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The Disciple-Making Minister

Biblical Principles for Fruitfulness and Multiplication

By David Servant

Chapter Five Church Growth

So you are a pastor and you want your church to grow. That is a very common desire among pastors. But why do you want your church to grow? *What is the honest reason in your heart?*

Do you want your church to grow so that you can feel successful? Do you want to be respected and feel influential? Do you want to yield power over people? Do you hope to gain wealth? Those are all wrong reasons for wanting your church to grow.

If you want your church to grow so that God can be glorified as more and more lives are transformed by the Holy Spirit, then that is the right reason to desire church growth.

It is possible of course for us to fool ourselves, thinking our motives are pure when in fact they are actually selfish.

How can we know our true motives? How can we know if we truly want to build *God's* kingdom or simply build our *own* kingdom?

One way is by monitoring our inward reactions to the success of other pastors. If we think our motives are pure, if we think that we sincerely want *God's* kingdom and *His* church to grow, but we discover some envy or jealousy in our hearts when we hear of other churches' growth, it reveals that our motives are less than pure. It shows that we really aren't so interested in *the* church growing, but in *our* own church growing. And why is that? Because our motives are at least partially selfish.

We can also check our motives by monitoring our inward reaction when we hear of a new church that is starting in our area. If we feel threatened, that is a sign that we are more concerned about our own kingdom than *God's* kingdom.

Even pastors of large or growing churches can check their motives by this same means. Such pastors might also ask themselves some questions, such as, "Would I ever consider planting new churches by sending and relinquishing key leaders and people from my congregation, resulting in my church becoming smaller?" A pastor who is very resistant to such an idea is likely building his church for his own glory. (On the other hand, a pastor of a large church could plant new churches for his own glory as well, just so he can boast of how many churches have been birthed from his church.) Another question he could ask himself would be, "Do I associate with pastors of smaller churches or have I distanced myself from them, feeling above them?" Or, "Would I be willing to pastor just twelve to twenty people in a house church, or would that be too hard on my ego?"¹

¹ Here is another advantage of the house church model—pastors aren't striving to have large congregations for the wrong reasons, because congregation size is limited by house size.

The Church Growth Movement

In Christian bookstores across America and Canada, there are often entire sections of shelves devoted to books on church growth. These books and the concepts within them have spread around the world. Pastors are hungry to learn how to increase attendance at their churches, and they are often quick to adopt the advice of American mega-church pastors who are deemed successful by virtue of the size of their buildings and the number of people who attend on Sundays.

Those who are a little more discerning, however, realize that attendance and building size are not necessarily an indication of the quality of disciple-making. Some American churches have grown due to appealing doctrines that are a perversion of biblical truth. I've spoken to pastors all over the world who have been shocked to learn that multitudes of American pastors believe and proclaim that once a person is saved, he can never forfeit his salvation regardless of what he believes or how he lives his life. Similarly, many American pastors proclaim a watered-down gospel of cheap grace, leading people to think that they can gain heaven without holiness. Quite a few more proclaim a gospel of prosperity, fueling the greed of people whose religion is a means to gain more treasures that they can lay up on earth. Those are pastors whose church-growth techniques certainly should not be imitated.

I've read my share of books on the subject of church growth, and I have mixed feelings about them. Many contain strategies and advice that are, to some degree, biblical, making them worthwhile to read. Almost all, however, are based on the 1700-year-old institutional church model, rather than on the biblical church model. Consequently, the focus is not on building the body of Christ through multiplying disciples and disciple-makers, but on building individual institutional congregations, which always requires bigger buildings, more specialized church staff and programs, and a structure that is more like a business corporation than a family.

Some modern church-growth strategies seem to suggest that, just for the sake of gaining numbers, church services be made more attractive for people who don't want to follow Jesus. They advise short, positive sermons only, non-expressive worship, lots of social activities, that money never be mentioned, and so on. This does not result in the making of disciples who deny themselves and obey all of Christ's commandments. It results in professing Christians who are indistinguishable from the world and who are on the broad road to hell. This is not God's strategy to win the world but Satan's strategy to win the church. It is not "church growth" but "world growth."

The Seeker-Sensitive Model

The most popular American church-growth strategy is often referred to as the "seeker-sensitive" model. In this strategy, Sunday morning services are designed so that (1) Christians feel comfortable inviting unsaved friends, and (2) unsaved people hear the gospel in non-offensive terms to which they can relate and understand. Midweek services and small groups are reserved for discipling the believers.

By this means, some individual churches have grown quite large. Among American institutional churches, these may have the greatest potential to evangelize and disciple people, as long as everyone is incorporated into small groups (which they often are not) and disciplined there, and as long as the gospel is not compromised (which it always is when the goal is to be non-offensive, because the true gospel is offensive to human pride). At least seeker-sensitive churches have implemented some strategy to reach unsaved people, something that most institutional churches do not have.

But how does the American seeker-sensitive model compare with the biblical model for

church growth?

In the book of Acts, God-called apostles and evangelists preached the gospel publicly and from house to house, accompanied by signs and wonders that attracted the attention of unbelievers. Those who repented and believed in the Lord Jesus devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, and regularly met together in houses where they learned God's Word, exercised spiritual gifts, celebrated the Lord's Supper, prayed together, and so on, all under the leadership of elders/pastors/overseers. God-called teachers and prophets circulated among the churches. Everyone shared the gospel with friends and neighbors. There were no buildings to construct that would slow the church's growth and rob God's kingdom of the resources that would help spread the gospel and make disciples. Leaders were quickly trained on the job rather than sent off to seminaries or Bible schools. All of this resulted in exponential church growth for a limited season, until all the receptive people in a given area were reached.

By comparison, the seeker-sensitive model is normally void of signs and wonders, thus it lacks that divine means of advertisement, attraction and conviction. It depends heavily on natural means of marketing and advertising to attract people to a building where they can hear the message. The preacher's oratory skills and his powers of persuasion are the primary means of conviction. How this differs from the methods of Paul, who wrote, "My message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God" (1 Cor. 2:4-5).

More Differences

The seeker-sensitive model is generally void of apostles and evangelists, because the primary figure is the pastor. A question: Does eliminating apostles and evangelists from their role of evangelization and giving that responsibility to pastors a superior means of obtaining church growth?²

The seeker-sensitive pastor preaches once a week in a Sunday service where Christians are encouraged to bring unsaved people. Thus, generally speaking, the gospel can be heard only once a week by unsaved associates of church members. Those unsaved people must be willing to come to church, and they must be invited by church members who are willing to invite them to church. In the biblical model, apostles and evangelists continually proclaim the gospel in public and private places, and all believers share the gospel with their friends and neighbors. Of these two models, through which would the most unsaved people hear the gospel?

The seeker-sensitive model requires an acceptable building that believers are not ashamed to invite their unsaved associates to and which their unsaved associates are not ashamed to visit. This always requires a substantial sum of money. Before the gospel can be "spread," an acceptable building must be obtained or constructed. In America that building must be in a good location, usually in wealthy suburbs. By contrast, the biblical model requires no special buildings, special locations or money. The spread of the gospel is not limited to the number of people who can fit into special buildings on Sundays.

Still More Differences

When comparing *some* seeker-sensitive churches with the biblical model, there are even more differences.

² This is much of the reason why today we have so many evangelists, teachers, prophets and even apostles pastoring churches. So many God-given ministries are not given a rightful place or any place within the institutional church structure, and so non-pastoral ministers end up pastoring churches, robbing the church of the greater blessing they could be to the larger body of believers within a biblical structure. It seems everyone has reverted to building his own kingdom in the form of an institutional church, regardless of his true calling. Because pastors supposedly have the right to "their peoples'" tithes, and much of that goes to constructing and maintaining buildings, non-pastoral ministers resort to pastoring churches just to gain financial support for the ministries to which they are actually called.

The apostles and evangelists in the book of Acts called people to repent, believe in the Lord Jesus and be baptized immediately. People were expected, at their conversion, to become disciples of Christ, meeting the conditions Jesus laid down for discipleship, enumerated in Luke 14:26-33 and John 8:31-32. They began loving Jesus supremely, living in His word, taking up their crosses, and giving up all their rights of possession, new stewards of that which now belonged to God.

The gospel that is often proclaimed in seeker-sensitive churches is different. Sinners are told how much God loves them, how He can meet their felt needs, and how they can be saved by “accepting Jesus as Savior.” After they pray a short “salvation prayer,” never having been told about counting the cost of discipleship, they are often assured that they are genuinely saved and solicited to join a class where they can begin to grow in Christ. If they do join such a class (many never return to church), they are often taken through a systematic learning process that focuses on gaining more knowledge of the church’s particular doctrines rather than becoming more obedient to Christ’s commandments. The pinnacle of this “discipleship” program is when the believer *eventually* starts to tithe his income to the church (to pay primarily for the mortgage and non-biblical staff salaries, which amounts to horrible stewardship, supporting much of which is not ordained of God and robbing that which God does want supported) and is led to believe that he has “found his ministry” when he begins performing some supportive role within the institutional church that is never once mentioned in Scripture.

What would happen if your nation’s government, concerned because there were not enough men volunteering for its army, decided to become “seeker-sensitive”? Imagine that they promised potential recruits that if they joined, there was nothing expected of them—their paycheck would be a free gift, unearned and unmerited. They could get up in the morning whenever they wanted. They could practice the training drills if they wanted to, but they had the option to watch TV instead. If war broke out, they could chose if they wanted to participate in battles or go to the beach. What would be the result?

No doubt the army’s ranks would swell! But the army would no longer be an army, unfit for its task. And that is what becomes of seeker-sensitive churches. Lowering the standards inflates Sunday attendance, but erodes discipleship and obedience. Those seeker-sensitive churches that attempt to “preach the gospel” on Sundays and “do discipleship” at midweek services find that they have a problem if they tell people at the midweek services that only Jesus’ disciples are going to heaven. People then feel as if they’ve been lied to on Sunday mornings. Thus such churches must deceive people at the midweek services as well, presenting discipleship and obedience as options rather than requirements for heaven-bound people.³

I certainly understand that some institutional churches do incorporate aspects of the biblical model that others do not. Regardless, the biblical model is clearly the most effective in multiplying disciples and disciple-makers.

Why is the biblical model not followed today? The list of excuses seems endless, but in the final analysis, the reason the biblical model is not followed is because of tradition, unbelief and disobedience. Many say that the biblical model is an impossibility in our world today. But the fact is that the biblical model *is* being followed in many places around the world today. The explosive growth of the church in China over the past half-century, for example, is due to believers simply following the biblical model. Is God different in China than elsewhere?

All of this is to say that non-American pastors should beware of American church-growth methods that are being promoted around the globe. They would be much more successful in accomplishing Christ’s goal of making disciples if they pursued the biblical model of church growth.

³ Remember that the requirements that Jesus enumerated to be His true disciple in Luke 14:26-33 were not spoken to people who were already believers, as if He was offering them a second step in their spiritual journey. Rather, He was speaking to the multitudes. Becoming His disciple was the *only* first step Jesus offered, which is nothing less than the step of salvation. This stands in contrast to what is taught in most seeker-sensitive churches.

The Aftermath

It has been my observation that many proponents of modern church-growth teaching are out of touch with average pastors around the world. The very large majority of pastors shepherd flocks that consist of less than a hundred people. Many of these pastors become disheartened after trying church-growth techniques that don't work or that backfire through no fault of their own. No one seems to admit that there are several factors beyond the control of pastors that limit the growth of their churches. Let us consider some of them now.

First and foremost, *church growth is limited by the size of the local population*. It is obvious that most large institutional churches are found in large metropolitan areas. They often have millions of people from which to draw church members. If numbers, however, are a true determination of success, then a church should be judged, not by size, but by its *percentage* of the local population. On that basis, some churches of ten people are much more successful than other churches of ten thousand. A church with ten members in a village of fifty people is more successful than a church of ten thousand in a city of five million. (Yet those ten-person pastors will never be asked to speak at a church-growth convention.)

A Second Limiting Factor to Church Growth

Second, *church growth is limited by the degree of saturation among receptive people by all the churches in a given region*. At any certain time, there are only so many people in an area whose hearts are open to the gospel. Once those receptive ones are all reached, no church will grow, unless some already-churched people transfer to another church (which is how many large churches have grown—at the expense of other churches within their regions).

Of course, every current Christian was unreceptive to the gospel at one time but became receptive under the influence of the Holy Spirit. Thus, it is very possible that people who are currently unreceptive will become receptive. When they do, churches can grow. What we often refer to as “revival” occurs when *many* unreceptive people suddenly become receptive. We should not forget, however, that *one* person becoming receptive is also a revival, only on a smaller scale. Every big revival begins with just one person becoming receptive. So pastor, do not despise the day of small beginnings.

Jesus sent His disciples out to preach the gospel to cities that He knew would be unreceptive, where not one single person would repent (see Luke 9:5). Yet Jesus still sent them to preach the gospel there. Were those disciples unsuccessful? No, even though they had no converts (and no church growth) they were successful, because they obeyed Jesus.

Likewise, Jesus still sends pastors to villages, cities and suburbs where He knows that only a small percentage of the people will ever be receptive to the gospel. Those pastors who faithfully serve their small congregations are successful in God's eyes, even though they may be failures in the eyes of some church-growth experts.

All pastors in every area should also be encouraged by the fact that, because of God's great mercy, and in answer to His peoples' intercession, He is working to help unreceptive people become receptive. He attempts to influence unsaved people by means of their consciences, His creation, circumstances, His temporal judgments, the living testimony of His church, the preaching of the gospel, and the conviction of the Holy Spirit. So pastor, take heart. Keep obeying, praying and preaching. Before every large-scale revival there first exists the great *need* for a revival. And there always exists someone who is *dreaming* of a revival. Keep dreaming!

A Third Limiting Factor to Church Growth

A third factor that limits the growth of individual churches is the ability of the pastor. The majority of pastors do not have the skills that are necessary to oversee a large congregation, and it is no fault of their own. They are simply not gifted organizationally, administratively or with the preaching/teaching skills that are necessary for a large congregation. Clearly, such pastors are not called by God to pastor large congregations, and they would be wrong to attempt to pastor anything but an average-size institutional church or house church.

I recently read a popular book on the subject of leadership by the senior pastor of one of America's largest churches. As I read the pages he had filled with his experienced advice for modern pastors, my overriding thought was this: "He isn't telling us how to be a pastor—he is telling us how to be a chief executive officer of a huge corporation." And there is no other choice for the American institutional mega-church senior pastor. He needs a large staff of helpers, and managing that staff is a full-time job. The author of the book I was reading was skilled enough to be the chief executive officer of a large secular corporation. (Indeed, in his book he often quoted famous big-business management consultants, applying their advice to his readership of pastors.) But many, if not most of his readers, do not have the leadership and management skills that he has.

In that same book, the author candidly related how, on several occasions as he built his huge congregation, he had made almost-fatal mistakes, errors that could have cost him his family or his future in the ministry. By the grace of God, he survived. His experiences, however, reminded me of the many instances when other institutional pastors, striving for the same kind of success, made similar errors and suffered total shipwreck. Some, devoting themselves to their churches, lost their children or ruined their marriages. Some suffered nervous breakdowns or severe ministerial burnout. Others became so disillusioned that they ultimately abandoned the ministry altogether. Many others survived, but that is about all that can be said. They continue living lives of quiet desperation, wondering if their super-human sacrifice is worth it.

As I read that particular book, it continually reinforced in my mind the wisdom of the early church, where there was nothing that resembled modern institutional churches, and no pastor was responsible for a flock larger than twenty-five or so people. As I stated in a previous chapter, many pastors who think their congregations are too small should reconsider their ministries in light of Scripture. If they have fifty people, their churches might actually be too large. If there is capable leadership within, they might prayerfully consider dividing into three house churches and selling their building, with the goal of making disciples and building God's kingdom God's way.

If this seems too radical, they might at least begin to disciple future leaders, or start small groups, or if they already have some small groups, set some free to be autonomous house churches to see what happens.

Other Modern Church-Growth Techniques

There are other techniques being promoted today as essential for church growth besides the seeker-sensitive church model. Many of these other techniques are unbiblical and fall under the category of "spiritual warfare." They are advertised using such names as "pulling down strongholds," "warfare prayer," and "spiritual mapping."

We'll consider some of these practices in a later chapter about spiritual warfare. In short, however, we might wonder why such practices that were completely unknown to the apostles would be considered necessary for church growth today.

Many of the new means of church growth are the result of the experiences of a few pastors who say, "I did this and that, and my church grew. So if you do the same things, your church will also grow." The truth is, however, that there was no real connection between the growth of their churches and the peculiar things they did, even though they

thought otherwise. This is proven repeatedly when other pastors follow those peculiar teachings, do the identical things, and their churches don't grow at all.

A church-growth pastor might be heard to say, "When we started screaming at the demons over our city, revival broke out in our church. So you need to start screaming at demons if you want revival to come to your church."

But why have there been so many wonderful revivals around the world in the past 2,000 years of church history where there was no one screaming at demons over cities? This shows that, even though that pastor *thought* the revival was a result of screaming at demons, he was mistaken. More likely, people within his city started becoming receptive to the gospel, perhaps as a result of the united *prayers* of the church, and that pastor happened to be there preaching the gospel when they became receptive. Most often, church growth is the result of *being at the right place at the right time*. (And the Holy Spirit helps us be at the right places at the right times.)

If screaming at demons over cities brought revival to a certain pastor's church, why, after a length of time, did the revival slow and then cease, as it always does? If screaming at demons is *the* key, then it stands to reason that if we just keep screaming at the demons, *everyone* in the city will come to Christ. But they don't.

The truth is obvious when we simply give it a little thought. The only biblical means of church growth are prayer, preaching, teaching, disciple-making, the help of the Holy Spirit, and so on. And even those biblical means don't guarantee church growth, because God has made people free moral agents. They can choose to repent or not repent. It could be said that even Jesus failed at church growth at certain times when cities He visited did not repent.

All of this is to say that we only need to practice *biblical* means for building the church. Anything else is a waste of time. They are works that consist of wood, hay, and straw that will one day be burned in the fire and go unrewarded (see 1 Cor. 3:12-15).

Finally, the goal should not be just growth in numbers, but disciple making. If the church grows as we make disciples, then praise God!