

## **Preface**

What is the secret of church growth? There is not a single pastor who has any degree of motivation who would not like to have an answer to that question. He may reject modern church growth theory, or embrace it. He may read books about it, or do his own thinking. He may ask his friends, go to seminars, read the Puritans, study business theories, read the church fathers, or maybe just daydream.

The question may be borne out of an unhealthy ego trying to portray success. Or the question may be prompted by a firmly and deeply rooted love for souls for Jesus' sake.

Whatever the context, it would be a very very unusual pastor who would be satisfied with two or three souls, no interest in his work, and no results from his preaching.

So, again, what is the secret of church growth? And more to the point, what are the things that the church should do — or stop doing! — in order to grow.

## **Introduction**

In our text we have an amazing example of how God began to grow the early church. Peter preaches one very short, yet very pointed sermon, “and there were added that day about 3000 souls” (2:41). So it is very understandable that we are tempted to look at such a text and ask ourselves, “what is the secret of this church growth?”

And, indeed, there have been attempts to try to distill something out of this and similar places in the Bible in order to discover how to grow one's own church. Many have attempted to capture something of the primitive church — here, when I use the word “primitive”, it is not a criticism that all — the hope has been to rid ourselves of all the complexities, politics, and bureaucracy that can make up our own churches.

The problem with that approach is the fact that the book of Acts cannot support that sort of idealism. Yes, in chapter 3 there is the amazing healing of the lame beggar sitting outside the temple and a second wonderful sermon by Peter. However,

- in chapter 4, Peter and John are imprisoned;
- chapter 5 finds Ananias and Safira trying to cheat God;
- there is yet another imprisonment in Chapter 5 and this time the apostles who were arrested get beaten;

- in chapter 6 we have the first threat of a church split because of the complaints of the Greek speaking Jews against the Hebrew speaking Jews;
- chapter 7 is Stephen's martyrdom, and;
- chapter 8 has Saul/Paul persecuting the church.

So, to be perfectly objective, it appears that one secret of church growth is that preaching the truth can get you in big trouble! And, in fact, that is a sound biblical principle. "Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted", wrote Paul.<sup>1</sup>

Chapter 2 — indeed, the entire book — does give us many tips about what the church should do and not do, what it should be like and what it should not be like. So the question "what is the secret of church growth?" is a worthy one. But I want to narrow my focus back in chapter 2.

### **God grows the church**

Okay, are you ready for the secret of church growth? It is very easy and it is explicitly clear in this text. Look at verse 47.

*And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.*

There you go! That's it.

Sarcasm aside, this is actually a pretty important principle. Sometimes there is an evangelism explosion. Sometimes, however, there is an evangelism implosion. Jesus himself experienced that in John 6, "when many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him".<sup>2</sup>

In other words, we need to ask ourselves what we really mean by "church growth". Does church growth simply mean nickels and noses? No. In fact, we need to recognize that sometimes a decrease in nickels and noses can indicate an increase in maturity, godliness, and effectiveness.

- After Ananias and Safira were judged in chapter 5, how many people do you believe tried to lie about their generosity to the apostles? Intuition tells me that there was a significant decrease in home sales, but a significant increase in sincerity and candor in the congregation.
- Sometimes the preaching can be of the highest quality — as with Peter's 2 sermons — and one can still end up in jail. Sometimes one's intentions about the relationships between Christians can be as

---

<sup>1</sup> 2 Timothy 3:12.

<sup>2</sup> John 6:66.

honorable and well-intentioned as one likes, and one still gets complaints as in chapter 6.

So again, the real secret of church growth is that God grows the church.

### **Can do and cannot do**

But that's not the whole story. Acts chapter 2 distinguishes between things that the church of Christ can and should be doing and those things which the church cannot do. It's actually a rather interesting list. Go through it with me.

- 37. "Cut to the heart"
- 38–40. Peter "bore witness and continued to exhort them" (40)
- 41. "Baptized"
- 41. "there were added that day about 3000 souls"
- 42. "Devoted themselves"
- 43. "awe came upon every soul"
- 43. "Many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles"
- 44. "All who believed were together"
- 44. "All who believed ... had all things in common"
- 45. "They were selling their possessions and belongings"
- 45. "They were ... distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need"
- 46. "Day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts" — that didn't last very long though, did it?
- 47. "Praising God"
- 47. "Having favor with all the people"
- 47. "And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved"

If you break down the text like this, it is very easy to see that there are things that the church can and should be doing. Baptizing, for example. Devoting themselves to healthy practices of knowing the word of God ("the apostles' teaching"), worship, and time together in fellowship. These are the healthy practices, the proper things to which God's people should be giving themselves.

It is equally easy to see that there are things over which we have no control. Not everyone who heard Peter's teaching was "cut to the heart", as his hearers were in vs. 37. One cannot create a response of awe. One cannot manufacture signs and wonders at will. "Having favor with all the people" did not last very long. And, of course, it was "the Lord [who] added to their number day by day those who were being saved".

What I have found interesting over the years is that churches will often give a great deal of attention to the things that they cannot do and give minimal or no attention to the things that they can and should be doing.

They work very hard to figure out how to add numbers — and by extension they often mean nickels as well as noses — but give very little attention to the apostles' teaching, the prayers, the breaking of bread, or sharing with those who have need. They will strategize how to “gain favor with all the people”, but give no thought to what it means to have “glad and generous hearts”.

By the way, do you see how practical this approach is? Would it be good for St. John's to excel at evangelism, let us say, while at the same time we are evangelizing people into a church rife with gossip, slander, multiple political parties, egotism and power struggles in the leadership, and all the other mortal ills to which the church is naturally subject? That would be terrible! But a church that was full of people with “glad and generous hearts” is ripe and ready to walk alongside people who are hurting, lonely, lost, confused, broken, and so on.

As one brother in this congregation has rightly said, the metrics of the kingdom of God have more to do with behavior than with nickels and noses.

Notice also that the list of “can do” generally reflects our strategic outline of Outreach, Worship, and Fellowship. That is no surprise to me — nor should it be to you. Oh. W. F. Is nothing more than a simple way of characterizing the things to which the church of Christ ought to be giving us attention — the can do things — rather than the cannot do things.

## **Conclusion**

These are all things about which I have thought during my entire time as a pastor, and even before. What makes this topic of fresh concern and interest to me is the most gracious gift I have ever personally experienced as a pastor, that of 1150 Bristol Rd. And I find myself yet again asking myself the same questions. "What should we be doing?" "Are we doing it and doing it well?"

That means that I must again think about the "can-do" things and distinguished them clearly from the "cannot do" things.

It is in light of 1150 Bristol Rd. and these sorts of questions about the secret of church growth that we will be preaching through the book of James for the first part of Trinity season. James is the distillation of Jesus' teaching.

THIS SECTION IS INCOMPLETE: Consult audio for completion