

Church Growth

Joe Slater

Whole sections of religious bookstores and catalogs are devoted to church growth books. It's a hot topic – and rightly so, for the New Testament church was characterized by explosive growth. Unfortunately, much modern material on church growth has little to do with the Bible and much to do with marketing, consumerism, and pop psychology. Have you wondered how the New Testament church grew so rapidly without all these schemes and gimmicks? Consider several factors:

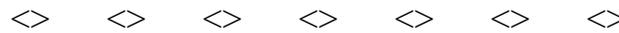
First, they used the **pure seed**, Christ's gospel (Luke 8:11). Plenty of other seed was (and is) available, and planting it would produce growth. Jesus told the parable of the tares, which grew right along with the wheat (Matthew 13:24ff). However, the apostles and other faithful Christians scrupulously avoided other doctrines, adhering faithfully to the truth.

Second, they **zealously planted** that pure seed into people's hearts. In other words, "they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ" (Acts 5:42). Even pure seed is ineffective until and unless it is planted! As sowing precedes reaping, so evangelism precedes church growth. Early Christians tirelessly and shamelessly proclaimed the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, urging sinners to avail themselves of salvation through loving, obedient faith. Today, it seems we want some other way – let's entice them with entertainment; let's wow them with glitzy gimmickry. Give 'em what they want, just like any good consumer-oriented business does. Brethren, "growth" may result from such tactics, but is it wheat or tares?

Next, the early Christians **watered that seed** (1 Corinthians 3:6). Like Barnabas (the "son of

encouragement"), they persuaded those they taught to believe and obey. They lived exemplary lives to demonstrate the effect of the gospel upon themselves, and to enhance its effect upon others (Titus 2:10; 1 Peter 3:1-2).

Finally, let us remember **the soil factor**. The best seed, sown with care and diligently watered, will not produce a harvest in poor soil. In Jesus' parable, four kinds of soil represented for conditions of human hearts. The sower had no control over the condition of the soil; likewise, we cannot force someone else's heart to be receptive to the gospel. This may be the most difficult lesson to learn relative to church growth. When people reject the truth, we err in trying to wheedle them into the church through entertainment, marketing ploys, and gimmickry. Our task is to teach the pure gospel to everyone who will listen. God's task is to add people to the church. Let's get busy doing our job, and let God be God!



The Best Bible School Teacher I Ever Had

Always was there

Always was on time

Always wore a smile

Always demonstrated patience

Always was prepared

Always stayed true to the Scriptures

Always prayed for those in the class

Always checked on me when I was absent

Swift Judgment

"Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed quickly, therefore the hearts of the sons of men among them are given fully to do evil" (Ecclesiastes 8:11).

Parents normally prefer to discipline their children immediately. This teaches the child the principle of consequence. Yet God chooses to allow the sinner to go unpunished. By doing this, Solomon notes that men are more likely to sin again, and sin more often. This being the case, why does God work this way?

Peter said *"God is patient, not wanting any to perish but for all to come to repentance"* (2 Peter 3:9). Paul notes that *"God desires all men to be saved"* (1 Timothy 2:4). We are fortunate that God doesn't immediately punish. If He did we would not have the time to repent. Neither would we have the time to serve Him. The fact is, the *"wages of sin is death"* (Romans 6:23).

Solomon notes that most men, when given more time, are simply given more opportunity to sin. But for those who have a heart for God, time is a gift. With that time necessary corrections can be made (cf. Romans 2:4). Yet know this: *"it will be well for those who fear God"* (Ecclesiastes 8:12). But *"it will not be well for the evil man"* (Ecclesiastes 8:13).

Denny Petrillo (Denver, CO)