



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

## Missiology

### Lesson 18 – The Church Growth Movement as a Threat to Christian Missions

The Church of Jesus Christ grows in two ways: it grows in numbers, and it grows spiritually. Of the Christian congregation in Jerusalem, we are told: **“And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved”** (Acts 2:47). On the day of Pentecost **“three thousand ... were added”** (Acts 2:41) to the church. In Acts 4:4 we read: **“And the number of the men came to be about five thousand.”** In Acts 5:14 we read: **“Believers were increasingly added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women.”**

Another way in which the Church grows is in spiritual growth; it grows in faith and love. The apostle Paul wrote to the Christians in Thessalonica: **“May the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another and to all”** (1 Thessalonians 3:12). Later he wrote again to them, saying: **“We are bound to thank God always for you, brethren, as it is fitting, because your faith grows exceedingly, and the love of every one of you all abounds toward each other”** (2 Thessalonians 1:3).

Notice that it is the Lord who causes both growth in numbers and growth in faith and love. It is the Lord who adds to the Church. It is the Lord who makes Christians increase in faith and love. The Lord brings about both kinds of growth through His Word and Sacraments, that is, through the means of grace. Therefore, if we want the Church to grow (and we certainly do), then we need to pray as Paul did for God’s blessings on our faithful and diligent use of the means of grace, that is, to bless the preaching of the Word and the administration of the Sacraments.

Therefore we state as our confession: *“Since it is only through the external means ordained by Him that God has promised to communicate the grace and salvation purchased by Christ, the Christian Church must not remain at home with the means of grace entrusted to it, but go into the whole world with the preaching of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments, Matt. 28:19-20; Mark 16:15-16. For the same reason also the churches at home should never forget that there is no other way of winning souls for the Church and keeping them with it than the faithful and diligent use of the divinely ordained means of grace. Whatever activities do not either directly apply the Word of God or subserve such application we condemn as ‘new methods,’ unchurchly activities, which do not build, but harm, the Church”* (Brief Statement of 1932, #22).

Whenever we pray **“Your Kingdom come”** (Matthew 6:10), we are praying that God would make His Church grow both outwardly and inwardly. God will answer our prayer and give us Church growth in accordance with His gracious will to save sinners.

How, then, can any movement called “the Church Growth Movement” be a threat to Christian missions? The problem is that the Church Growth Movement is not satisfied with the growth in numbers that comes about through the regular use of the means of grace. The leaders in this movement have come up with various earthly methods that they think will bring about faster growth. They want to remove various barriers that they believe hinder church growth.

One way to increase in numbers is to change the message that Christ has given us to make it less offensive to unbelievers. In other words, we make it easier for outsiders to join a Christian congregation by eliminating parts of the message that are difficult to accept. To say that Jesus is the only Savior of the world and that all non-Christian religions cannot save anyone is a hard saying for some people. To say that non-Christians will go to an eternal hell if they do not come to faith in Christ is a hard saying for many. To say that most modern scientists are wrong when they claim that the world evolved over millions of years is very hard for many educated people to accept. To say that certain sexual practices are contrary to God’s will makes some people turn away from the Gospel. When growth in numbers becomes more important than teaching God’s Word faithfully, then we have a definite threat to genuine mission work.

Did Jesus soften or change His message to make it easier to accept? No! He made it clear that faith in Him was necessary for eternal life. He said: **“This is the will of Him who sent Me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life”** (John 6:40). Many of His Jewish listeners did not like to hear words like this. **“Therefore many of His disciples, when they heard this, said, ‘This is a hard saying; who can understand it?’”** (John 6:60). **“From that time many of His disciples went back and walked with Him no more”** (John 6:66). Jesus did not water down the truth to attract more followers.

The apostle Paul was not willing to change God’s Word to make it more acceptable. He wrote: **“The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing”** (1 Corinthians 1:18). **“We preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness”** (1 Corinthians 1:23). Nevertheless, **“it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe”** (1 Corinthians 1:21).

If Paul had accepted circumcision as necessary for salvation, he could have gained more Jewish followers. If Paul had made light of the immorality of the Gentiles, he could have gained more Gentile followers. But the fact is that when the Gospel of Christ is proclaimed as God has given it, no one can accept it on his own or by his own will power. God is the only One who can convert unbelievers, and He has given us the way by which He does His work. No unbeliever chooses to become a Christian, rather unbelievers resist Christianity because it condemns with their sinful nature. No one is by nature friendly to the idea of becoming Christians.

Because conversion depends on God, we should not judge congregations, missionaries, and pastors by how many new members they have gained. Two pastors may be preaching the

exact same true message of Christ in similar ways. God may cause the one group to increase greatly, while the other congregation may not grow much at all, and even may be declining in numbers. Does this mean that the growing congregation is more faithful than the other? Not at all. If both preachers and congregations use the means of grace faithfully and faithfully preach the Word, they are both doing what God wants them to do. God blesses with growth as He chooses.

Apollos followed the apostle Paul as preacher in the congregation at Corinth. Some people were comparing Paul and Apollos and choosing one over the other. Paul responded to this by saying: **“Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers through whom you believed, as the Lord gave to each one? I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase”** (1 Corinthians 3:5-6). What God requires of congregations and pastors and missionaries is that they be faithful in the use of the Word of God. **“It is required in stewards that one be found faithful”** (1 Corinthians 4:2).

Some groups who follow the precepts of the Church Growth Movement visit the people who live in a certain community and ask them what they would like a church in their neighborhood to teach and do. Based on the answers they receive, they plan their church, its teachings, and its activities. In other words, they give the people what they want, instead of giving them what they need: namely, the Word of God in its truth and purity, even if the Word hurts people at first. Catering to what people want is the Church Growth Movement at work, and many people join such churches because they are getting what they want: mainly pleasant surroundings, activities for the young and old, friendly sermons that make everyone feel good about themselves with no mention of sin or punishment; they experience just a pleasant time. But what good is a large church with many members who are having a good time on this earth if it does not provide what Jesus called the **“one thing”** that is needed (Luke 10:42), namely, God’s clear Word – both the Law that condemns and the Gospel that brings life? God has chosen to work through the preaching and teaching of that Word.

### Questions

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1. In what two ways does the Lord of the Church make His Church grow?
2. What is the means by which the Lord adds to His Church?
3. What is the only way to win souls for Christ’s Church?
4. What prayer did Jesus teach us that prays for growth among Christians?
5. What is the big flaw in the so-called Church Growth Movement?
6. What happens when growth in numbers becomes more important than the truth?
7. Prove that Jesus did not soften His message to gain more followers.
8. Show that Paul did not alter the Gospel in order to gain more members.
9. What is the only thing God requires of His missionaries?
10. Why is it dangerous to compare congregations on the basis of numerical growth?
11. What is wrong with the church trying to give people what they want?