

# *A Time to Grow Again!*

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TEXT: "So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and increased in number daily" (Acts 16:5).

## INTRODUCTION

Nothing on this planet is more natural than growth. Plants and people are in a constant state of change and growth. Even limestone rocks grow. What is so sad as stunted, hindered growth? What is so thrilling as proper growth? The entire family beams when a "growing boy" is acknowledged. Physical, mental, social, and spiritual growth are exciting to behold.

The pages of Acts are punctuated throughout with reports of growth of the church. Notice Acts 2:41; 4:4; 6:7; 12:24; 16:5.

It is time for the Lord's church to grow again! His church must grow in grace, knowledge, number, and spirit. Growth does not come simply by wishing. It will demand the best of us—and all of us. It will require a new level of commitment rarely seen in modern churches.

Growth will demand that church leaders tune in to the times. This is not yesterday, but today, not the nineteenth century, but the twentieth—almost the twenty-first. No longer can we say, "As things have always been so shall they always be." *The birth rate* in America has been greatly altered. It may be galloping in the Third World, but in America it moves at a snail's pace. Since there are fewer babies, there will be fewer young people, college students, and preacher students. There will be smaller families and more mothers in the workaday world. *The marriage rate* has changed. Many are married late, others not at all. One-third of all adults are single, widowed, or divorced. *The divorce rate* has changed. While there was a slight improvement in 1983, we, nevertheless, march to the divorce court in unprecedented numbers. *The national population* is shifting to the South and Southwest, where churches of Christ have their greatest concentration, thus providing unusual opportu-

nities for expansion. This is the age of the *computer*, the *missile*, the *shopping mall*, and the *porno shop*.

Churches that grow must know what time it is and plan accordingly. On the campus of Abilene Christian University I recently noticed the cornerstone of a building which read "Girls' Dormitory." That inscription was set in stone perhaps fifty years ago. At the time, it was assumed that this large, strategically-located building would remain a dormitory throughout the college's history, but today it is an office building. Regrettably, many congregations have "set in stone" their customs, methods, and traditions. They plod on regardless of any success or accomplishment.

With regard to human history, it is later than it has ever been and the dangers facing the world are greater than ever. We must not leave for our children a sad and shattered legacy of what might have been. It is time for the church to grow again! But if growth is to occur, *three truths are essential*.

## I. BECOMING AND BELONGING

Men everywhere seek a circle of friendship that is genuine and lasting, a place of acceptance and belonging—*their place*. Each week from three to four thousand bodies are transported across state lines for burial—to rest in *their place*. Foreign-born Americans spend at least \$250,000 annually to visit the countries in which they were born—*their place*. Worshipers tend to sit in the same pew on the same side of the building—*their place*. Even so, growing churches are composed of people who have been made to feel that this is *their place* and these are *their people*.

When Saul came to Jerusalem, he wished to be accepted by the congregation, but found it difficult (Acts 9:26). Barnabas intervened and encouraged Saul's acceptance.

All of us feel the *need to belong*. We live in the midst of milling machines, pressing people, impersonal crowds. Twenty-six lanes of traffic on six different levels surround the Pentagon. Daily, 250,000 go in and out of the International Trade Center in New York. In a sea of anonymity, Christ's church must be an island of belonging where men are brought into our hearts and lives and homes. Whosoever will may come and whosoever comes will be welcomed!

## II. CARING AND SHARING

In Jerusalem, the believers at the beginning had all things in common (Acts 2:44). A hungry, ill-clothed Christian was served (James 2:15, 16; 1 John 3:17).

In *A History of Christianity*, Kenneth Latourette writes:

The Christian churches were the most inclusive and the strongest of all the various associations in the Roman world. They cared for their poor and for those of their number imprisoned for their faith. In times of distress churches would help one another by gifts of money or food. A Christian holding membership in a local unit of the church would be among friends in whatever city or town he found others of his communion.

Christians who do not deeply care about their fellow saints are violating the letter and spirit of true religion. The daily climate of a growing congregation is caring (Galatians 6:10). Charles Swindoll tells of a Marine Corps buddy who was converted. He had been a loud, profane, immoral, and intemperate person. But he changed. Several months later he said, "The only thing I still miss is that old fellowship I used to have with all the guys down at the tavern. I remember how we used to sit around, laugh, drink a pitcher of beer, and tell stories and let our hair down. I can't find anything like that for Christians. I no longer have a place to

admit my faults and talk about my battles—where somebody won't preach at me and frown and quote a verse to me." Should not the church be a fellowship that is largely unshockable, where people can come to say, "I've done wrong; I've played the fool," and find help and understanding?

## III. FRIENDS AND FAMILY

The emphasis in Acts is upon reaching your own (Acts 10:24; 16:34; 18:8). Family and friends are often mentioned together as mutual followers of Christ—James and John, Andrew and Peter, Philip and Nathaniel, Barnabas and Mark. Wives are encouraged to win their unbelieving husbands (1 Peter 3:1).

We have often assumed that churches are built up anonymously—strangers going door-to-door speaking to strangers. In most cases, our greatest opportunities for lasting conversions lie at our own doorstep. Ten thousand persons were polled as to the initial cause of their conversion. Of these 5 percent walked in off the street, 5 percent came because of the particular preacher, 5 percent came because of a good Sunday School, 2 percent responded to the invitation of a stranger, 3 percent were attracted by church programs, and 80 percent came because of *the invitation of a friend or relative*. The same survey was taken at a recent meeting of ministers and elders which I attended. Of those present 95 percent gave as their initial church contact the influence of a relative or friend. "Go to thy house unto thy friends, and tell them how great things the Lord hath done for thee, and how he had mercy on thee" (Mark 5:19).

## CONCLUSION

Let us grow again! A weary world cries out for the Lord's church to grow!

—Paul Rogers

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