

THE GROWTH OF THE LOCAL CHURCH

David B. Jones

As we rapidly approach the conclusion of the present year and the inception of another, Lord willing, we will naturally reflect upon the past. We will examine many facets of our lives in retrospect. One of those facets, upon which we reflect, ought to be the growth of the local church. We ought to examine the word of God and recognize our personal responsibility to the growth of the church. We need to reflect and see if we contributed toward or hindered its growth.

As we examine the Scriptures relative to the growth of the church, we see the importance of the church to heaven. The church of Christ was the eternal purpose of God through Christ: ***"Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ; And to make all men see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the world hath been hid in God, who created all things by Jesus Christ: To the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God, According to the eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord:"*** -- Eph 3:8-11. God determined before the foundation of the world that he would save mankind through the spiritual body of His Son, the church of Christ. The church cost Christ His very life: ***"Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood."*** -- Acts 20:28. In fact, the fact of His death was a predetermined part of God's plan: ***"And all that dwell upon the earth shall worship him, whose names are not written in the book of life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world."*** -- Rev 13:8. The Holy Spirit was the medium chosen by God to reveal His truth: ***"Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak: and he will show you things to come."*** -- John 16:13. The church was all-important to the Godhead and it should be to us also.

Since the church was the eternal purpose of God, her growth would also be of great importance. God sent His Son and revealed His truth so that we might be saved through the body of Christ. How many times do we take these great blessings for granted? How often do we overlook our responsibility, especially in view of the great opportunities afforded us through Christ? We will endeavor to examine the growth of the church as revealed in the Scriptures.

Command of god

The Lord commanded that the gospel be **preached** throughout the world: ***"And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned."*** -- Mark 16:15-16. The gospel is God's power to save: ***"For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek."*** -- Rom 1:16. It is the engrafted word which saves man: ***"Wherefore lay apart all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness, and receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save your souls."*** -- James 1:21. The word of God edifies us and enables us to enjoy the inheritance: ***"And now,***

brethren, I commend you to God, and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up, and to give you an inheritance among all them which are sanctified." -- Acts 20:32. It is through the Spirit's words our inner man is strengthened: ***"That he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man;" -- Eph 3:16.***

It is through the word of God we are saved, sustained and strengthened. Therefore, we understand it is a command of God that the church grow in view of the fact He commanded the gospel (word of God) be preached throughout the world.

God also commanded that the word continued to be **planted** in the hearts of Christians. Peter wrote: ***"As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby:" -- 1 Pet 2:2.*** The word of God must be received initially in order for one to be saved. However, the Christian must continue to plant the word and this is a command of God also. We are to seek His kingdom first – Matt 6:33. We are to have no other “gods” before Him. He must occupy first place. If God occupies first place, we continue to plant His word in our hearts so we might be strengthened. If the church is planting the word on a continual basis, then growth will be a necessary result.

Consequence of fruit-bearing

As the child of God plants the seed of the kingdom in his heart, he will grow. As he grows he will naturally bear fruit. The Lord designed the laws of nature so that the seed would bear fruit of its own kind: ***"And the earth brought forth grass, and herb yielding seed after his kind, and the tree yielding fruit, whose seed was in itself, after his kind: and God saw that it was good." -- Gen 1:12.*** If a tomato seed is planted, a tomato plant will be the result. Assuming that tomato plant is able to receive the proper nutrients, it will develop and produce fruit. The fruit it produces is a tomato, having all the characteristics of a tomato. Therefore the tomato plant produces fruit because God so designed it that way.

A Christian bears fruit of a spiritual nature because God so designed it also. The Lord said: ***"Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God." -- Luke 8:11.*** The soil is the human heart: ***"When any one heareth the word of the kingdom, and understandeth it not, then cometh the wicked one, and catcheth away that which was sown in his heart. This is he which received seed by the way side." -- Mat 13:19.*** Notice the Lord said the seed was sown in the heart, therefore the soil. There is no doubt or mystery as to what it will produce – it will produce a Christian because that is the way God designed it. As the Christian continues to grow and develop, he will also bear fruit for the same reason the tomato plant did – God designed it that way. The Christian will produce the fruit of the Spirit. The fruit of the Spirit has several manifestations as listed by Paul: ***"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, Meekness, temperance: against such there is no law." -- Gal 5:22-23.*** As the Christian continues to bear fruit, he will learn to love God more and more. He will understand the importance of the word of God and the church of Christ. The fact the world is passing away will become abundantly clear - 1 John 2:15-17. He will put matters in this life in proper order. He will then begin to be more concerned about the lost in the world. When he reaches this point, he will begin to teach them and some will be converted. He has now produced another Christian. This new Christian will begin to study and apply, bearing the fruit of the Spirit. On and on it goes, as the word of God is spread around the world, resulting in new Christians who continue doing the same.

Thus, growth in the local congregations is the result of fruit-bearing. As the “plant” develops, it produces after its kind - Christians!!

Characteristic of living congregations

God commanded that the word be preached. When it is preached and planted, fruit is borne to God. God has designed His church to be comprised of those who have obeyed the gospel, being added by Him. Those added live in different geographical regions, thus the necessity of various local congregations. These local congregations are overseen by elders (Acts 14:23), who are served by qualified men known as deacons – Phil 1:1. As the Christians in a certain local congregation work and worship together, fruit is borne to God. As fruit is borne the local congregation grows. Their growth is a natural result of the fruit-bearing in each individual. The growth may not be seen numerically at first, but this will be seen later. The numerical growth can be less or greater given the certain region and often varies depending on several factors. A living congregation is one which grows because her members grow individually.

Therefore, if a congregation ceases to grow it can be properly deducted that the individuals ceased to grow themselves. This brings us back to our thought in the outset – “We need to reflect and see if we contributed toward or hindered its growth.” Have we contributed to the growth of the local church in the past year? We can answer that by examining to see if we have been bearing fruit for the Lord. Have we planted the word in our hearts? Have we allowed it to be planted and to “water and till” our hearts so the word can grow? Have we removed the “weeds” sown by the Wicked One and replaced them with the soul-saving, life-giving word of God? If we have not, why don’t we begin today so we can help the growth, rather than hinder it?
