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From Study to Pulpit: “Real Church Growth”

Ephesians 4:16

by Dan Anders

But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. This is why it says:

*“When he ascended on high,
he led captives in his train
and gave gifts to men.”*

(What does “he ascended” mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions? He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.) It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining the full measure of perfection found in Christ.

*Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. **From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work** (Eph 4:7-16, NIV).*

Sermon Forethoughts

A preacher’s “anniversary Sunday” can be a significant thing—especially if he has spent several years with a church. Looking back across a span of years, you see a few successes, maybe more failures. Some good people have been brought to Christ. But

others lost their “first love.” There have been some setbacks and some progress.

As my ninth anniversary in Malibu approached, I found myself pondering the ups-and-downs of ministry. What could I say, authentically from God, to draw me and my people upward now? The happy blush of the honeymoon was long past. We knew each other, “warts and all.” Was there a Word from the Lord for this time and place?

Now I know that every preacher “worth his salt” wants a growing church. We like to see the numbers climbing—attendance, baptisms, membership, contributions. If things are booming, or at least modestly increasing, we sense the blessing of God on our labors.

There are several reasons for our fetish for numerical growth. First of all, God wants it, does he not? I mean the Great Commission is still in the Bible! We are to make disciples, and if we do that efficiently and effectively there would have to be a steady increase in the numbers. If my church is not growing, I must be failing, perhaps even disobeying, God.

A second influence on our fixation with church growth is the impact of the modern “church growth movement.” I was a student at Fuller Theological Seminary when Donald MacGavran came to found its School of World Missions and Institute of Church Growth. As the guru of the scientific study of church growth, MacGavran passionately insisted that living churches are growing churches. If anything, his disciples have turned up the heat. We grow or we die!

A third factor is our guilt over the phenomenal growth of the Boston Movement, a.k.a. Interna-

tional Churches of Christ. Much as we may poke holes in their theology, this new mini-denomination makes us look like nerds in bean counting. If they have such defective doctrine, how could God let them boast congregations in the thousands, budgets in the millions, while my little church struggles to keep its head above water?

A fourth influence—perhaps, truth told, the dominant one—is our American definition of “success.” We are hung up on the belief that “bigger is better.” The corporation must show a bigger profit each year. The football team has to win more games every season. The church should be knocking down walls and building “bigger barns.” Otherwise we are failures. And if a preacher fails too long, anyone can hear the moving van at the door. These are some of my thoughts as I think of nine years of our life together. Is my church growing—in God’s way? Is there a Word from the Lord on the kind of growth he wants us all to experience?

In the Study

A simple concordance-search turns up a few texts where the Bible talks about “growth.” Some of them seem, on examination, to deal mainly with personal development, the Christian’s own spiritual maturing. One passage, Ephesians 4:7-16, seems to combine personal and corporate growth in one grand panorama.

Several readings and some serious exegesis later, I am particularly drawn to the concluding verse in the NIV: “From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.”

The verse obviously speaks of growth as God intends it. Analysis of the text yields a simple flow of ideas.

First, the growth of which it speaks is “from him,” i.e., “Christ, our head” (4:15). Divine power is the source of growth. That seems to jibe with other ideas. “So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow” (1 Cor 3:7). Maybe that idea goes back to Jesus himself (cf. Mark 4:26-29). Real growth is from God, not from human strategies.

Second, this text speaks of our interconnectedness—“the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament.” What a relief! I’m not in this by myself. Every segment of the body is involved. And it is not just one congregation, swelling or shrinking. The development God designed is for the whole body as it functions together simultaneously in every place. Third, every part of the body must be working for growth to occur. This

is the next thought in the order of the Greek sentence. The phrase is quite emphatic: “each one of the parts.” Instead of no one being indispensable, maybe it is the other way round! That reminds me of a line from Augustine—“Without God, man cannot. Without man, God will not.” One sickly member weakens the body. Real vitality comes from healthy body parts.

Last, when every part of the whole body works, drawing its energy from Christ, it is “unto building itself in love.” This is the end result, God’s grand goal. He wants his people built up in love. Numbers count, but they are not the whole story. God wants quality that gives quantity.

At the Pulpit

An honest sermon on “real church growth” better begin honestly. It is important to God that increasing numbers of people be brought to obedient trust in Jesus Christ as Lord. God wants people to be converted!

The story of the gospel’s onward march, familiarly chronicled in Acts, counts conversions—about 3,000 on Pentecost Day (Acts 2:41), numbers being won daily (2:47), about 5,000 male members (4:4), more and more men and women converting (5:14), a rapid expansion with large numbers of Jewish priests following Jesus as Messiah (6:7). As Ira North, church-grower par excellence, used to say “Numbers must count with God.”

But wait! There seems to be another side. There were times when “less was more.” Remember God’s call to Israel. “The Lord did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples” (Deut 7:7).

What about Gideon? (Judg 7:1ff.). God shrunk his army from 32,000 to 300 so they could not claim their own victory over Midian. And then there is Jesus. His ministry did not hinge on the size of his following. There were just eleven men present when Christ issued his marching orders.

So maybe real growth is more a matter of quality, than quantity. Maybe healthy external development comes from healthy internal development. Remember the text: “From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work” (4:16). Paul says a lot. In one text the apostle tells us the source, the place, the activity, and the goal of real growth.

From there, the sermon almost preached itself.

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