

The Simple Biblical Rules of Church Growth

I have written on this subject before, in several places, but here I want to outline the matter in the simplest possible terms. This is necessary to combat all the fleshly ideas that swamp believers from a variety of sources. These strategies, as well as being unbiblical, actually work against God's principles of church life, causing serious problems that lead congregations into more and more deception.

God's principles regarding church and growth are actually very simple. There is no need for complex methods based on many levels of hierarchical authority, nor for all sorts of deluded spiritual warfare. True believers meeting in Biblical churches that function according to scripture will grow automatically with divine power. It is that simple.

While we could demonstrate this from various NT passages, such as Eph 4:16, Jn 15:5, 1 Cor 3:7, in this paper I want to focus on Col 2:19:

Holding fast to the Head, from whom all the body, nourished and knit together by joints and ligaments, grows with the increase *that is* from God.

Let us analyse just what is being said here.

Centring the church on Christ alone

Holding fast to the Head

'Hold' here means to seize, to hold fast, grasp, keep hold of. The 'Head' is, of course, Christ. Without the head the body is dead; without grasping and holding on to Christ as our head, we become spiritually lifeless. 'Head' here is *kephale*, which means the supreme one, Lord, the first, the superior rank. When the word is applied to buildings, it refers to the keystone or corner stone that holds the others together; when applied to towns it means the capital city. This is how we must view Christ – he is the one who holds all things together because he is before all things (Col 1:17).

Christians can give assent to this in principle and fail miserably to obey this in practice. So often men are treated as the head in church. Obeying such men often leads to disobeying Christ, and yet no one blinks for a moment; this is probably the greatest sin in church life today, so Paul's command is entirely right and timely.

To have any success in our personal life, or in church, we must absolutely centre our attention on Christ. Everything must be tested on whether it accords with Christ's teaching. Every strategy must be evaluated according to his revealed word in scripture, particularly his final words given to the church by his Spirit through the apostles.

If we are not holding fast to the head, nothing will go right. We can have visible human success or numerical growth, but unless we are apprehending Christ in our ministry it will count for nothing at the last day, and will just be wood, hay and stubble.

Relying only on divine resources

From whom all the body ... grows

We must understand this important principle - growth only comes from Christ. He is the head of the church directing its affairs. He is building his church, not human leaders. He does this his way and not according to fleshly wisdom.

In some periods, he builds his church by allowing terrible persecution to winnow his own people. Thousands die in tribulation, but he is building his church. In other periods he allows terrible heresies to flood the visible church and cause havoc to the Lord's people. Corruption of the testimony is everywhere, faithful men are few – but he is building his church. On other occasions he pours out his Spirit in fulness; for a time certain churches know great power to witness to the Lord and many are converted. Sometimes thousands are saved at once, as in the early days of Acts. Yet at other times the flame of the testimony seems almost extinguished; Elijah felt at one time that only he was left faithful, though there were a few thousand more in Israel.

Jesus builds his church his way and not according to human wisdom. We must get in line with what he is doing at any particularly time and willingly submit to that. At no point must we put up our hands to uphold the testimony by fleshly means (2 Sam 6:1ff). This will result in spiritual death even if our motives are sincere.

Every member involvement

All the body

Church ministry is by all the body. Paul emphasised this in 1 Cor 12 and no one can deny that this is an important truth covering, as it does, most of a chapter. No one can say that he is not needed, and no leader can say that a person is dispensable to the work. All are part of the work in some way.

Every member must learn what their gift is, since all have been given one (Eph 4:7). Paul understood what his gift was and used it effectively (Eph 3:7). When his disciple and co-worker Timothy was in danger of neglecting his gift, Paul exhorted him (1 Tim 4:14). It is the job of pastor-teachers (elders) to help folk find and develop their gifts.

When we have learned what our gift is, we must then put it into practice for the benefit of others (1 Pt 4:10). The whole point of gifts, whether spiritual (such as teaching or faith) or more ordinary (such as helps or works of service) is that they are focused on the body. They are directed to all the members of the local church and used to stimulate, support, encourage, edify and help everyone else. The local church is simply one vessel of mass mutual edification – all the time people are blessing each other inside and outside the meetings.

The more people are involved in edifying others, amazingly, the more they are personally edified themselves. Whatever God gives us to bless others should be poured out in fulness as soon as possible. Never hold back what God has given you; pour it all out to help the brethren. In this we can be sure that the measure we give will be the measure we get back. If you want to grow, pour yourself out in service to others in every way that you can.

The body nourished – focus on the church not on the world

Nourished and knit together

The big mistake that many modern leaders foist on the church is to direct their attention and strategies on the world. To gather in the world, they reckon, we must focus upon the world. So meetings are geared up to be natural to fleshly sinners; all is done to make them feel comfortable - even to the point of watering down the Gospel to be inoffensive; thus sin, judgment, and hell are never mentioned publicly. This is a disaster; I repeat an utter disaster. It is a shocking form of clear disobedience to God's word,

The church is never focused on the world in any way. Friendship with the world puts us at enmity with God and must never be tolerated (Jm 4:4; 1 Jn 2:15).

The means Paul mentions whereby growth occurs is by virtue of the body nourishing itself. The local church puts its ministerial focus on edifying the all the members of that church. There are no Gospel meetings, no healing meetings, no advertised campaigns, no huge evangelistic conventions, no slogans, no dragging people to hear a special preacher, no Christian carnivals through the streets – no nonsense.

What we do see is mutual nourishing, mutual ministry, mutual edification (Rm 14:19; 1 Thess 5:11).

The apostolic purpose is to reach out and plant churches, taking the authority and support of the home church to evangelise new areas (Col 4:3-4). However, the responsibility of the church membership is to edify each other, and let evangelism take place as God leads in ordinary day-to-day life, making the most of the time when it appears (Col 4:5-6). If we are holding fast to the Head, these opportunities will soon arise. Meanwhile, we seek to nurture the body.

Mutual edification in the body

By joints and ligaments

The body is established through joints and ligaments. Growth will openly develop if the intrinsic parts of the body are strong and capable of growth, otherwise any growth will damage the body,

Joints are where different strong parts of the body come together; ligaments are the ministries that bind these junctions together in love. We need junctions and joining bands. This all refers to the various relationships within the body that must be fostered and cared for. Nothing must ever be allowed to damage or even ruin these relationships. Any strategy that puts pressure on church relationships is wrong. All strategies must release and nurture relationships within the body. This is one reason why local churches are small and meet in homes. Large churches in big buildings cannot foster relationship and must then hold the body together by functions and organised activities. In such 'churches' formal leadership become central and the whole thing is diverted from the Head.

Joints and ligaments are essential. Nothing must be allowed to damage the development of family relationships in the body.

Growth – of believer’s maturity and church membership

All the body ... grows

The Biblical church is a place where everything works because God is central and the body functions according to his instructions. Where God has the first place, everything flows; men do not have to prop up the work with all kinds of effort and techniques.

God’s concern is not numerical growth for its own sake. This idea is an absolute nonsense. God chose the elect from before the foundation of the world (Eph 1:4-5) and he is working out his purposes in human history. Throughout time God calls his chosen people and plants them in a local church. There is no haphazard numerical growth; the church grows in number as God calls out his predetermined elect. If God chooses to do an unusual work in converting large numbers through a revival, it is because he has elected those people before the world was made. If the number of the elect at a certain time and place is relatively small, no amount of prayer or strategies will usher in a revival.

So we have to get away from this humanist concept of success and numerical growth, as if the problem of small numbers rests with man.

In a truly Biblical church there will always be growth. If a work is honouring God’s instructions growth will be going on all the time in various ways. This will primarily be the maturing of believers through the work of edification in the body. Individuals will be growing all the time with the increase of God – genuine maturity of spiritual knowledge, godliness, character and good works.

In the midst of this atmosphere of continual growth, there will be the increase of new converts within the plan of God. This means that we can rest on God’s activity to grow the work in his way and in his time. This takes away all the human effort and ingenuity, all the worldly and fleshly methods and all the frustration and chest-beating about failure. The genuine church will simply walk by faith and trust in the providence of God, while it makes sure that it is obeying all the divine principles it is responsible for. The work of growth is God’s responsibility done by God’s power. Our job is to obey his instructions in the local church, including the command to be witnesses in our day-to-day lives to the resurrection of Jesus. This takes all the stress out of church growth.

Divine power and purpose

Grows with the increase *that is* from God

We have just referred to this matter. The words ‘grows’ and ‘increase’ are different forms of the same root Greek word; they simply mean that when we are obeying God and looking to Christ in the local church, the body will grow with growth that comes from God. By obeying God we will know divine growth, not a human manufactured superficial increase of numbers. This is what counts; numbers mean nothing at all. If we want large numbers in a religious body then we should all be Roman Catholics, Muslims or even Pagans since these religions are growing at high rates, especially in the UK. Large numbers in churches mean nothing and prove nothing. The biggest churches in the UK at this time are those that are given over to very serious deceptions. Numbers mean nothing.

Indeed, if we consider that God’s clear direction in apostolic teaching is that churches are small enough to function as a family, based on mutual edification and meeting in homes, then large numbers of Christians meeting in big buildings puts such churches in disobedience before they even start. How can they experience God’s blessing when the

foundation of their experience together is in disobedience to God's word? There will be no true, spiritual power in such places – but there may be much excitement, froth and bubble.

What we want and need is the increase from God, divine growth; not some human, organised, fleshly, whipped up, manufactured, superficial, gathering together. We want God's power not man's work.

If we obey the principles laid down by Paul in this verse then we are assured that we will know the growth of God, both in the lives of individuals growing in grace, and by having the addition of converts according to God's plan.

Conclusion

None of this is complicated. It involves no specialised ministry, resources, finance, strategies, techniques, buildings, spiritual warfare or meetings – it just involves ordinary believers, doing ordinary spiritual things, in an ordinary way. It does not rely on men, money or gimmicks and certainly needs no advertising or media exposure.

In short, it is behaving just like the early church – the church that experienced the greatest ever explosion of growth. This church had no money, no advertising and no media support. Indeed, it was a persecuted church that had slaves as a very high proportion of its membership – people with very limited freedom or free time. It knew nothing about territorial spirits that had to be defeated first in order to succeed in evangelism. It never had one 'praise march'. Many of its key leaders were martyred, in prison or in exile. In fact, very few of the local church members would have even had any scripture in written form; the Bible as we know it would not be finally compiled and authorised for a couple of hundred years or more. Yet this church grew at an astronomical rate and threatened the stability of the greatest world empire.

This is evidence of divine power, and it came about simply because people trusted God and obeyed his principles about church with tremendous zeal. Their greatest motivation was love, for God first and then for others, and this was enough to energise them to work and make sacrifices – which led to personal and corporate growth.

This is what we need today; nothing else.

Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version*

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