

TWO CHURCHES WANT TO GROW

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Two churches want to grow, but their attitudes toward growth differ greatly. The first church looks upon growth as its primary purpose. Goals are placed before the membership: “We want to double our membership within the next three years,” for instance. Success (or failure) is judged almost entirely on the basis of that congregation’s numerical growth. The second church looks upon the saving of souls as its primary purpose, and any growth in membership is just a natural result of that primary purpose. Members of the second church are infused with the value of immortal souls rather than with a sense of congregational pride.

Members of the first church become eager to get people to the water. Baptism is the point at which people are added to the membership list. Consequently it’s going to take so many baptisms to keep pace with their goal of doubling their membership. They must not only get them to the water, they must get them there within the time period that has been arbitrarily set by their leaders. Members of the second church are far more eager to get people to repent. Their concern is for additions to the Lord’s body rather than additions to a membership list. Their approach is to bring sinners to a consciousness of their sin and the consequences of remaining in sin. If they can do this in one study, great! But if considerable time is required to uproot false concepts and to plant the true seed of the gospel, they patiently accept this. Their only sense of urgency grows out of the uncertainty of life and its duration. But they know that shortcuts are not the answer, that baptism without repentance is worthless, and that once people are brought to true repentance, having been properly taught, baptism for the remission of sins will follow. So they wait with longsuffering until the gospel brings about its desired effect in the hearts of those whom they are teaching.

Members of the first church will be tempted to use questionable tactics in their approach to people. The old methods and approaches don’t seem to be effective anymore. New and more positive approaches must be found. So the members of the first church make their appeal to the pride of people. They persuade them of their self-worth. They build their self-image. They tell them how valuable they would be to the congregation. “We need you,” they tell their prospects. They might extol the virtues of the congregation, persuading their prospects of the value of being a part of such a vibrant, growing group of people. So, people “become members,” and they conform to the rules that are placed before them for acceptance within the group, but there may have been little grief over sin. In fact, they might even still believe they were Christians before they “became members.” The members of the second church recognize that the gospel never makes its appeal to the pride of people. They bring people to see their spiritual bankruptcy, that they have “nothing to pay,” that their true worth

is not to be found in self, but in Christ, that they are sinners in desperate need of salvation, that their only hope is to be found in Christ.

The first church may become compromising in its teaching. Its elders intend to maintain doctrinal soundness, but there is the pressure to produce, to maintain the growth rate set before the congregation. When doctrinal soundness becomes an obstacle to that purpose, the elders may succumb to the pressures and ease up on its teaching. The second church faces no such pressure, for in its concern for the spiritual well-being of people, there is desire for truth on every subject vital to salvation.

The emphasis of the first church is organizational and institutional. The emphasis of the second church is spiritual and heavenly. We commend the second church to our readers. Serious problems can result when churches see growth as their primary purpose – let them focus on the number to be taught rather than the number to be baptized. If new approaches are needed, let them be conceived only if they are compatible with God’s wisdom. In efforts to reach others, let all determine to know nothing “except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.” When churches thus become really serious about saving souls, God will give the increase, and growth will take care of itself.