happen as a matter of course if we maintain the humble spirit of our Savior and continue to know that the "victory is of the Lord" (Prov. 21:31). As we enlarge the place of our tent and lengthen its cords, we need to remember to strengthen its stakes (Isa. 54:2) by speaking "the things which befit the sound doctrine" (Titus 2:1) and holding fast "the pattern of sound words...in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 1:13).

The last thing I intend to suggest by all this is that we become paranoid about numerical growth. Sometimes I think there are as many Christians who take pride in being few as there are that grow puffed up by being many. It is not the NUMBER that is significant but the PEOPLE. People are lost one by one and they will be saved the same way. If we succeed in recovering every lost person we can, our numbers will of necessity increase, but it will still be the individual souls that are important and the glory and power will still be the Lord's.

A friend of mine recently asked my why I was so skeptical of numerical goal-setting in promoting growth in local churches. It was a new question for me, but he had read me accurately. I have an uneasiness about any great emphasis on statistics in measuring the growth of churches. I am skeptical because numbers can so often mask what is happening to people. The ultimate goal of our Father for His children is both spiritual and personal. He wills that we be "conformed to the image of His Son" (Rom. 8:29). Success or failure in this enterprise cannot be measured by mere statistics. A far more important question to raise as numbers change is how individual saints are faring in their effort to be more Christ-like. Churches only truly grow as the individual members of those assemblies grow. What is the glory of our numbers if people are not prepared to go to heaven?

There are no ultimate concrete number goals to be set. God is not willing that ANY should perish (2 Pet. 3:9). If our numbers increase, and God grant that they shall, let it be because we have shown compassion to one more lost soul who needs the gospel with its saving and transforming power, and not because we are trying to build "great churches." This whole thing is about people going to heaven. May we never forget that.

-- by brother Paul Earnhart, via, Weekly News Letter of Hanceville, AL church

If ALL Christians in the Lord's Army were like us, what shape would the army be in?

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Romans 16:16 "...the churches of Christ salute you."
