

Wings

*“Those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength;
they shall mount up with wings like eagles.”
Isaiah 40:31*



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Church Growth

Every Christian wants to see the church grow. But flawed concepts of what that means have created distorted versions of growth. We need to return to the original model.

“Speaking the truth in love, [we] may grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ—from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love” (Eph. 4:15-16).

Church growth is obviously a goal of God’s people, and most believers embrace that goal. But there is considerable disagreement about what that means in practical terms.

Some look at church growth from a numerical standpoint. They point to the Great Commission, for example, as a command to reach “all the world” and “every creature” (Mk. 16:15). The fulfillment of that Commission in the book of Acts highlights numerical gains: 3,000 on the first day (Ac. 2:41), then 5,000 (4:4), later “multitudes” in Jerusalem (5:14), Samaria (8:6), and Thessalonica (17:4), “a great number” in Antioch (11:21), and so on. Indeed, the whole message of Acts is how the churches were “multiplied” (9:31) in

spite of every effort to destroy them. Numerical growth definitely played a major role in primitive Christianity.

But numerical growth had its limits. Jesus Himself modeled that limitation when He refused to keep feeding a multitude who was looking for a free lunch. The result was a precipitous loss in the number of followers (Jn. 6:26-27, 66). Clearly, numbers alone were not the *primary* objective.

Recognizing that limitation, others look at church growth as a solely spiritual dimension. What matters is not numbers, but knowledge and conviction. In this scenario, members are held to a strict standard of belief and behavior designed to purge out every trace of error. By focusing on Biblical injunctions to “grow in grace and knowledge” (2 Pet. 3:18), and “contend earnestly for the faith” (Jude 3), this approach to church growth creates an elite body of believers whose advanced spirituality displays to the world what a real follower of Christ looks like.

Of course, the problem with this approach is that it too often ends up as a

small group of condescending, self-righteous super-saints whose holier-than-thou attitude turns off the very people who need the gospel the most. The apostles fought this concept of spiritual superiority in the first century, both as Pharisaism (see Galatians) and gnosticism (Colossians, 1 John). Whatever form it takes, any approach to church growth that sacrifices a broad appeal to the masses for the sake of rigid doctrinal extremism is flawed.

To get a balanced view of church growth, look again at Paul’s description in our opening text: “growth of the body” is the result of “speaking the truth in love.” When we speak the truth (maintaining doctrinal integrity) in a spirit of love (giving ourselves to others), the result will always be the same: large numbers of people who are struggling with sin and self-doubt will see in our message a refreshing alternative to their life without God, and gladly embrace this new way of life. The body will grow (numerically) and be edified (spiritually). This is church growth that honors God.

– David King