

“Church Growth That Glorifies God”

by David M. Doran

So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace, being built up; and going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it continued to increase.

Acts 9:31

Church growth is a popular subject, and it is an important subject. I believe that God’s people should hunger for God-honoring growth in their churches. By God-honoring growth, I mean the kind of growth that honors God both in product (more and better disciples who are like Christ) and process (a dynamic display of God’s power that results in His glory through increased faith and praise).

This kind of intense desire for the growth of Christ’s church is not only pleasing to God, but completely in harmony with the teaching of Scripture. The Great Commission is built on the expectation that the mission of Jesus Christ will be effective in making and maturing disciples (Matt. 28:19-20). The throng gathered around the Lamb in the book of Revelation offers evidence that God will indeed call out a people “from every tribe and tongue and people and nation” (Rev. 5:9). The book of Acts is equally clear that the ministry of the Word bears fruit that produces the growth of the church (Acts 2:47; 9:31). Since the Scriptures are clear about God’s intention, we cannot be satisfied with anything other than God-honoring growth!

Sadly, the modern emphasis on church growth has turned away from its proper biblical anchors. Desire for church growth too often springs from the carnal motive of pride and a quest to be successful by the world’s standards. The net result of these is the assessment of church growth on the basis of carnal measurements (preoccupation with numbers—people, dollars, and buildings). Since these measurements define success, the church growth movement has stooped to carnal methods in order to reach them. The thinking is intensely pragmatic. Rick Warren, a church growth writer, illustrates this with his advice, “Never criticize any method that God is blessing!”¹ Since church growth is *assumed* to be the sign of God’s blessing, then increased numbers become the justification for whatever methods are chosen.

This kind of pragmatism is dangerous because it elevates human opinion and experience over the authority of God’s Word—marketing surveys end up carrying more clout than the Scriptures! The by-product of this pragmatism is an array of bizarre efforts to reach people for Christ and, even worse, has often led to the distortion of the gospel message itself.

However, we cannot let the errors of some make us indifferent to the issue of God-honoring church growth. Acts 9:31, quoted above, reveals that such growth is marked by three characteristics. First, it is spiritual growth (*being built up*). The believers were being edified and the Spirit was causing them to grow strong spiritually. Second, there was numerical growth (*it continued to increase*). As it says in a number of places in Acts, the number of disciples was increasing (6:7), and the Lord was adding to their number such as were being saved (2:47). Third, there was geographical growth (*throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria*). The mention of these places points backward to Acts 1:8 in which Jesus told His disciples that their mission was to include the continual expansion of the witness about Him. Genuine church growth must include the expansion of the Word into new areas and regions.

Church growth that glorifies God should be the desire of all growing believers. Our desire at DBTS is to train pastors, church planters, and missionaries that have a burning desire to see Jesus Christ honored through the growth of His Church. And we also desire to strengthen the hands of

¹ *The Purpose Driven Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), p. 156.

pastors with a burden to see God-honoring church growth. To that end, the theme of our annual conference is *Church Growth that Glorifies God*. It should prove to be a wonderful time of fellowship, encouragement, and equipping. Please pray for the conference, and we would love to see you there!