

Section 5

Biblical Leadership Completed, or How A Church Grows Up

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How to Grow a Church

Becoming part of a church, to some, is something like the experience of turning 40 years old:

Question: “Now that you’re 40, have you discovered the meaning to life?”

Answer: “Yes—I’ve discovered that, after 40, there is no meaning to life!”

To too many, the Christian life, as it relates to church life, is a journey into discouragement—and disenfranchisement. There is little meaning. The result is that *our churches are full of believers who are lonely*—who need brothers and sisters who can come along side and, under the leadership of pastor-teachers, and provide an environment for true Christian living and growth.

In studying the subject of authority, we have discovered that believers have the same two anxieties about authority that they have about buying a used car: first, will it get me where I want to go? And second, what will it cost me to get there? The answers to these questions, as we will see further in this chapter, are seen in the

context of real Christian community—both as it relates to the life of the church, and as it allows for relationships with others.

CHURCH GROWTH—ESSENTIALS FOR RAISING A HEALTHY BODY

It is easy to be fooled by the counterfeit. It looks the same, and it smells the same. The words sound the same, and the people seem the same. But it is different. It is as different as physical is to spiritual, visible to invisible, and temporary to eternal.

A familiar, yet appropriate, rhyme says it well:

*No service of itself is small
Nor great, though earth it fill
But that is small which seeks its own
And great which does God's will*

While motives, like *seeks its own*, are hard to say, actions and results are more available to analysis. Today church growth theorists—well-meaning though they are—boldly declare that salvation is the purpose of the Church, and statistical growth—or numbers—is the measure of that purpose, or success. Usually this thinking comes from missions' circles, and understandably so. But it is not enough to look at salvation, or statistics, or the book of Acts, for what we know and understand about the Church.

The will of God is to bring everything—saved and unsaved—under His rule and subjection, and for His glory (cf. Eph 1:11-12, Rom 9:22-23). Both the children of God, and the children of Satan, as well as all creation, will bow before Him as Sovereign and Lord. The purpose is greater than just salvation—as full of grace and mercy as that is! It is to glorify God as He works out everything according to His will. Consequently, “that is small which seeks its own, and great which does God’s will.”

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But how can an individual saint, or a church, understand the will of God? How can they be confident they are on not just a good track, but the best track which is the will, and leads to the approval, of God? The answer comes in identifying the four main ingredients of church growth, and noting how they apply to the individuals and groups that make up a church.

FIRST INGREDIENT: THE WILL OF GOD

We are told that there are cakes, and then there are cakes! Some are store-bought: just add milk, and bake. And then there are cakes made from scratch: flour, oil, eggs, and baking powder. The main ingredient is flour. Oil or butter adds smoothness and moisture, eggs bind it together, and baking powder is necessary for it to raise and bake. Sounds better than zucchini!

Following this analogy, we would submit a similar consideration for a scratch recipe for church growth. Again, there are four essential ingredients. The first and, in some respects, main ingredient is the will, or Word, of God. Additionally, the body is made up most smoothly by the will, or commitment, of Christian men and women. Third, godly pastor-teachers are necessary, like eggs, for the binding together of the church. And fourth, the church will not grow, or fulfill its design, without the strategic work of the Holy Spirit.

The will of God, or the Word of God, is the first of four essentials for proper church growth. Remembering that we have noted that what is assumed is soon forgotten, or even eventually denied, the Scripture teaches about itself:

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Tim 3:16-17).

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Paul's words of encouragement to Timothy were that the Scriptures — principally the Old Testament, and progressively the New Testament as well — were from God, and were profitable for four things: teaching, or presenting the standards of the Kingdom; rebuking, or identifying error; correcting, or bringing thinking or actions into line with Truth; and training, or establishing a pattern of faith, hope and love which promoted the Kingdom, and the work of its citizens.

How does this apply to the Church? Only in every respect! Whatever else we do, our *goods and services* are people, and our goal, within the purposes of God's glory, is to establish the saints in maturity and righteousness. This cannot be done without the Scriptures. It cannot be done without the admonishing, encouraging, and training process provided by the Word. God expects that in the conversations and meetings — plans and programs — of the church we have a central focus the Word of God, which is His revealed will. No public meeting, private prayer group, special-needs ministry, or youth group justifies its ongoing existence apart from substantial exposure, and obedience, to the Scriptures.

This follows for leaders as well. As a body of believers sees among its leaders a willingness to know and obey the Scriptures, they are encouraged to do the same. Even as leaders translate their love for God into obedience to Him, and love for others into servant-styled service for them, so believers will follow. The principle is that *it takes one to make one*.¹

This pattern is picked up, similarly, in Paul's last written epistle:

You, then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others (2 Tim 2:1-2).

In reviewing four generations of leadership, Paul majors on the majors: the beginning point is the grace of Christ Jesus. Drawing

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on that—as it is known in the Scriptures, and within the context of Paul’s life as Timothy knew it—leads to the passing on of the heritage of Christian leadership from older to younger. *It is the transfer of leadership from the proven to the reliable to the qualified!* No store-bought recipe has ever come close to that.

SECOND INGREDIENT: BELIEVERS WHO WORK TOGETHER FOR COMMON GOALS

Secondly, and following directly from the priority of the Word as the will of God, is the necessity of a church having godly men and women who are committed to the Word and will of God. This is seen in, what some writers call, *the* text on the New Testament church:

It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work (Eph 4:11-16).

Just as there is confusion about the nature of grace in the Scriptures, so there is confusion about good works, or the work of the ministry. While good works have *nothing* to do with our justification and salvation (cf Eph 2:1-5, 8-9), they have *everything* to do with

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the life of the church, and the nature of the ministry for leaders and believers (cf Eph 2:10, 4:11-12, 16). Salvation is a free gift, and costs me nothing, but following Christ as an obedient disciple will cost me everything!

What do we mean by the will or commitment of men? Ephesians 4 identifies two kinds of commitments: first to our Head, and second, to each other. The promise is that as we participate in “works of service” we also move toward maturity. We cannot grow without work, and, most particularly, working as a servant. As we grow, we become more similar to our Master (“attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ”), and close to Him as well (“we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head”).

The fruit of this growth is not only an increasing Christlikeness—measured, in our judgment, by the fruit of the Spirit—but it also leads to a second commitment: a fellowship and community with an church known as family—the family of God.

The greatest cure for loneliness is ligament-growth. That is, within the environment of love, each member of the body, called ligaments (cf Eph 4:16), “turns its attention back on itself” in the sense of believers both hearing and seeing the Kingdom in the lives of each other.

There are two critical considerations here: first, believers have to be “speaking the truth in love” or “truthing in love” (Eph 4:15). What we say, and what we do, has to equally reflect the truth of the Word of God, and translate it lovingly (“love” being defined as “the willful choosing of the interests of another over my own”) into relationships in the church. Second, each member is needed. The emphasis is on “every supporting ligament” and “each part does its work.”

THIRD INGREDIENT: ELDERS WHO REALLY PASTOR, AND WHO REALLY TEACH

This will or commitment of men applies to both believing men

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and women in the assembly, and the elders who make up the pastors and teachers in that same group. Now, we need to be candid and honest as we work through the implications of this. What kind of opportunity does our Sunday meeting provide for building relationships? How do needs become known, and met? What kind of opportunity is there for individual contribution—in love-to the whole body? How well can shepherds know the flock from just Sunday meeting exposure? We think the answer is found, in part, in that we have asked our Sunday meeting to do too much of the wrong kinds of ministry, and not enough of the kinds of worship reflected in the New Testament.²

The work of the ministry, as it relates to the will of men, is seen primarily in the small group relationships commonly called *shepherding groups* or *growth groups* or *fellowship groups*. This is *not just another add-on program*—attempting to modernize the church to the 1990's. Rather, it is the only way that there can be an appropriate context for the *knowing and being known* kinds of relational intimacy that are essential requisites of the New Testament model of shepherds and sheep.

Essentially, we recommend that each elder—having been set apart for the work of pastoring and teaching—should have a small group of believers that, year in and year out, is his primary ministry responsibility within the context of the larger church body.³

This is in keeping with the existence of house churches in the New Testament.⁴ While *church* in the New Testament can be the universal body of Christ, a city-identity, or a smaller group meeting together regularly in one geographic region, the local churches in the New Testament were house churches with maximum *upper-room* group sizes for about 40 believers.

While believers also came together in larger gatherings in a city, and even with the numbers of believers in Jerusalem, we believe the regular New Testament church meetings were in the homes of the believers (cf. Acts 2:41-47, 4:31, 20:7-8; 1 Cor 16:19; Rom 16:5; Col 4:15; Philemon 2). Obvious limitations in meeting room sizes

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(though we suspect intended and ordained by God!), along with the above references, indicate the strategic place for the small group in church ministry.

Typical small group meetings include a time of study of the Scriptures — using an informal discussion format, but moving toward intended conclusions for biblical doctrine and application — prayer, possibly some singing, and development of friendships and relationships. In this context, leaders (and their marriages, and families!) are seen as real, and lives are joined together in Christian commitment. We cannot say it strong enough: this context is the real New Testament measure of the indispensable ministries of shepherding *and* teaching needed in our churches today.

To sum up, the elder's responsibility for shepherding and for teaching is *primarily* seen in his ongoing work with a small group of believers who meet as a cell or sub-group of the local assembly of which they are all a part. Then, as the elders meet together, they are maintaining the kind of *regular involvement* — both in the lives of the believers who make up the church, as well as with each other — required by the New Testament model for the church.

Whatever other ministry responsibilities — compensated or not — they assume, these elders as the key church leader must be working at this level to qualify as the New Testament pastor-teacher. And, if they are not involved at this level, they do not qualify for the office or responsibilities of an elder.

FOURTH INGREDIENT: THE HOLY SPIRIT

It is often said that there are only two things we can do with opportunity: we can use it, or we can lose it! More than seeing this as one of those *bad news, good news* kind of stories, this is more *good news, good news*.

It is good news at two levels. First of all, without developing volumes on the nature of the work of the Spirit in the life of the believer, but rather focusing on primary features of His will for us,

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the Scriptures teach that His ministry is one of helping us use—rather than lose—opportunities provided by the existence of Christ’s Church:

The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned (1 Cor 2:14).

Without reading our 20th century meanings into these words, this text says that men without the Spirit reject the words of wisdom from God (in this context known as verbally inspired Scripture), and is without spiritual discernment. By contrast, the spiritual man (cf. 2:16) has understanding. In this context, this means accepting—rather than not accepting—and calling Scripture wisdom from God—rather than foolishness.

The work of the Spirit of God, then, is to *apply* the words of Scripture to our lives. Some would believe the Spirit does the work of bible study for us—and thus provides content for our teaching.⁵ This text, among others on the Holy Spirit, indicates His primary concern with taking the truth of the Word that we read and study, and applying it to our hearts in ways that changes our lives (cf. Rom 8:5-17; Eph 1:15-23, 4:29-32; Gal 5:16-26).

This, then, is a fourth essential ingredient for properly growing a church. We not only need the word of God, and believers who are committed to the same Lord, but also qualified elders who pastor and teach, and, finally, the Holy Spirit who takes the Word, and applies it sovereignly and thoroughly to the hearts of believers and leaders alike.

CHURCH GROWTH—MEETING TOGETHER TO GROW PEOPLE

Bud Wilkinson, formerly coach at the University of Oklahoma

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as well as of the NFL's St. Louis Cardinals, liked to define the church as follows:

For me, the church is something like a football game. It involves 22 men on the field—exhausted—sorely in need of rest. And it also includes 70,000 people in the stands—sorely in need of exercise!

Why is it that this is true the majority of the time? The answer is that we have attempted to make the Christian church do other than it was intended to do, and have asked of it that it focus on people as a means toward institutional ends, rather than believers as the reason the Church exists!

Having covered the basics of church growth, we are now ready to identify the *reason* we have been laboring in this theological kitchen. The purpose is to create a *food* worthy of its design, and capable of satisfying its hungry *customer*.

Church is not the building we attend, nor the name we give an organization. It is *not where we pray, but we who pray*. Therefore, the basic ingredients of the Word and Spirit of God, coupled with obedient leaders and believers who are willing to obey and serve, are for *producing a people which are unsurpassed in the most important ministry enterprise: that of changing lives—of taking those known as children of God into growth and maturity*.

A well-known New Testament text on the church illustrates this vital purpose:

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching (Heb 10:24-25).

Some believers flinch when reading this text—because of current

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or former shepherds who specialize more in beating than feeding the sheep! But, beyond warnings to continue regularly meeting as an assembly, this text establishing what is to happen when we meet together.

The results of assembly together should be twofold: first, we are to develop relationships in a way that results in lives that are characterized by love and good deeds. This fits together well with other texts which remind us of the agenda for relational intimacy—namely, that loving God, and loving others, is the essentials of the expression of grace in our lives (cf Matt 22:34-40; 1 Tim 1:5; Eph 4:15-16). Only in the context of small group nurture and accountability can believers avoid the luxuries of unrestrained behavior and decisions, or being cynical or critical without knowing or caring about the people-consequences. The regular barometer of the quality of our meetings need not be the eloquence of the message, nor the professional dynamic of our meetings, but rather are we providing regular contexts where a *large majority* (at least) of our people are in the process of people-building relationships where they can both be accountable to leadership, and responsible for others besides themselves.

This can be illustrated by the issue of the role of the Christian woman in our homes and marriages. One of the early traumas young couples work through is the giving up the *two-income* earning power for the joys and responsibilities of parenting. In our culture, the pressure is on—sadly, even in many churches—for the mother to continue to work. By far the best way to encourage “love and good deeds”, in obedience to Titus 2:3-5, is for the leaders’ marriages to model this principle, and for it to be loving encouraged in the context of a supportive small group committed to understanding and obeying the Scriptures.

The point: the church is to be a refuge for believers to reappraise their lives in relation to the will of God, and to provide a context of relationships where they see others obeying similarly, and are encouraged to do likewise. This is the good and lofty standard of

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encouraging one another in love and good deeds.

Second, it can be noted that intimacy is always difficult. If it stops being difficult, it stops being intimacy! Therefore, our text also says: “let us encourage one another.” We have not taken you on a literary journey into matters of the Church with any illusion that we are offering you answers that are easier. If any thing, they are harder, because they prevent the masks and games that we all are tempted to play in large groups—where matters of status and position are interpreted as indications of spirituality, and where fear and pride transplant faith and humility.

The ministry of encouragement is the progressive exposing of need without rejection.⁶ It can only happen for a group of believers in settings where we know and are known, and we understand the ability of the group to be trusted with our joys and our concerns. All the better when this group involves the leadership of the church.

Matters of church growth and ministry do not have to be sources of loneliness, and discouragement. Rather, the church is to do the opposite: it is to provide relational contexts for leaders and believers to candid and genuine together—to face the same Scriptures—and, under the encouragement of the Spirit of God, to apply them wisely to our daily living. As such, the church is to grow or produce people who increasingly love God, and others—both believers and unbelievers—even if they are over 40, and don’t like to shop for used cars!

Only a few loose ends remain. One is evangelism. Read on. It only gets more exciting!