

CHURCH GROWTH

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 forty or fifty years ago. 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. The Lord's church enjoyed a marvelous numerical growth 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 past century. Even now, there are some areas of our world (e.g., India) where the Gospel is most eagerly received.

There is an observable principle that explains both rapid growth periods and periods of little or no growth: 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 duplicated or 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 nineteenth 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 either Jerusalem's or Athens's growth as a pattern for now or any other age or place.

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 as it will. This fact is demonstrated both in the wording of the Great Commission and in the record of 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. They fail to realize that, by that “logic,” God would be blessing a multitude of heretical religious groups more than He is us. Sooner or later, when numerical growth is the end, almost every means of achieving (and maintaining) it will be employed. We have witnessed a steadily increasing emphasis among brethren on such devices for growth over the past few decades. The building of “family life centers” (i.e., gymnasiums), the use of singing groups that are professional entertainers and that mimic mechanical instrument sounds with their voices in rendering 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. This phenomenon cannot avoid the rotten harvest of apostasy, which it has increasingly reaped. 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 numerical growth by worldly procedures.

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