

GROWTH AND THEOLOGY

By

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The deep problems of the world are theological. The prime issue of the day — as in any era — is the salvaging of man from the chaos of sin and the judgment to come.

Only as man is brought to a confrontation with his Maker and made to see the purpose for which he was created and the ultimate destiny toward which he is traveling will he see the necessity of right thinking and action. Nothing is right unless it is right according to God's will, and as long as man resists the knowledge of revealed theology, he will continue to create greater chaos and violence.

The modern clamor for "Church Growth," while often claiming that it is founded on solid doctrinal truth, tends to shun theology for the sake of gaining the people that are resistant to study and objective thinking. Worship often is a performance staged by professionals, and sermons may be aimed at satisfying the ego, improving one's self-image or coping with some psychological problem.

The belief that "big is better" is alive and well among Christian leaders and many are playing the game of power, the winner being judged on the basis of how big and fast his church grows. No one has to be reminded that this is a far cry from the New Testament example.

This is not a complaint against the growth of the church. Every Christian is eager to see more converts to Christ being added to the church. The complaint is against the means many are using and the disastrous results being obtained. Instead of challenging people to repent and seek the face of God in humility and service, they are told that all is well, God loves them and they should come to reap the benefits of all the ways the church can serve them. It is not uncommon for visitors who have moved into the area to tell me they are "looking for a church to meet their needs," not one that upholds the word of Christ and meets the demands of God. They often land in one of the churches that offers them fun and games, because that is the kind of bait used to lure them into the church in the first place.

Of what value is quantity without the very elements that define a Christian disciple: Lukewarm-ness is still lukewarm-ness even if multiplied over and over. A thousand lukewarm members is not better than one genuine believer but a thousand times worse!

Christ came seeking to save the sinner. His love and concern surely must have been as great as any church-growth advocate of our day. Yet He met people head-on with truth (theology) and drove away those who only gave lip service, who followed Him because it was popular and satisfying to the flesh and the ego. On one occasion they left Him in droves because He insisted that they understand the theology He presented. He asked the apostles, "Would you also go away?" Peter had the good sense to give the only

logical answer, “To whom shall we go, Lord? You have the words of eternal life” (John 6:68). One thing most modern preachers want to avoid like the plague is any discussion about the meaning of eternal life and eternal death!

Paul was not hesitant to present the bare theological facts right up front, so there would be no question about the necessity of a confrontation with God, sin and the ultimate destiny. Whether to kings or slaves, he preached the implications of sin and judgment and the hope of the resurrection of the dead.

Peter, who seems to have a reputation of being a crude and obtuse bungler, was nevertheless a theologian who, in his very first sermon, incorporated the foreknowledge of God, the crucifixion of Jesus, the resurrection, the fulfillment of scripture and the guilt of his hearers before he challenged them to “repent and be baptized” (Acts 2). His next recorded sermon is equally as theological, in which he upheld the resurrection, the judgment and destruction of sinners and God’s blessing to those who turn from sin to the Savior (Acts 3:12–26).

The church of the first century grew because the theology of the gospel was presented in plain terms which demanded acceptance or rejection. People were “added to the church” because they believed, not because they like to sing in the choir, or like the colors of the church nursery, the recreation program or the singles’ monthly party!

In this generation we have seen a retreat from theology and a rise in self-centeredness — improve your image, increase your self-esteem, join the jazzercise class, be successful, find healing, find wealth, find success! Who congratulates the believer who turns down a promotion in favor of devoting more time to family and church? Who admires the church which meets in humble quarters in order to spend its money on missions and the poor? And how many will cut loose from a popular doctrine held by the power-brokers of the church because they see it is not biblical and take the unpopular stance rather than compromise in silence?

In a recent study Dr. Win Arn, President of the Institute for American Church Growth, reported that the fastest growing churches are the ones that are noted for their “love” and that their leadership and theology are of much less significance than their “love quotient.” The report simply indicated that churches grow faster where thought and obedience to truth are not required, which is no surprise. But experiencing “love” is not the same as experiencing redemption and a life of faithful obedience to Christ.

The modern church and church leader is in danger of contracting “megalomania,” the disorder in which the subject thinks himself great and endowed with power. It is easy to rationalize that the end (converting more people to Christ) justifies the means (appealing to the worldly desires and goals in order to attract sinners). But Jesus warned that before following Him, one is to count the cost, deny himself and take up the cross.

Filling church houses with people primarily concerned with worldly success and personal pleasure does not fulfill the great commission.

Peter warns us against being carried away with the error of the wicked, saying, “But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (II Peter 3:18).

Growth is demanded. It is the natural growth produced when the right seed is planted and nurtured, ultimately bearing the fruit of the Spirit. What we are to seek for is not size, but sanctification; not power but purity.

Our problems and those of all the world can be solved only by an honest and humble effort to bring life into harmony with God as revealed through Christ. This is true of all our concerns: drugs, abortion, immorality, the deterioration of the family, robbery through taxation, loss of freedom and the network of world revolutionaries and their effort to destroy Christian faith. The bottom line is theological; the warfare has to do with the faith, and the sword is the truth of God.

According to Paul the leadership of the church is given “for the perfecting of the saints...unto the building up of the body of Christ...that we may be no longer children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, in craftiness, after the wiles of error; but speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him, who is the head, even Christ” (Eph. 4:12–15).

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