

My Church Is Not Growing – Areas to Control

When exactly is a pastor successful? It seems to me that we can only answer this question when we understand our task. A Christian plumber can judge his success at the end of the day by how many leaks he fixed, how many drains he unblocked and what kind of profit he took for the day. A Christian electrician can judge his success by faults repaired, things installed and profit taken. A Christian software programmer can judge his success by codes written, problems solved, creative solutions developed. These professions have a measurable criteria by which a person can tell if he is successful at what he does. These people can put their heads on their pillows at night, and say – it was a good, profitable day.

But how does a pastor judge his success? Is he successful if people liked his sermon? Is he unsuccessful if they don't? Is he successful if they don't? Is he successful if he is popular? Is he unsuccessful if he is unpopular? Is he successful because more people are coming to his church, or unsuccessful because the opposite is happening?

Already you know that if criteria, by which we judge a pastor's success, are outward things like attendance figures, popularity, financial income, we are in trouble – because these things can mean more than one thing. People might be coming because his messages are sound, they might be staying away for the same reason. They might be coming because his messages are filled with ear-tickling false doctrine, they might be leaving for the same reason. He might be popular the way David was, he might be unpopular the way Jeremiah was. He might have a ministry like Apollo's; he might have a ministry like Ezekiel.

The fact is the Bible tells us there are times when the preaching of the Word is in season, and there are times when it is out of season. If you are preaching the Word during an out of season time, and your church is not growing numerically, you may be doing nothing wrong.

In other words, the pastor should not put his head on his pillow on Sunday night and say – that was a successful day because 14 new people came; nor should he necessarily lie awake that night thinking he is a failure because 15 people were missing. In order for you to have the same satisfaction that a hard-working plumber, electrician or software programmer has at the end of a hard day's work, you are going to have to realise that the pastor's tools and trade deal with invisible, and sometimes immeasurable things. Yet, I suggest, you can still know when you have been successful.

So, I suggest, as pastors, we need to decide what kind of growth it is that the Bible requires because the right kind of growth is the right kind of success. Now it wouldn't surprise you if I said the growth we want is spiritual growth. But because that term is something of a cliché, I am going to inject it with some new life. Spiritual growth is when there is a growth of the work of the Spirit in your church.

Now I know that theologically we believe that we receive the Spirit at salvation. But it is also a theological truth that His ministry can be sought and welcomed, or it can be snubbed and quenched.

A pastor's job is to understand the ministry of the Spirit, understand what tools or means the Spirit uses, and then bring these to bear upon the ministry. A pastor is bit like a bee-keeper. The bee-keeper doesn't produce honey. He doesn't have the capacity in himself to do that. But he arranges things so as to attract the bees, keep them, nourish them, and enjoy a sweet harvest of honey. He does everything from the building of the hives, to the planting of nearby flowers and plants to

supply them with sweet nectar. He attracts bees, and supplies the things which make the work of the bees happen.

Now bees are impersonal, unthinking creatures, whereas the Spirit is the eternal, all-knowing, all-wise God. Bees are used for our own ends, but we do not use the Spirit for our own ends. Nevertheless, the illustration helps us see – the Spirit is the one who produces the sweet work of conversion and growth in holiness. He alone can do it. Seeing people being saved, growing in Christlikeness, discipling others – this we would call growth, wouldn't we? But who does that? The Spirit of God.

So our goal is to understand His ministry, understand His preferred tools, and then submit to that pattern and work with Him.

The first and primary principle is that:

The Spirit blesses Christ's pre-eminence

John 15:26 *But when the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me.*

John 16:13-14 *"However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come. ¹⁴ He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you.*

Jesus said that the Spirit's ministry will be to exalt the Son. In turn, the Son reveals the Father. God's plan is that all the fullness of the Godhead should dwell in Christ, and that He should have the pre-eminence (Col 1:18-19). You can take all the other works of the Spirit – regenerating, baptising, filling, sealing, gifting, convicting, enabling, anointing guiding – and they all come back to this thing – the Spirit aims to reveal Jesus Christ so as to glorify Him. The Spirit aims to illuminate Jesus Christ so that He may be loved above all. This is always His goal in your individual life, and this is always His goal in your local church. He wishes to see His work of revealing Jesus Christ thrive. He is not seeking to conceal Christ; he is seeking to testify of Him.

A church that is growing spiritually is a church where His work of revealing Christ is growing. Where the knowledge of Christ is enlightening the hearts of people, and stirring up affections that drive them to obedience. Illumination is where the truth becomes as real as it is true to people. People become aware Christ is here, Christ is active, and Christ is glorious. They respond to illumination intellectually, emotionally and volitionally.

If His ministry of revealing Christ is growing, your church is growing. That may mean more people attending, it may not. It depends on Him. It may mean your popularity or it may not. It depends on Him. But you can put your head on your pillow at night and say – I did the things necessary to bring more of the Spirit's ministry of revealing Christ to my congregation today.

What things invite the sovereign work of the Spirit? I am going to list five things:

I. The Word of Christ must dwell richly in your church. - proclamation and praise

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.

Now the interesting thing about Colossians 3:16 is that it is nearly identical to Ephesians 5:18-19:

Ephesians 5:18-19 ⁸ *And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit,* ¹⁹ *speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord,*

What that leads us to believe is that the Spirit of God fills where the Word of God is dwelling richly. The Spirit's work is always integrally connected with the Word. He does not work in a vacuum. He works primarily through the medium of the Word of God. As someone has said, the Spirit of God, takes the Word of God, and shows the people of God the Son of God.

The command here is – let the word of Christ (which is His written Word) settle in your hearts. Give it a permanent dwelling place in your hearts. The Word should not be a visitor, a backpacker, a sometime guest – the Word should have a front door key and have prime place. Moreover, he adds the word 'richly'. The Word is to have a luxurious accommodation in our hearts. Now Paul is using an image of the Word living and living luxuriously, lavishly in your heart. What does that mean, exactly? What would it look like in our church life?

Well, verse 16 actually helps us because we are told of the two ways that this is to happen. The one is *proclamation* and the other is *praise*. We see proclamation in the words 'teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom'. The Word gets a lavish place in our church, when we give it much space to proclaiming the Word in all wisdom. Proclaiming the Word is both positive and negative – *teaching and admonishing*. Teaching is setting forth the truth, admonishing is the warnings and rebukes that must come as we apply the Word.

If we had 90 minutes to meet together, and we had to decide how to split that time up, what would signify a rich, abundant, place for the Word in our meeting? A 10 minute object lesson? A 15 minute motivational talk? A 5 minute devotional chat? Sadly, you see this occurring today. The Word is shunted to the side. You even see it in the physical arrangement. The pulpit is a transparent, almost invisible thing, the preacher is almost to the side, if not the edge of the stage, and his sermon is really a 15 minute Powerpoint, designed to keep the entertainment going.

If we are to enjoy the Spirit's ministry of revealing Christ abundantly, it is because we give much place to what He uses. It is self-evident: if we do not want the Word of Christ, then we do not want the will of Christ. If we do not want the will of Christ, we do not want His pre-eminence, and we should not expect more of the Spirit's illumination. The Word must dwell richly in the hearts of our people by how much time we give to it. Not only how much time we give to it, but what we do with that time. A series of stories loosely tied together with an anchor text? A verse used as a springboard to talk about all kinds of other things? No, if we are to give Christ the pre-eminence, we must be expositors of His Word. Let His Word speak, uncover it, open it, explain it – make it plain.

Pastors must make no apology for giving doctrine and teaching such a central place in the local church. Read through the pastoral epistles, and what does Paul emphasise to both Timothy and Titus? Teach, preach, take heed to the doctrine, don't give heed to fables – preach, teach.

The second way that the Word is to have a rich place in our church and our lives is through praise. We are to sing with sincere gratitude in our hearts to the Lord- psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. Now, I don't know if there is a sharp distinction between those three, I think they overlap in many ways, but what is clear is that psalms come from the Word of Christ. Hymns come from truth from the Word of Christ, Spiritual songs sing of testimonies and experiences that emerge from the Word of Christ. When we sing, we are to sing the truth. We are not supposed to sing about ourselves (mainly) or about our spiritual aspirations (mainly). We are to sing of God and His glory from the

Word. His attributes, His works, our privileges in Him, our gratitude, our love for Him.

Sadly, modern churches have split the two off from each other. The singing is tailored around pop songs, with vaguely spiritual lyrics, designed to give the placebo effect. There is not substantial praise going on, no substantial edification going on, but the driving beat and the gushy words at least make us *feel* like it is. So you have this self-centred time of amusement, or even spiritual entertainment, and then having done that, we now sit down to hear the Word. You hear people say things like, "That church has great praise and worship, but the Word isn't very strong." How can that be? If the Word is not strong, what are you singing about? *If the truth isn't properly proclaimed, then God will not be properly praised.*

God says that the pastors worth of double-honour are those who labour **1 Timothy 5:17**, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine. They are going to draw the Spirit's ministry of revealing Christ. They are going to bring about spiritual growth.

II. The Power of Christ must be sought personally and corporately.

Luke 11:9-13 "So I say to you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. ¹⁰ "For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. ¹¹ "If a son asks for bread from any father among you, will he give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent instead of a fish? ¹² "Or if he asks for an egg, will he offer him a scorpion? ¹³ "If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!"

To draw the work of the Spirit is to ask for it. Now I know this verse can be abused by some to teach a wrong view of the Spirit. But this much is obvious – God is willing and desirous to have His Spirit work amongst those who ask for it.

Jim Cymbala's book *Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire* is not as theologically straight as I would like. He says some things which I believe are in error. But the overall thrust of the book is fundamentally correct. A church that wants to see God work must be a praying church. There will be no power in the Word, no illumination unless God's people plead for it.

Prayer to a church is like what happens before lightning. Before lightning strikes, there is a charge of electrons that flows up from the ground. Particles with the opposite charge that are building up in the clouds are drawn to this, and soon, the powerful strike comes. Prayer is a people sending up positively charged prayers to draw the oppositely charged power of God.

What kind of prayer draws God's attention?

Psalms 34:17-19 *The righteous cry out, and the LORD hears, And delivers them out of all their troubles. ¹⁸ The LORD is near to those who have a broken heart, And saves such as have a contrite spirit. ¹⁹ Many are the afflictions of the righteous, But the LORD delivers him out of them all.*

Believers who come with brokenness, emptiness, neediness draw God's attention- self-sufficient believers do not send up a charge that attracts the God who delights to show His power on behalf of His people. God's power is drawn to the weak who call on Him.

But of all our meetings, which meeting is the most poorly attended? The prayer meeting. The prayer meeting is always for the three or the five or the nine faithful men or women. God's people do not like to pray.

What can a pastor do about this? Firstly, make sure you yourself pray. Display in your own life that you desire grace. Display by your time of seeking the Lord, as the representative of the church, that your congregation cannot function without God's enabling grace. Though it may be secret, it will be a large reason why power is present or absent in your congregation. Remember Moses holding up his arms at the Battle of Amalek. The arms of their leader raised up to heaven – signifying the victory in this battle comes from God. And as Moses' arms sank, the battle went badly. As Aaron and Hur held up his arms, the battle went well. There seems to be a lesson here for the leaders of God's people. Your arms must remain up. And if they are sagging, get one or two others who will help you. Get them to pray for your prayer life. Get them to pray with you.

Second, teach your people the importance of private and corporate prayer. Help people to understand that revival has historically happened when people corporately cried out to God for a work of grace in their own hearts and in their churches.

Third, do not cancel the corporate prayer meetings. Keep them going, no matter what. Be it two or three men, do not let the fire on the altar go out. God may be gracious and fan that flame into a fire.

III. The Unity in Christ must be maintained and protected

Acts 2:1-3 *When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. ² And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. ³ Then there appeared to them divided*

The day of Pentecost was a unique event. Nevertheless there are some principles that are fascinating to realise. One of them is this: The Spirit's filling did not produce unity; the Spirit's filling came because there was unity. Now, I understand the kind of love we need to have unity is a work of the Spirit. But the other side of the coin is – the Spirit does not come and bless a church with further revival, unless there is unity.

Disunity in the local church grieves the Spirit.

Ephesians 4:30-32 *And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. ³¹ Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. ³² And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ forgave you.*

The church is a Body, but whose Body? Christ's. The Spirit is deeply committed to the pre-eminence of Christ, and the pre-eminence of Christ is not seen in a fragmented Body. Divisions are signs that the Spirit is being grieved and quenched, not obeyed.

Unity is quite simply a spiritual one-mindedness. It is when individuals submit their minds and wills to the standard of the Word of God, and the Spirit of God thereby harmonises them to the same standard. Oneness of mind produces oneness of purpose. People that have one mind and one purpose do not bite and devour one another.

Now, we do not have time to talk about the ways that we foster unity. The important theological truth to remember is that Paul said in **Ephesians 4:3** *endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace*. Maintain the unity – not create it. There is already a unity between believers by virtue of what they share in Christ. The commandments of the New Testament are always focused around not interrupting that unity with selfishness, and secondly encouraging the unity with selfless acts of service.

There are four things a pastor can do to encourage unity and discourage disunity.

- 1) A pastor must set the tone with his gracious attitude, with his desire to be involved and fellowship. His attitude filters down to others and their relationships.
- 2) He must teach through the passages dealing with believers' relationships to one another. People must understand, unity is something God requires.
- 3) He must help solve the conflicts, where he can, in one-on-one counselling. More importantly, teach people how to biblically solve it for themselves.
- 4) He must hold people to the Scriptural standard, and discipline the persistently divisive.

Titus 3:10-11 *Reject a divisive man after the first and second admonition, ¹¹ knowing that such a person is warped and sinning, being self-condemned.*

IV. The Purity in Christ must be taught and protected

When Jesus died, He died with a purpose in mind:

Ephesians 5:25-27 *Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, ²⁶ that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, ²⁷ that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish.*

Jesus died to give Himself a holy church. Jesus died to give Himself a church like Himself. When does that process begin? It starts now, with the church being increasingly set apart. That's the meaning of holy. Holiness is otherness, other than the world, other than sin, other than pop psychology, other than the culture around us. The holier a local church, the more like Christ it is. The more like Christ it is, the more the Spirit is pleased to reveal Christ to it.

John 14:23 *Jesus answered and said to him, "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him.*

It goes without saying – the Holy Spirit is the *Holy* Spirit. He loves to dwell amongst what is holy. Where open sin, flagrant disobedience, and unpunished rebellion abound, the Spirit will not be pleased.

A pastor committed to seeing the purity of Christ in his church will do several things. Firstly, he will preach the Word without compromise. If the Bible calls it sin, he will call it sin. If the Bible calls for radical obedience, he will call for radical obedience.

Second, he will help the people apply general truths in specific ways. He will not ignore the matters of relationships, materialism, entertainment choices, music, dress, sexual purity, dating, child-raising, marriage, work ethic, thought life, speech, priorities, goals, ambitions, desires. He will be accused of legalism. He must absorb this criticism graciously. A legalist is someone who adds works to salvation. A Pharisee is someone who makes external acts of obedience the standard of righteousness and teaches a righteousness based on willpower alone. Legalism and Pharisaism are not making specific applications, giving people specific guidelines. Legalism and Pharisaism are when you make the rules ends in themselves. Rules are like roads. They help you get somewhere. But you don't camp on the road. Don't be scared of setting standards. If you can defend them biblically, and they are taught graciously, and the empowering work of the Spirit is emphasised, and the heart issue is explained, they are like training wheels for people learning to find their balance.

Third, he is going to supervise the obedience of God's people. Now he is not a policeman seeking to pounce on the slightest offence. But when he sees a sheep that is determined to go its own way, he

does not stand idly by. He corrects. Pastors correct, in one-on-one counsel if needs be - church discipline.

V. The Name of Christ Must Be Spread

Matthew 28:19-20 *Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ "teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Amen.*

The final thing that a church which loves the pre-eminence of Christ will do, is spread His name abroad. In other words, a church will follow the Great Commission to make disciples of all nations.

If you believe Christ deserves first place in all men's hearts; if you believe He should be loved with all the heart, soul and mind; if you believe that every knee should bow and ever tongue confess that He is Lord, then you will be involved in evangelism and discipleship.

There are three parts to making discipleship found in Matthew 28:19-20:

Conversion through a clear Gospel, this corresponds to the word 'going'. We have to be deliberate, and intentional with our evangelism. We must aim through our lips and our lives to declare the Gospel. And the Gospel we must declare must be a clear one - one of repentance from sin, surrender to the Lordship and Saviourhood of Jesus. We must call sinners to repentance and also teach them to count the cost. Whether you preach in the open, give out tracts, go door-to-door, or simply equip your people to preach the Gospel to all they know and meet – the person of Jesus Christ must be shared, so that there can be true conversion – true works of regeneration.

The next step of making a disciple is to get commitment through baptism and membership. We must not create spiritual orphans. God insists upon a public and corporate means of displaying the relationship you now have with Christ and His body by being baptised and joining a local church in covenant membership. You will not create disciples if you shrink back from insisting upon commitment.

Thirdly, we make disciples through coaching them - systematic teaching, and accountability. We now teach them what it is to obey Jesus Christ in all of life. This is not a programme. This is the task of the church. Seek true conversion, gain true commitment and coach such people over the long term. This creates not fly-by nights, not neon-light believers, not shallow soil, superficial professions, or thorny ground withering professions – but the good ground professions of Christlike believers who reproduce themselves. Of course, this mission of making disciples goes beyond our local church to include missions around the world. The more we believe Christ is pre-eminent, the more we will want it so all over the globe.

You can't measure all that the Spirit is doing. But you can measure how much you are giving yourself to these things. You can answer these questions: Did I labour in the Word and doctrine today? Did I give myself to prayer, watchful, fervent and thankful? Did I do what I could to maintain the unity of the church? Did I supervise and strengthen the obedience of God's people? Did I seek to make disciples? When we answer *yes* to these questions, we are saying we have done the things needed for spiritual growth.