

## Understanding Church Growth, Part 1

Most congregations of the Lord's people want to grow. Their motivations may spiritually noble or selfishly pragmatic. Some congregations only get concerned about "growing" when the membership level gets unsustainable. Other groups want to grow *spiritually* and *numerically* (not for mere *numbers*' sake, but for what those numbers represent). But whatever the motive, the *means* considered and utilized vary widely. Even among those who want to grow for the right reason(s) and in biblical ways look to a variety of passages for guidance. For instance, one suggestion commonly given to "fix" just about any supposed *membership problem* in a church is to "spend more time together"- either outside of normal assemblies. Acts 2:46 usually is quoted in support of this notion. There is no doubt that we need to "know one another better" to form, cement, and build upon relationships with each other. But don't ignore the fact that the congregation in Jerusalem was first "*continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer,*" v.42 (thus, *corporate worship*)! So, don't let denominational concepts of "fellowship" (*i.e. food and fun*) become your "go to" solution for the lack of dedication to the Word and its emphasis on evangelism and edification, cf. vv.41,42a,46a,47.

Besides Acts 2:41-47 and its emphasis on the "seed" and its "planting," what other passages provide instruction on the required "watering" that enables local congregations to be active contributors to the "growth" (spiritual reproduction) of the kingdom? There are surely many, but I'd like us to focus on just one in this lesson, Acts 9:31.

**Context.** The immediate context details the conversion of Saul (Hebrew version of the Greek *Paul*). We're introduced to him at Stephen's stoning, cf. 7:58; 8:1a; and he appears to be a prominent *leader* in the persecution of the church in its early days, 8:1b; 9:1-3a. Obviously, after his conversion however, he became a proponent extraordinaire of Jesus and His church, 9:20-22,26-30. This *background* leads us to the specifics of our text.

**What does Acts 9:31 include as essential elements of *church* (both *universal* and *local*) *growth*?**

1. **Peace- Eirene** is not just the *absence of rage* and/or *havoc*, but also the *presence of harmony* and *concord*. The *rage* toward the church toward the church to this point, as well as the *havoc* it caused, was largely mitigated by a couple of contributing factors: a) the *conversion* of one of its primary persecutor, one *Saul of Tarsus*, cf. vv.1-30 as previously covered; and, b) the Roman Emperor Caligula (ruled 37-41 A.D.) attempting to have his own image displayed in the Temple at Jerusalem distracted much Jewish attention from persecuting Christians (Josephus, Antiquities 18.8.1,c). These two factors greatly reduced the *rage* and *havoc* the church experienced from *external* sources. But *eriene*, by definition, also implies *internal* sources of "peace"- *harmony* and *concord*. *Harmony* results from differing contributions (of content, quality, and quantity) blending together to produce a pleasing effect, cf. 1Cor.12:14-25 and Eph.4;11-16. *Concord* comes from mutual thoughts, emotions, (and therefore) goals, and actions, cf. Acts 2:42-47; Eph.4:4-6; Rom.12:5. But there is one thing regarding

“peace” that must be understood relative to church “growth”: *internal peace* is vital while *external peace* is not. Evidence? The church at Jerusalem WAS growing despite the *external persecution* it faced, Acts 2:47; 4:4; 5:14; 6:7.

What do these things mean? That in order for a church to grow, *internal peace* must present. Members must be willing to “work at” *peace*, Eph.4:1-3! Such requires *humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance*, and *love* for God, His Word, and one another. A church not only will not but can not grow if it keeps shooting itself or “one another” in the foot. This is likely why a “*factional man*”- one who engages in and stirs “*foolish controversies and genealogies and strife and disputes about the Law*” must be *rejected* if he will not desist, Titus 3:9-10; and is surely at least part of the reason God “*hates*” and “*abominates*” one who “*spreads strife among brothers*,” Prov.6:19b!

### Conclusion/Application Questions for Part 1:

- Do you want *the kingdom* (universal church) to grow, or just **Southport** (local church)? Your answer probably indicates your true motivation(s).
- Do you understand that *spiritual growth*- both *individually* and *congregationally*, is the “right” and only “true” way to achieve *numerical growth*? Means and methods that produce only *numerical growth* are “missing the point/mark” at best, and are apostate at worst.
- Thus, *planting/sowing* and *watering/cultivating* the “seed”- which is the “*word of God*,” is not merely the “right” way to grow (spiritually and numerically), it is the only “right” way to grow both the *universal kingdom* and *local congregations*, cf. Luke 8:11; Rom.10:17. Denominational concepts of “fellowship” and “worship” designed and developed to attract the masses may increase numbers but not produce *spiritual growth*. And remember that whatever is used to “attract” people must also be provided in increasing amounts to “keep” them, cf. 2Cor.4:2; 10:4-5.