

The Rest of the Pattern: The Growing Church

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West End, Richmond
Blue Ridge Church of Christ

- I. Introduction
 - a. When we talk about the church, we often mention identifying characteristics that set it apart from other religious organizations
 - i. Its worship
 - ii. Its organization
 - iii. Its name
 - iv. It's manner of collecting and using money in evangelism and benevolence
 - b. We rightly argue that the New Testament lays out a pattern for how the church that Jesus Christ built is intended to act and work in this world
 - c. We say that if we are looking for the true church today, we should look for a religious body that is like the first century church in every significant way.
 - d. We even say to people in the religious world, that if the church where you worship does not have these characteristics, it is not the church of the New Testament, and therefore not the church that Jesus died to save.
 - e. What is sometimes overlooked, however, is that there is much more revealed about the church of the first century than
 - i. Its worship
 - ii. Its organization
 - iii. Its name
 - iv. Its manner of collecting and using money
 - f. The characteristic of the early church that I'd like to focus on in this study is growth
 - g. I want to challenge each of you, as we study this lesson, to consider the following questions:
 - i. Is this characteristic part of the pattern for the church of Jesus?
 - ii. Does the church where I worship have this characteristic that the first century church had?
 - iii. What can I do personally, as a Christian, to make this characteristic more evident in the church of which I am a member?
- II. Key Sentence: The early church was a growing church: in numbers, in influence and in maturity
- III. The early church grew in numbers
 - a. Scriptures indicating the numerical growth of the church
 - i. Acts 2:41
 - ii. Acts 4:4
 - iii. Acts 5:14
 - b. Significance of Numerical Growth

- i. Some have erred in thinking that unless a congregation is multiplying as the Jerusalem church did in its early days, then the church is not following the pattern of the New Testament
 - 1. E.g. the crossroads movement and the Boston church
 - 2. So called multiplying ministries
 - 3. They pursue numerical growth in an unbalanced and unscriptural way
- ii. Numerical growth is impossible to sustain if there are not other types of growth occurring as well.
- iii. Numerical growth is the aspect of growth that is the least in our control.
 - 1. 1 Cor. 3:6 – God gives the increase

c. Application:

- i. Is the Blue Ridge church of Christ growing in numbers?
- ii. Historically Yes –
 - 1. A few Christians meeting in homes
 - 2. Renting space in a strip mall
 - 3. Moving into a building owned by the church
- iii. More Recently that numerical growth has slowed
 - 1. Several have moved away, with fewer moving in
 - 2. Many of our new converts in recent years have fallen away
 - 3. The slowing of our numerical growth is mainly due to a slowing in the two types of growth we will be considering
- iv. Numerical growth at the level of the local congregation is good, but it is more important that the church as a whole is growing.
 - 1. Example, many converted, but more move away
 - 2. Example, many converted, and a substantial portion leave to begin a new work
 - 3. In these cases, the local church may actually be smaller, but the growth of the kingdom of Christ is obvious
 - 4. Acts 8:1 – Ex. Jerusalem church scattered by persecution, but went everywhere preaching the word

IV. The early church grew in influence

a. Scriptures

- i. Acts 2:47-48
- ii. Acts 5:13
- iii. Acts 8:4
- iv. Acts 17:6

b. Spiritual Influence

- i. The influence the early church had was not
 - 1. Political influence
 - 2. Military influence
 - 3. Any kind of temporal authority
- ii. It was a spiritual influence
 - 1. The moral power of a godly life

2. The demonstration of Jesus Christ living in them and among them
3. The influence of a person who has nothing to gain but heaven, and nothing to lose except their faith in Jesus Christ
4. The influence of a community of believers willing to live and die for each other
5. This is the type of influence that we need to be growing in as the people of God

c. Application:

- i. Is the Blue Ridge church of Christ growing in influence in the communities of which it is a part?
 1. That is a difficult question to answer
 2. We might say not in any overt, obvious way
 - a. Every once in a while we will hear of someone who has visited our congregation because its reputation in this community
 - b. But the enemies of the truth are not accusing Blue Ridge of turning the world upside down, or even a small corner of it.
 3. The questions are easier to answer when we ask them of ourselves as individual members of this congregation
 - a. The spiritual influence of a congregation is the product of the spiritual influence of its members
 - b. So I should ask myself questions like these:
- ii. Is my influence for Christ growing in the community where I live? Over the past year...
 1. How many people of my acquaintance know that I am a Christian?
 2. How many people know that I care about them?
 3. How many have I engaged in a conversation regarding spiritual matters?
 4. How many are aware of my beliefs regarding the church of Jesus Christ?
 5. How many have received an invitation from me to attend services or participate in a Bible study?
 6. How many have I taught the gospel?
 7. How many would identify me as a good moral person who has integrity, and is available to help others?
 8. How many people have been blessed by the practice of my Christian faith?
 9. Are these numbers increasing, staying the same or decreasing?
- iii. How can we increase our influence?
 1. Demonstrate the love of Christ

- a. In our society, people are getting further and further apart
 - b. We must make connections in order to have influence on others
 - c. Matt. 5:13-16
 - i. If we isolate ourselves from the world, we are not acting as the salt and light that Jesus intended for us to be
 - ii. We shine our lights by doing good works
 - 2. Defend the faith
 - a. Share our knowledge of God's word with others – 1 Pet. 3:15
 - b. Apply our faith to the circumstances we are in
 - c. Demonstrate that God's way is the best way
 - d. If we do this, we will be recognized as not just knowing the truth, but also living the truth, and it will increase our influence for Christ
- V. The early church grew in maturity
 - a. Scriptures
 - i. Ephesians 4:7-16
 - 1. Christ's intentions for the church:
 - a. The equipping of the saints for the work of the ministry
 - b. The edifying of the body of Christ
 - c. Unity of faith and knowledge
 - d. Perfection or completeness
 - e. The measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ
 - f. Stable, not easily led astray
 - g. Grown up in all things into Christ
 - h. The growth of the body
 - i. The edifying of itself in love
 - 2. This is just as much part of the pattern of the church as its worship and organization!
 - 3. Sometimes we assume if we have converted someone to Christ, we have effectively caused the body of Christ to grow
 - a. That is true, but much more needs done
 - b. There is a life-cycle to being a Christian which only begins with being baptized into Christ
 - c. That new Christian needs to grow up in Christ
 - d. If each Christian reaches one soul for Christ in their lifetime, the church could still die in the next generation!!!!
 - i. If those souls are not brought to maturity
 - ii. They must be firmly rooted in Christ

iii. They must be brought to the point where they are also reaching others for Christ

4. What is needed:
 - a. Christ has supplied many things
 - i. Apostles
 - ii. Prophets
 - iii. Evangelists
 - iv. Pastors and teachers
 - v. Many other things
 - b. Each member must also supply something (v. 16)
 - i. Joined and knit together
 - ii. What every joint supplies
 - iii. Effective working
 - iv. Every part does its share

b. Application

i. Is the Blue Ridge church of Christ growing in maturity?

1. There is much spiritual maturity here:
 - a. High quality Bible classes
 - b. Good participation and discussion in those classes
 - c. Many members active in the work of the church
 - d. There is maturity, is it growing
2. However,
 - a. Much of the maturity that is here was not developed here
 - b. Most of our Christians gained the vast majority of their spiritual maturity elsewhere and brought it here
 - c. When we recognize that, we are recognizing that the providence of God has RICHLY blessed this congregation, in a way that, in my experience, at least, is unique.
 - d. What does that tell you about God's expectation for the church of Jesus Christ at Blue Ridge?
3. But to return to the original question. It is not, is there spiritual maturity at Blue Ridge, but rather, is our congregation growing in spiritual maturity?
 - a. Think of one of the mature members of the congregation, and one of our newest members, and ask the question, could this new Christian develop to the level of maturity of that mature Christian here at Blue Ridge?
 - b. What would it take for that to happen? Are those things happening?
4. There are tangible evidence that this is the case:
 - a. Deacons appointed
 - b. Full-time evangelist

- c. People are being reached with the gospel
- d. Both new and old members are growing in faith, love and hope
- e. This congregation has converted, trained and equipped a gospel preacher who is working effectively for the Lord in Lakeland, FL
 - i. Ian Rice
 - ii. He was converted by the Fields family
 - iii. His initial growth and maturing happened within this congregation.
 - iv. After being a faithful Christian for less than fifteen years, he decided to take on the role of gospel preacher
 - v. He and his family are an enormous influence for good
 - vi. It all started here in this congregation.
 - vii. That can happen again
 - 1. Not that every new Christian should become a gospel preacher
 - 2. But that this congregation has the ability to bring a new Christian to high levels of spiritual maturity
 - 3. And that is what it must do
- 5. But new Christians are not the only ones expected to grow in Christ – 1 Pet. 2:2-3
- 6. This question is best answered at the individual level
- ii. Am I growing in maturity? In the past year....
 - 1. Am I more likely to make decisions that are primarily based on God's will in my life?
 - 2. Am I more consistent in turning away from temptation?
 - 3. Am I more consistent in turning to God for help with my problems?
 - 4. Am I bearing more of the fruit of the spirit?
 - 5. Am I growing in total dependence on Jesus, and full confidence that I can do all things through Him?
 - 6. Am I more knit and joined together with the rest of the body?
 - 7. Am I supplying what is needed for the growth of the body?
 - 8. Am I effectively working and doing my share?
 - 9. Am I causing growth of the body and edifying it with love?
 - 10. Are these qualities increasing or decreasing in my life?
- iii. Ways to grow in maturity
 - 1. Increase your knowledge of God's word
 - 2. Increase your application of God's word
 - 3. Stay close to Jesus
 - a. Spend DAILY time in prayer to God

- b. Spend DAILY time in God's word
 - c. Everything you find that God want you to do, do it
 - d. Repeat steps 1-3 for a long time
 - e. You will be growing in maturity
 - 4. But the verses we read teach that we do not achieve maturity by ourselves. It is the church ACTING UPON ITSELF that causes the growth of the body
 - 5. You cannot become a mature Christian by yourself. You need others, and they need you.
- iv. Helping others grow in maturity
 - 1. Share what you are learning and applying with others
 - 2. Personally encourage brothers and sisters who are going through difficulty, or have less spiritual maturity than yourself
 - 3. This requires time in contact with each other outside of worship services
 - a. NOTE: One of the unique challenges facing this congregation is how far apart geographically we are
 - b. We need to be reminded, that just as each first century church had unique advantages and disadvantages that helped or hindered their growth, so do we
 - c. If one of our unique advantages is a high concentration of spiritual maturity, one of our unique disadvantages is how far apart we are
 - d. We should not ignore or discount our advantages or our disadvantages
 - e. We must actively use the advantages God has provided, and actively and consciously overcome the disadvantages we have
 - 4. It is often the case that Christians don't have a clear picture of what it took for them to become mature, and therefore not sure what to do to help others mature in Christ.
 - a. Especially true of those who grew up in the church
 - b. Those who became Christians as adults can help us much in identifying and practicing ways of help others grow in maturity

VI. Conclusion

- a. If every Christian is
 - i. Growing in maturity – this comes first and is the root of all healthy church growth
 - ii. AND Growing in influence
- b. This local body will be
 - i. Growing in maturity
 - ii. Growing in influence
 - iii. Growing in numbers

c. INVITATION