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FOUNDATIONAL ISSUES:

Church: Growth of

Church growth issues:

It is not uncommon to have pastors who have built up large churches present seminars on how they accomplished this task, even traveling to other nations to educate church leaders on how to duplicate their achievement. Interested church leaders may flock to these events to hear the secrets of success so that they can then use them in their own churches. But one needs to be careful.



The question is, “What are the key components for building a sound, strong, healthy, dynamic, and even large church?” Is it the cleverly-devised marketing techniques of man, or is there something else? The problem with some church growth seminars is that what worked for one church in one part of a country may not work for another church in another part of the same country. Actually, it might not even work in the same city where the seemingly successful church is located. This can be especially true when crossing borders from one country to another. Therefore, the premise presented here is that unless the principles applied to build a church are supracultural in nature (scriptural principles; not cultural or man-based), they cannot be expected to work from place to place or to produce the building blocks necessary to construct a strong, fruitful church which will make an eternal impact for Christ. The words of Jesus, which He spoke after preaching His Sermon on the Mount (Mat. 5-7), state why this is true: “Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine and acts on them, may be compared to a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded on the rock. Everyone who hears these words of Mine and does not act on them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and it fell -- and great was its fall.” (Mat 7:24-27). Building a church upon cultural principles is like building a house upon sand. Building a church upon supracultural principles is like building a house upon rock. The Bible must be the focus of one’s ministry if it is going to succeed and be a healthy, dynamic church.

Another reason why cultural principles of church growth seminars cannot be expected to always work from one place to another is because each church is different

from the next, and the people to whom each church is reaching out to are different; having their own sets of issues (i.e., cultural, economic, racial, geographical, linguistic, environmental, etc.). In other words, they will have their own set of challenges. But it doesn't stop there because churches and communities have their own personalities, likes and dislikes as well. Because of these differences, what may work with one people group may not work in the same way with another, that is of course if they are not using supracultural principles from the Bible. This is why God organizes churches in specific locations (cf. 1 Cor. 12:18; 1 Pet. 5:3), made up of the leaders (cf. 1 Cor. 12:27-28; Eph. 4:7-13) and gifted believers He places there to do the job (cf. 1 Cor. 12:4-7,11). Therefore churches which are established by a sovereign God (Psa. 103:19; 1 Tim. 6:15) have their definite purposes and goals (Eph. 2:10; Php. 2:12-13), just like everything else which God does; they do not come together haphazardly.

Church growth principle:

When one understands that God is sovereign and that His Word is complete, it would then be logical to conclude that the essential information which church leaders need to know for the purpose of building a successful, dynamic church is found in the Scriptures. This conclusion is based upon the belief that God does desire His churches to be successful (cf. Mat. 28:19-20), and because of this He has supplied them with the information needed to carry out His task (Php. 4:19). If this is correct, then based upon this conclusion, here is a very simple biblical church growth principle:

Make Christ your first love (Rev. 2:4-5), and in the power of the Holy Spirit (Eph. 3:16; cf. Acts 1:8) work hard at doing the things which the Scriptures command churches to do (cf. Acts 20:27; 1 Cor. 11:2; 14:37; Eph. 4:11-16).

What are those things which the Scriptures command churches to do? They are to love the Lord and others, be obedient to the Scriptures, and do those things which churches are suppose to do (those topics addressed in this manual; specifically see the articles titled, "Church: Foundational Truths About and Responsibilities of" and "Church: Goals of"). In other words, love Jesus and be faithful to Him and His Word.

This principle of church growth is based upon two things: the Scriptures and personal experience. In preparation for the composition of this article, the author wrote short summary statements for each chapter of the New Testament epistles (Romans through Jude). He then summarized each epistle with a short statement focusing upon its general theme (i.e., the gospel, correction, the Christian life, etc.). Having analyzed these general themes, the main issue addressed by the writers of these epistles is the Christian's walk and his character (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 2 Timothy, James, and 1 Peter). Other general themes were the gospel (Romans, Galatians), correction (1 & 2 Corinthians), church issues (1 Timothy and Titus), forgiveness (Philemon), the superiority of Christ (Hebrews), warnings (2 Peter), contrasts of righteousness and wickedness (1 John), false teachers (2 John and Jude), and faithfulness (3 John). While each epistle was written for a specific reason and for the purpose of dealing with specific needs, none of these focused on the issue of church growth. Looking at the issues which concerned the New Testament writers, church growth was not one of them. Even the topic of evangelism, though it is mentioned, is not a main theme. Although specific

principles of church growth were never directly addressed by these writers, the issues they did address are essential to genuine church growth; those being the believer's walk and character, and the function and operation of the church. These are the indirect principles of church growth. Therefore, it is the author's view that when these indirect issues are addressed in the local church (those things which a church is commanded to do), church growth will eventually take place. This happens because a church which does these things is being obedient to God, which is a manifestation of its love for Him and His Son (cf. 1 John 5:3; John 14:21). Consequently, it is these things which church leaders should occupy themselves with. When they do, God will bless that church no matter where it is located in the world; making it sound, strong, healthy, dynamic; and if He so desires, even a large church. The church which does not make Christ its first love but is busy with its own agenda, will not be blessed no matter how big it is and no matter how many things it is doing.

The second thing that this principle is based upon is the author's personal experience. During the years that he was a pastor, he pastored three churches. Two of the churches were small; and he was a part-time, interim pastor (in one church for one year and the other for only three months). In the third church, he was the full-time senior pastor for over eight years. When he began his ministry in this church, the church's attendance was averaging 100 people. The church is located in a small town in Michigan (USA) which has a population of about 300. By the time he left this church to go to Ukraine as a missionary, the average Sunday morning attendance was about 170, but was ministering to over 200 people. (So that there is no misunderstanding, not all of the people who attended the church were from that town; many drove in from surrounding communities.)

More importantly though, during the time that the author was the pastor, the church was reaching out to the lost; people came to Christ, many were baptized, disciplined, and the church increased its support of missionaries. In other words, people were growing in their faith, and the church grew both stronger and in number. For this God receives the glory. As the author later thought about his time at this church and about what he and the church did to cause this numerical growth, he could think of nothing extraordinary which was done to make this happen. But when he reflected further, he realized that they had done something. What they had done was work at making Christ their first love as they worked at being more obedient to Him and having a stronger walk with Him. By the power of the Holy Spirit, they had worked hard at doing the things which the Scriptures command them to do. As a result, God blessed them. So the author acknowledges the success of the church, not to any one particular thing or person, but to God blessing a group of people who were working at doing the things that a church should be doing.

Difficulties behind implementing the church growth principle:

Though this church growth principle may sound easy to fulfill, it is not. One reason this is true is because at times it is hard for churches to accurately assess their true condition, especially if they are a church that is slowly dying on the vine (cf. John 15:4-6). (This point can be clearly seen in Jesus' messages to the seven churches in Revelation Chapters 2 and 3, but especially concerning the church of Ephesus [Rev. 2:1-7]). This happens when churches come to a point where they think that they are doing all of the right things for all of the right reasons, but they are not. Actually, they really may not be doing all of the right things; but even if they are,

they may not be doing them for all of the right reasons. They may be doing them as the result of tradition, and not as the result of a living, growing relationship with Christ. They may be doing these things out of misguided conviction, believing that what they are doing and how they are doing it is the only right way; proving their point with Bible passages which have been twisted out of context. Therefore, if they are not doing things for the right reasons, the question is: "What are their true motives; their true intent?" Are they doing them because Christ is their first love, or for other reasons? Please remember that the church of Ephesus which Jesus spoke to in Revelation 2 was doing many of the right things (vss. 2-3,6), but they did them from the wrong motivation; Christ was no longer their first love. For a person and/or a church to ascertain the true intent of why they are doing the things they are doing can be difficult to determine at times, especially if they have been doing these things for the wrong reason for many, many years. The only way to get back on track in such a situation is to fall on one's knees and seek the wisdom and help of God (Jam. 1:5-8).

Another reason that implementing this church growth principle is not an easy thing to do is because not all of the people in the average local church want to grow in their faith or want to follow the Scriptures. This may not be just the church members, but it may include the pastor and other church leaders as well. Many times people simply do not want to change because it is too uncomfortable for them. Change takes a lot of work. The best catalyst for change can come from a person (or people) in the church who is godly and is moving forward in his faith. Such a person can motivate others to do the same through his example (cf. 1 Pet. 3:1). Hopefully this person is the pastor. If it is, then through his personal example and through his preaching and teaching ministry, he can make a great and positive impact in his church. But to be this kind of an example, he needs to model what he is preaching and teaching. If he does not, nothing positive will happen in the church because no one wants to follow a hypocrite. If he is a positive role model, then the church will become excited in what they see in his life and teaching and will want to imitate him.

Please note that generally a church will take on the personality of its pastor. If the pastor is a dictator, then the church may very well produce other dictatorial type leaders and members who are legalistic in their faith. If the pastor is passive, then the church may very well produce passive leaders and believers. If the pastor is a hypocrite, then the church may very well produce other hypocrites. But if the pastor is zealous for and loves Christ, then the church will produce leaders and believers who are zealous for and love Christ. It is up to the pastor and church leaders to decide what result they want, but what they decide will need to begin in their own hearts and in their own relationship with Christ.

As a general rule, to keep a church growing and changing it is good to have the church change its leaders on a regular basis, so that new men can come into the leadership of the church and give it fresh, new ideas to help the church grow. In most cases it is best to change pastors when the current one has lost his zeal and vision. Though this is hard for the pastor and the church, it may be exactly what the church needs in order to continue and make an impact for Christ.

If church growth was not the focus of the New Testament writers, then why are so many churches concerned about something that God is not concerned about? Get concerned about the right things, watch God work, and then be amazed.

APPLICATION QUESTIONS:



1. What category of principles does your church use to grow (cultural or supracultural)? Are they effective?

2. Do you see why it is important to make supracultural principles the foundation of your church's ministry and not cultural principles? Please explain.

3. Please give an example of a cultural principle which many churches today are using to build a big church?

4. Is it wrong to bring certain aspects of your culture into the confines of the church, evangelism, etc.? If not, then what distinction needs to be made between building a church upon cultural principles versus using cultural principles in the church?

5. Is Christ your church's first love? If so, what evidence do you see of that in your church? If Christ is not your church's first love, then what evidence do you see of that in your church?

6. According to Revelation 2:1-7, what is the result of a church where Christ is not its first love?
 - What does the phrase mean which states that Jesus "will remove your lampstand out of its place"?

 - If Christ is not your church's first love, what will eventually be the result for your church?

- What must a church do, according to Revelation 2:1-7, so that this does not happen?

- What would the process be for a church to once again make Christ its first love?

- If your church needs to work on making Christ its first love again, what would be some things that you as a church leader can do within your church to make sure that Christ is its first love? Please list Bible references that confirm your thoughts (example: John 15:1-11).

7. How would you describe the personality of your church's pastor? Please list character traits (e.g., loving, stern, bold, gentle, etc.).

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If you are not the pastor, please do the same thing for yourself:

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How does your list compare to the list given in Galatians 5:22-23?

8. How would you describe your church's personality?

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- What characteristics of your church need to change to make it a more Christ-like church? How can you begin the process of making these changes?

- Those things which a church is to work hard at doing are discussed in this manual. List some ideas of how you can use this material in your church so that your church will grow, first spiritually and then numerically.

SPECIFIC QUESTIONS FOR CROSS-CULTURAL MISSIONARIES AND CHURCH PLANTERS:

1. Supracultural principles are to be the foundation of all that a church does. Though this is true, it is important to also understand the culture in which the church is located and incorporate aspects of it into the church. How will you determine what aspects of the culture should be incorporated into your church, and which aspects should not be incorporated?

2. Making Christ your church's first love is key to its success and longevity. How will you make sure that Christ will be the first love of your church from its conception and on into the future? What can you do to make sure your church does not lose this passion and become like the church of Ephesus, doing many of the right things, but not loving Christ? Please know that implementing ritual and tradition into your church is not the answer to this question. These things generally take life from a church; and though the church is functioning and seems to be alive, the truth is, it is dead.