

A BIBLICAL PATTERN OF CHURCH GROWTH

I try to be eclectic in my reading, gleaning from fields far and wide. I am sometimes amused, if not saddened by the attitude of some who will say if you want to see your church grow, this is what you must do. I am equally amused to see many different churches with differing philosophies that are growing, thriving churches. When I talk to the leadership of these churches, many will say God is blessing because they do "thus and so." There is a follow-up comment that if you do "this and that" like some of the other churches, you will not grow. Then I go to the "this and that" church, which is a growing flock and wonder how they grew with their "this and that" ignoring the "thus and so" method. Our methods may change, but our message should never change.

I recently read an article by a very learned man who dogmatically declared that a church must follow a certain pattern or die. When I read these words (and I read the article twice) it alarmed me because I wondered if we fall into the category of the dying rather than thriving church. Then I thought about how God has blessed us and He has brought people to us from our neighborhood, across town and from all points of the compass. Jesus said, *"...upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it"* (Matthew 16:18). Ultimately, Christ Himself builds His church. Whatever method we use, let us be biblical. In truth, if we are students of the Word, we will find the Scripture is not only replete with the message, it is full of methodology that would be helpful in any time period and any culture. Let us go to the early church and see if there is a pattern that is germane to our theme: how did the first church in the Bible grow? I bring to your attention five characteristics of that early church.

I. Born in Trouble

Acts 8:1-3 points out that there was great persecution in the church at Jerusalem and a serious diaspora took place as the flock was scattered. Things looked very bad for the early church. One of her bright and shining lights had just been put out; the preaching deacon, Stephen was martyred and the man most responsible, Saul of Tarsus was not content with Stephen's death. He wanted to root out this following of Jesus once and for all. No one was exempt from Saul's

assaults. The Bible says, *“As for Saul, he made havock of the church, entering into every house, and haling men and women committed them to prison”* (Acts 8:3). The word “havoc” means to affix a stigma to, to dishonour, spot, defile to treat shamefully or with injury, to ravage, devastate, ruin.

The Bible pointed out that, except for the apostles, everyone was scattered from Jerusalem. I wonder what the discussions were like just following the persecutions. This was within the first year since Jesus had ascended to Heaven, so His teaching was still very fresh in their minds. What must they have contemplated as they thought back to His teachings? I do not know this for sure, but I know at this time I would be asking, “What would Jesus do?” This would not be difficult to determine; all they had to do was consider what did Jesus say and what did He do when He was with us?

A. Jesus said, “Rejoice!”

“Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you” (Matthew 5:12)

B. Jesus said, “Don’t resist.”

“But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also” (Matthew 5:39).

C. Jesus said, “Love the people that hate you.”

“Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you” (Matthew 5:43,44).

II. Began with Preaching

“Therefore they that were scattered abroad went every where preaching the word” (Acts 8:4). Preaching in the early church was more than requirement, it was mandatory. In other words, there was no other way. I am surprised at the number of evangelicals that believe to reach the culture in which we live we must not be “preacher.” This may be modern opinion, but it is diametrically opposed to the biblical pattern. Paul said in II Timothy 4:2, *“Preach the word....”* I Corinthians 1:21 tells us, *“...it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe.”* This is our mandate and if it is not included in our method, we are not biblical.

III. Blended the People

"Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria, and preached Christ unto them. And the people with one accord gave heed unto those things which Philip spake, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did" (Acts 8:5,6). Observe the phrase "...the people with one accord...."

The word "accord" comes to us from the Greek word, "homothumadon." It is a unique Greek word that means to "rush along" yet "in unison." With the help of Thayer's Greek and Smith's Bible dictionary we discover, "The image is almost musical; a number of notes are sounded which, while different, harmonize in pitch and tone. As the instruments of a great concert under the direction of a concert master, so the Holy Spirit blends together the lives of members of Christ's church." The phrase "one accord" occurs 13 times in the Bible, 11 of those times it is found in the book of Acts. The Bible records, *"And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting" (Acts 2:2).* This unity is vital to the advancement of the church.

IV. Brought Out Demons

"For unclean spirits, crying with loud voice, came out of many that were possessed with them: and many taken with palsies, and that were lame, were healed" (Acts 8:7). When God begins to move, the Devil puts up a fight. To borrow the words of Dylan Thomas, he does not "go gentle into that good night." Our experience in the country of Zambia in Africa showed us that this is true. With the influx of conversions, there was an attempted satanic counterblow. Thankfully, *"...greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world" (1 John 4:4).* I remember after the meeting one night as my wife and I were heading back to our lodging, we witnessed groups of people dealing with possessed individuals. One of the Zambian elders casually explained, "Oh, don't worry, this always happens when you preach on the blood or the cross."

Although the spiritual warfare in some places may be more dramatic than what we normally see here in our country, spiritual warfare is real and Satan fights with us on different fronts. Anyway, we should not be discouraged with spiritual warfare; it is all part of a growing church.

V. Blessed Everybody

"And there was great joy in that city" (Acts 8:8). The Greek word that is translated "great" in English is the word "megas." When we want to express something colossal and huge we use the English word "mega." Here God is saying, the joy was "mega-happiness." It is no exaggeration to say the joy that comes with knowing and loving Jesus is the greatest happiness ever experienced.

The Father of the returned prodigal said, "For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry" (Luke 15:24). This reminds me of Proverbs 17:22, "A merry heart doeth good like a medicine..." It is no coincidence that along with the evangelism of Acts 8 is joy and along with the joy was healing, for Acts 8:7 tells us the people "...were healed."

When people get saved and filled with God's Spirit, they receive joy and their hurting heart is healed. The Bible says, "Who His own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed" (1 Peter 2:24). When the lost community sees the joy and spiritual health of the redeemed, it is only natural that growth to any church will ensue. "...And it was noised that He (Jesus) was in the house. And straightway many were gathered together, insomuch that there was no room to receive them, no, not so much as about the door: and he preached the word unto them" (Mark 2:1b, 2).

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Johnny Pope". The signature is written in black ink and includes a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.