

**Growing Churches God's Way**  
**Eric Walker, Worship Ministries Director**  
**June 10, 2007**

Today I'm going to deal with the topic, *Growing Churches God's Way*.

III. Seed in the hairspray cap...Mystery of growth...

How do churches grow? That's the question I've been wrestling with for several weeks now as I've prepared to preach this Sunday. With some of the challenges our church is facing, it seemed a good question to ask. In America these days it appears that church growth has become something of an industry. In spite of all the experts and seminars though, at times I wonder if the subject has more mystery about it than many let on. To hear some people talk, you might think church growth was all about marketing strategies and focus groups. While in today's world these things may have their place, if these form the hub of the wheel, then the result is merely cosmetic.

I've been taking a closer look recently at what the Bible has to say about church growth. Right away I discovered a very interesting concept. It is this: *No man can grow a church*. That's right. No man can grow a church...and no group of people can grow a church, for that matter. Why? Because according to the Bible *only God can grow a church*. Jesus said "*I will build my church*." (Mt. 6:18) In another place He stated, "*No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him...*" (Jn. 6:44) In the book of Acts Luke tells us how "*The Lord was adding to their number... those who were being saved*." (Acts 2:47)

Oh we can fill buildings. If that's our goal, there are a lot of ways to do that. We can even plan programs and activities. But to grow a New Testament church is another matter entirely. That's God's domain. Paul tells us that we can plant, and we can water, but it is "*God alone who causes the growth*." (1 Cor. 3:6-7) And even though Paul encourages us to "*...be careful how we build*," (1 Cor. 3:10) the Psalmist also reminds us that "*Unless the Lord builds the house, those who labor, labor in vain*." (Ps. 127:1)

So where does that leave us? Here's the interesting part. The Bible actually has a great deal to say about the role we play in church growth. For instance, Peter tells us something crucial about the materials God uses to grow churches. You see, God doesn't use brick and mortar. He uses *living stones* (1 Pet. 2:5). That's right. In God's amazing sovereignty, He has chosen to use living, breathing believers as the very stones with which He will build His Church.

So, God grows churches and He uses believers to do it! Sounds simple. Question solved, right? Wrong. Many churches in America are populated with believers God is *not* using to build His Church. This places us squarely at the doorway of an even bigger question. *What kind of believer does our Church-Grower-God look for when He wants to build His Church?*

One of my favorite verses is 2 Chronicles 16:9.

It reads... "*The eyes of the Lord move to and fro throughout the earth that He may strongly support those whose heart is completely His*."

You see, *"The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart."* (1Sam. 16:7) When God prepares to do a work like growing a church, He always goes on the lookout for just this kind of whole-hearted follower. Surprisingly, they are often the last people we might choose or expect. Not necessarily the beautiful, or talented people; the influential or powerful. Think about it; God chose Moses, Gideon, David, Mary, Peter, Paul. *Not many mighty, not many noble...* (1 Cor. 1:26) but oh, their heart!

So for the past several weeks I've been searching in God's Word for a group of people like this; whole-hearted ones that God might use to grow a church...and I'm glad to say I found a group of 120 of them huddling together in an upper room in Jerusalem, in Acts chapter one. Unbeknownst to them, in just a matter of days their small group would grow from 120 to 3,000. And then it would continue to expand geometrically after that. How's that for church growth!

Since discovering this group, my mind has been filled with questions about these people. What were they like? How and why did God use them? And most importantly, what do we have in common, or in difference with these walking, talking advertisements for new life in Jesus Christ? One thing I have discovered...if you want to join our Church-Grower-God in the amazing work of building His Church, you've got to go about it His way. Today we're going to take a look at what it means to *Grow a Church God's Way*.

Let's pray...

### **Nine Principles for Growing a Church God's Way**

- *To grow a church God's way, we desperately need the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.*

He gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." Acts 1:4-5

"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." Acts 1:8

What we're about to witness here is the very birth of the Church of Jesus Christ. For three years and forty days Jesus had prepared them for this precise moment. But there was one more indispensable, desperately needed, must-have element, without which nothing else could happen; The Holy Spirit. That's why He said, "Do not leave...wait."

Bottom line. We cannot grow a church apart from the indispensable power of God's Holy Spirit. The moment we try to build depending on our own strength we will discover that it is... *Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,' says the Lord. (Zach. 4:6)*

You might say, "Wait a minute! I'm a believer! I have the Holy Spirit!" It is interesting to note that in the book of Acts, these Spirit-filled believers were constantly praying to be filled by God's Spirit! In the classic Gospel tract, *The Wonderful Spirit-Filled life* we read... *"Though all Christians are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, not all Christians are filled (directed and empowered) by the Holy Spirit."*

One of the best ways to learn about the person and work of the Holy Spirit is to study the Gospel of John chapters 14-17. He is our comforter, our helper, teacher; He convicts of sin, He assures us of our salvation, He brings things to our remembrance, He glorifies Christ and so much more...And when it comes to growing a church...the Holy Spirit is our divine consultant...He is the ultimate expert as we shall see.

So...to grow a church God's way, we must be people who are aware of their desperate need for the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

- *To grow a church God's way, we must make continuous, unified, believing prayer our highest priority.*

When they arrived, they went upstairs to the room where they were staying....They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers...In those days Peter stood up among the believers (a group numbering about a hundred and twenty) Acts 1:13-15

Luke tells us in Acts chapter one that their prayer had two characteristics, which Calvin comments are "two essentials for true prayer, namely that they persevered and were of one mind."

Charles Haddon Spurgeon once wrote: "The condition of the church may be very accurately gauged by its prayer meetings. So is the prayer meeting a grace-ometer, and from it we may judge the amount of divine working among a people. If God be near a church, it must pray. And if He be not there, one of the first tokens of His absence will be a slothfulness in prayer."

The Brooklyn Tabernacle is a church that has built its foundation firmly on the power of prayer. Back when the Tabernacle was still a small struggling congregation in Brooklyn, New York, Pastor Jim Cymbala made this commitment to his tiny congregation:

"From this day on, the prayer meeting will be the barometer of our church. What happens on Tuesday night will be the gauge by which we will judge success or failure, because that will be the measure by which God blesses us."

Today the Brooklyn Tabernacle, along with the Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir is known the world over, not just for great music, but for the dramatic testimonies of transformed lives that populate its congregation. In his book *Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire* Pastor Cymbala writes...

"At one point the biggest distributor of Christian Choral music in America got acquainted with us, liked the music, and sat down with Carol one day to ask: 'So what's the formula here? What makes this work?'

She began talking about the choir prayer meeting. The visitor said to himself, She didn't understand my question. I want to know what makes the music so inspirational.

It was months later before he realized that the life in the music comes from prayer. That's the formula."

It's truly a mystery that, though most of us would assent to the dynamic power and desperate need of prayer, that the actual practice and expression of persevering prayer in the lives of most believers (and in many churches) is sadly lacking. And our circumstances suffer as a result. It is only as we remedy this lack of appropriation of the presence and power of God through prayer that we can ever hope to grow our church God's way.

So... to grow a church God's way, we must be people who choose to make continuous, unified, believing prayer our highest priority.

- *To grow a church God's way we need believers who are not ashamed to proclaim to the world the greatness of our God.*

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. "...We hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!" Acts 2: 1-6, 11

Normally, when examining this passage, a great deal of attention is focused on the miraculous gift of tongues. Yes, it's true that suddenly the 120 in the upper room were gifted with the power to speak in a wide variety of know languages to the multi-cultural gathering in Jerusalem that day. But I'd like to draw attention to something even more fundamental. *What were they saying?* They were proclaiming the mighty acts of God! Yes, they were speaking in other tongues. *But why?* So people from every tribe and tongue and people and nation could hear of the greatness of our God. This not only was an inversion of the miracle at the tower of Babel, but it was a microcosm of what God was going to do to spread the Gospel over the next 2,000 years.

These Spirit-filled people's mouths were overflowing in praise and worship of almighty God. Let me ask you a question. When was the last time you proclaimed God's mighty wonders to your neighbors, relatives, friends, or co-workers. And yet, according to 1 Peter 2:9, that is a large part of our purpose here on earth.

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. 1 Peter 2:9

Paul said... "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile." Romans 1: 16

We are, each of us, called to bear dynamic testimony of God's greatness to a lost world. And get this...*we don't even have a language barrier.*

So...to grow a church God's way, we must be people who are not ashamed to proclaim to the world the greatness of our God.

- *To grow a church God's way there must be a clear and bold witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.*

"Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.... "Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ." Acts 2:22-24,36

Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. Acts 2:41

3,000 were saved in one day. Amazing. Let me ask you a question. How long did Paul have to prepare his message that day? Well there are probably a couple of answers to that question. No time at all...or three years and 40 days. Several years later Peter would write...

But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect. 1 Peter 3:15

Christian author Bruce Wilkinson tells of speaking at a Christian College some years ago and challenging their student body to expand their personal vision what God could accomplish through them...The author writes...

"A week after I returned home I received a letter from a student named Warren. He told me that he and his friend Dave had decided to challenge God's power and ask Him to bless them and enlarge their borders. Specifically, they had prayed that God would give them the opportunity to witness to the governor of the state *that weekend*. Throwing their sleeping bags in Warren's '63 Plymouth Valiant, they had driven the 400 miles to the capital to pound on doors. The letter continued...

'By Sunday night when we got back from Sacramento, this is what had happened: We had expressed our faith to two gas station attendants, four security guards, the head of the U.S. National Guard, the director of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare for the state of California, the head of the California highway Patrol, the governor's secretary, and finally the governor himself. As God makes us grow, we are thankful and scared stiff. Thanks again for your challenge!'"

Just like Peter on the day of Pentecost, we too are called to be ever ready to give an account for the hope that is in us.

So...to grow a church God's way, we must be people who are always ready to present a clear and bold witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

- *To grow a church God's way requires a healthy dose of Biblical community; what the Bible calls Koinonia.*

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. Acts 2:42-47

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need. Acts 4:32-35

These people were in one accord. But think about it...it is one thing to be in one accord with 120. But to be in one accord with over 3,000? That is truly miraculous.

Often when people look at this passage eventually the question arises, "So what are you proposing?" they ask, "Communism?" We as flag-waving Americans are especially sensitive to this. And in our over-sensitivity we miss the point entirely. This passage is not talking about promoting some secular form of government or social program. What we're seeing here is a dynamic work of the Holy Spirit. This is what the Bible calls Koinonia. *These people's hearts were so full of the love and compassion and care of God, that they could not bear to see someone in need. They could not imagine having more, while someone else had less.*

Many Christians today don't think of fellowship as a discipline; a behavior to be cultivated, just like prayer, Bible study and sharing our faith. Yet as discipleship expert Avery Willis states...

"Christian love is not just the identifying mark of extraordinary disciples-those who go beyond the call of duty. It is intended to be the identifying mark of *all disciples*. Those who obey His commands love one another."

Look up here. We are not just different parts of the Body of Christ. According to 1 Corinthians 12, we are members *one of another*. That is, you are part of me and I am part of you. You know how they say, you can choose your friends, but you're stuck with your relatives? Well here's the reality. We can't function independently, any more than my hand could function apart from my body. We're not just playing with words and religious symbols here. We really do need each other. We don't make sense apart. And we need to learn what it means to live and function as the fully operational Body of Christ.

So...to grow a church God's way, we must be people who are committed to practicing the dynamic of Biblical community; what the Bible calls Koinonia.

- *To grow a church God's way we must be serious about meeting the deepest needs of those around us.*

One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the time of prayer—at three in the afternoon. Now a man crippled from birth was being carried to the temple gate called Beautiful, where he was put every day to beg from those going into the temple courts...Then Peter said, "Silver or gold I do not have, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk." Taking him by the right hand, he helped him up, and instantly the man's feet and ankles became strong. He jumped to his feet and began to walk. Then he went with them into the temple courts, walking and jumping, and praising God. Acts 3: 1-2, 6-8

In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food...So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith. Acts 6: 1, 7

### III. Woman in Freeport...

So...to grow a church God's way, we must be people who are serious about meeting the deepest needs of those around us.

- *To grow a church God's way is impossible apart from the authentic testimony of changed lives.*

When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus. Acts 4: 13

One of the fundamental realities of New Testament Christianity is life change. Peter was the poster boy for life change and they all knew it. Only a few weeks earlier Peter had denied he even knew Jesus and was ready to return to fishing. But look at him now!

Rick Warren, pastor of one of the largest churches in America boils down church growth into two words, *changed lives*.

### III. Althea's letter

The early church was all about changed lives...and lives authentically changed by the person and power of Jesus Christ will grow a church faster than anything.

So...to grow a church God's way, we must be people who are committed to the authentic and indispensable testimony of changed lives.

- *To grow a church God's way we must be willing to face persecution, obeying God rather than man.*

Then they called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John replied, "Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard." Acts 4: 18-20

Having brought the apostles, they made them appear before the Sanhedrin to be questioned by the high priest. "We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name," he said. "Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood." Peter and the other apostles replied: "We must obey God rather than men! Acts 5: 27-29

Our passion for Christ must exceed our fear of unpleasant circumstances. Let me say that again...Our passion for Christ must exceed our fear of unpleasant circumstances. Jesus taught that, for those who take a stand for Christ, persecution is not only a possibility, it's a promise. But the good news is that with persecution comes blessing.

"Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great" Matthew 5: 11-12

This is a very hard lesson to learn. But one of the most important.

So...to grow a church God's way, we must be people who are willing to face inevitable persecution, obeying God rather than man.

- *To grow a church God's way we must understand that God is serious about holy living.*

Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. With his wife's full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet. Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? ...You have not lied to men but to God." When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened. Then the young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him. Acts 5: 1-6

Alright, so we have this great Holy Spirit party going on...thousands are being saved, everyone's in awe. So why in the world would God go and spoil it with *an execution of all things*? How's that for marketing. "Hey everybody. Let's go join *that* church. Some people tried to give to their building program and were struck dead!" Wow! So, why did God reveal himself at this particular time, and in this very harsh way?

Good question. With a very important answer. It's because God is serious about sin in the Body of Christ. Yes, He is a God of grace and mercy. If we confess our sins He is faithful and just to forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. But He is also Holy. Bold sin, unrepentant sin? The early Church wouldn't have lasted beyond those first few years if God hadn't taken great pains to teach this particular lesson. In his classic book, *The Pursuit of Holiness* Jerry Bridges affirms that...

“It is only as we see His holiness, His absolute purity and moral hatred of sin, that we will be gripped by the awfulness of sin against a Holy God. To be gripped by that fact is the first step in our pursuit of holiness.”

So...to grow a church God's way, we must be a people who understand that God is serious about holy living.

## Conclusion

So...why do we want to grow as a church? When it comes to church growth God looks very intently on the motives of our hearts. For example, do we want to grow this church because we are uncomfortable with empty seats? God will not grow our church because we are uncomfortable with empty seats. Is it because we need to increase giving to meet our budget? God will not grow our church in order to increase our giving. *Or is it because our hearts break for those lost souls who are headed toward a Christ-less eternity?* The good news is that God stands ever ready to empower believers who are impelled by the Holy Spirit to go into the highways and byways, because their souls ache to share the Gospel with those who have never heard.

During my preparation I've been spending time in a book called *I Believe in the Church*. As I have studied, I have been challenged by one key idea. *Before a church can evangelize, it must first be renewed.*

“I have come to believe that there is one prior necessity which must precede both evangelism and social action, that is *the renewal of the church*...The church that preaches the Gospel must embody the Gospel. The good news must be seen in our corporate relationships, worship, joy and life...Unless renewal precedes evangelism, the credibility gap between what the church preaches and what the church is, will be too wide to be bridged. It is only when the world sees the living body of Christ on earth that it will be in any way convinced of the reality and relevance of Christ Himself.”

David Watson – *I Believe in the Church*

The unsaved world is looking for authentic Christianity lived out before their eyes. When they see that, then hear the Gospel, they will respond. But if they hear the Gospel, without the accompaniment of a visual, behavioral witness of authentic Christianity, they reject the message as hypocritical and impractical. “*If Christians can't make this work, how am I supposed to?*” This is what Jesus was getting at when He said... “*By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.*” (Jn. 13:35) He could have just as easily said,...*they will know by the message you preach...* but He didn't.

Another way to look at it is this. We are called to obey the Great Commandment;

Jesus replied: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself. Matthew 22:37-39

We are also called to fulfill the Great Commission;

"Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." Matthew 28: 19-20

BUT what happens if we leave out the loving God and loving each other part, and skip ahead to the reach the lost part? If we try to fulfill the Great Commission, while neglecting the Great Commandment, we end up just like the Pharisees of Jesus' day. They had the law and the prophets, the very Word of God, but they had no love. That's why Jesus said, *Listen to what they say, but don't do what they do!* (Mt. 23:1-3)

We must seek renewal and revival within our Church body first; above all else. Passionately, whole-heartedly, aggressively seeking. We must be committed to healing on the inside first and foremost; dedicated to practicing authentic Christianity between brothers and sisters here, now. *Before* trying to export our faith. Because if it's not happening here, it won't happen there. To quote Francis Schaeffer...

"Our relationship with each other is the criteria the world uses to judge whether our message is truthful-Christian community is the final apologetic."

Lately there has been a great deal of talk among our leadership about a plan for church growth. Frankly, much of it has been a valid combination of very good plans, Biblical methods and techniques. However, with your indulgence, I'd like to close by suggesting a plan that has proven to work well for many centuries.

I've got a plan-Love one another deeply from the heart. (1 Pet. 1:22-23)

I've got a plan-Bear with one another and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. (Col. 3:13)

I've got a plan-Bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ. (Gal. 6:2)

I've got a plan-Confess your faults one to another and pray for one another that you may be healed. (Jam. 5:16)

I've got a plan- If a brother is caught in a trespass, restore him gently, watching lest you too be tempted. (Gal. 6:1)

I've got a plan-Don't merely look after your own interests, but also the interests of others. (Phil. 2:4)