



The Northpoint Lighthouse

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WHAT PRICE CHURCH "GROWTH"?

There has been much discussion among brethren in recent years about "church growth" and especially about why the church is not growing as rapidly as it did fifty or sixty years ago. Some point to the Jerusalem church in the early years (Acts 2-6) and seek to recreate the amazing reception granted the Gospel and the church's phenomenal numerical growth in 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 found an abundance of fertile soil in what was still a burgeoning USA. Again, the church led all religious groups in growth for a few years in the middle part of the twentieth century. Presently, some other areas of our world (e.g., India) more eagerly receive the Gospel than do our fellow-citizens.

I believe an obvious principle explains both rapid growth periods and periods of little or no growth: When Jesus said that the fields were white unto harvest (John 4:35), He manifestly referred specifically to "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" among whom He preached and worked (Mat. 15:24) and to whom He sent His apostles (10:6). The fields are not equally ripe for harvesting everywhere at all times. At a given time some places are "in season" while others are "out of season" regarding reception of the Gospel (2 Tim. 4:2).

The circumstances in Jerusalem that led to such exceptional growth in a short time will never be duplicated or repeated (God had providentially been preparing for that momentous day for centuries). Extraordinary circumstances likewise yielded the great reception accorded message of the pioneer restorers in our nation. Further, unique circumstances prevailed in the middle part of the past century that no longer prevail.

Circumstances greatly govern and alter practical results. We should not forget that, even in the first century, while equally able and inspired men in both Jerusalem and Athens preached the same Gospel, it hardly produced the same results in both cities. It is therefore folly to use either Jerusalem's or Athens's growth as a growth-pattern for now or any other age or place.

One does not find emphasis in the New Testament on the numerical growth of the church **as an end**. The emphasis is on preaching the Gospel to as many lost souls as possible and letting growth, whether it be little or much (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.

Very unfortunately, numerical growth became the primary goal of some brethren a few decades ago, and yet remains such to many. To them, large numbers equal success for the church. Many now equate the numerical size of a congregation with God's blessings or the lack thereof. They fail to realize that, by that "logic," God would be blessing a multitude of heretical religious groups more than He is His own people. History reveals that, sooner or later, when numerical growth is the end, almost every means of achieving (and maintaining) it are employed.

We have witnessed a steadily increasing emphasis among brethren on such artificial devices for growth over the past few decades. The building of "family life centers," 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," the attempt to address every "felt need" of everybody in town, and a score of other come-ons for young and old are but obvious symptoms of the growth mania. Although these phenomena may attract many people, they appeal to physical rather than spiritual interests—with the cross and sound doctrine often far in the background. "Gains" thus achieved cannot avoid the rotten harvest of apostasy, which they have increasingly reaped.

Faithful disciples will be content with planting and watering the seed of the kingdom and leaving the growth to God (Luke 8:11-15; 1 Cor. 3:6), rather than trying to force numerical growth by worldly methodology.

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