

It Is Written

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TWO CHURCHES WANT TO GROW

By Bill Hall

Two churches want to grow, but their attitudes toward growth differ greatly.

The first church looks upon growth as its primary purpose. Goals are placed before the membership: "We want to double our membership within the next three years," for instance. Success (or failure) is judged almost entirely on the basis of that congregation's numerical growth.

The second church looks upon the saving of souls as its primary purpose, and any growth in membership is just a natural result of that primary purpose. Members of the second church are infused with the value of immortal souls rather than with a sense of congregational pride.

Members of the first church become eager to get people to the water. Baptism is the point at which individuals are added to the membership list; consequently, it will take many baptisms to keep pace with their goal of doubling their membership. They must not only bring them to the water, but also do so within the time period arbitrarily set by their leaders.

Members of the second church are far more eager to encourage repentance. Their concern is for additions to the Lord's body rather than additions to a membership list. Their approach is to bring sinners to a consciousness of their sin and the consequences of remaining in sin. If they can do this in a single study, excellent. But if considerable time is required to uproot false concepts and to plant the true seed of the gospel, they patiently accept this. Their only sense of urgency arises from the uncertainty of life and its duration. But they know that shortcuts are not the answer; that baptism without repentance is worthless; and that once people are brought to true repentance, having been properly taught, baptism for the remission of sins will follow. So they wait with longsuffering until the gospel brings about its desired effect in the hearts of those whom they are teaching.

Members of the first church may be tempted to employ questionable tactics in their interactions with others. The old methods and approaches don't seem to be effective anymore. New, more positive approaches must be developed. Thus, the members of the first church appeal to the pride of the people. They persuade them of their self-worth; they build their self-image; they tell them how valuable they would be to the congregation. "We need you," they tell their prospects. They might also extol the virtues of the congregation, persuading their prospects of the value of being part of such a vibrant, growing group. People "become members" and conform to the rules imposed for acceptance within the group, but there may have been little grief over sin; in fact, they might still believe they were Christians before they "became members."

The members of the second church recognize that the gospel never appeals to human pride. They bring people to see their spiritual bankruptcy; that they have "nothing to pay" that their true worth is not to be found in self, but in Christ; that they must humble themselves and look to Christ for their exaltation; that they are sinners in desperate need of salvation; that their only hope is to be found in Christ. They would bring them to say, in the words of Mrs. C. H. Morris:

*"Nearer, still nearer, nothing I bring,
Naught as an offering to Jesus my King,
Only my sinful, now contrite heart;
Grant me the cleansing Thy blood doth impart."*

The first church may become compromising in its teaching. Its elders intend to maintain doctrinal

soundness, but there is pressure to produce and to maintain the growth rate set before the congregation. When doctrinal soundness becomes an obstacle to that purpose, the elders may succumb to the pressures and ease up on their teaching. The second church faces no such pressure, for in its concern for the spiritual well-being of people, there is a desire for truth on every subject vital to salvation.

The first church emphasizes organizational and institutional concerns; the second emphasizes spiritual and heavenly ones.

We commend the second church to our readers. Serious problems can result when churches see growth as their primary purpose. If goals are to be set—and goals can serve a good purpose—let them focus on the number to be taught rather than the number to be baptized. If new approaches are needed, let them be conceived only if they are compatible with God’s wisdom. In efforts to reach others, let all determine to know nothing “except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.” When churches thus become really serious about saving souls, God will give the increase, and growth will take care of itself.

Faith: A Gift Not Given?

By Gary Henry

"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16).

One of the most wonderful things about the gospel is its openness. The promise of salvation is open to “whoever believes,” no matter how badly they may have wrecked their life.

However, there is a popular concept of faith which sees it as something a person cannot have unless he’s one of those to whom God chooses to give it. In one of his movies, for example, Tom Hanks plays a character who, when asked if he believed in God, replied, “Faith is a gift that I have yet to receive.” That is a gentler way of putting it, isn’t it? Rather than saying, “I don’t believe there is a God,” characterizing it as a gift not given suggests that a person wouldn’t object to being a believer, but that God has simply not given the gift.

Scripturally, Ephesians 2:8 is often used to argue that faith is imparted by God: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God.” However, a close look at what Paul says is that the gift is salvation, not faith. He is emphasizing that nothing we may do, even choosing to believe, is enough to earn or merit our salvation. It is a gift.

The Gospel of John, in its entirety, is a study of what faith is and how it happens. John records a number of frank statements about faith made by Jesus, including the one where He said, “Therefore I said to you that you will die in your sins; for if you do not believe that I am He, you will die in your sins” (John 8:24; cf. 3:16; 20:30-31).

If we do not believe the message of Christ is true, let’s accept responsibility for the choice we’ve made. Our choice to disbelieve is not due to the withholding of a gift by God — it is due to our verdict that the gospel is not credible. But this matter is too great to leave it there. Let’s not make our choice so final that we never revisit the message. From our perspective today, it may be more compelling than it appeared in the past. If we see that Jesus was, in fact, telling the truth, the question is: what are we going to do about it? The choice is ours.

*One day there came along that silent shore,
While I my net was casting in the sea,
A Man who spoke as never man before,
I followed him; new life began in me.
Mine was the boat, but his the voice,
And his the call, yet mine the choice.*

(George MacDonald)