

Understanding Church Growth, Part 2

Introduction. Acts 2:41,47; 4:4; 5:14; 6:7. Previously, we introduced the notion that most congregations of the Lord's people want grow. However, their motivations may be spiritually noble or selfishly pragmatic. Some congregations only get concerned about "growing" when membership levels become 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. Indeed, a number of texts provide instruction and insight. There is, nonetheless, one principle that seems to permeate them all: ***Congregations grow numerically (in the right ways and for the right reasons at least) only when the individuals that make them up grow spiritually.*** To this end, we began last week to carefully examine one passage: **Acts 9:31**.

Context briefly reviewed. 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-** As considered in the previous lesson, *eirene* is not just the *absence of rage* and/or *havoc*, but also the *presence of harmony* and *concord*. The Jews had become distracted by Emperor Caligula's efforts to place his image in the Temple at Jerusalem, and Saul of Tarsus- apparently the primary early persecutor of the church, had been converted. Thus, *external* "havoc/rage" was greatly diminished. But we cannot overlook the importance of *internal* "harmony/concord" to church growth either. The church had been and was growing tremendously while the external persecutions existed, I believe, primarily **because** there was "harmony/concord" *internally!* We looked at Eph.4:1-3,4-6,11-16 to help explain how such *internal* "peace" must be established and maintained, and noted Titus 3:9-10 and Prov.6:19b also. Now let's press on in Acts 9:31 to discover other essential elements of "growth."
- 2. Being Built Up-** *Oikodome* (also translated as *edification*, e.g. Eph.4:29) comes from *oikos* (house) and *dome* (to build) and thus means "to build a house, erect a building; to build (up from the foundation);" but also includes "to restore by building, to rebuild, repair," Enhanced Strong's Lexicon. From these definitions, a couple of pertinent points arise: a) Proper growth begins with the right *purpose/objective*-building "*for the Lord*" and *His glory* rather than our own, 1Cor.3:6-9; b) it must be based on and must proceed from the right *foundation*, 1Cor.3:10-11; and therefore, c) may require some "demolition" improper previous *motives, means, and additions*, 1Cor.3:13-15.

But don't overlook the fact that it is a "from the ground up" process. You start on the right *foundation* and build *upward* on it. You don't "add on" to the existing

foundation, or waste time/energy building separate “structures” (think *day cares*, *youth centers*, or ‘*ministries*’ that are typically separate “programs”), 1Cor.4:6; 2John 9. Being “*built up*” is instead a “group project” performed *internally* as individuals within the church spiritually grow, mature, and reproduce, Eph.2:19-22; 4:11-16.

3. **Going On-** These two English words are translated from a single Greek one whose definition contains critical information. *Poreuomai* (por-yoo-om-ahee) is defined as “to lead over, carry over, transfer; to pursue the journey on which one has entered, to continue on one’s journey” (*Ibid*), cf. 1Pet.4:3. Unfortunately, “church growth” is often stifled or prevented altogether because some, many, or even most of its members view *baptism* and *continuous church membership* as the goal/end rather than the beginning and means to the end of personal and collective growth leading to heaven, 2Pet.1:5-11; 3:18. Fortunately, such thinking was not found in the early church(es)- which is a major reason they grew both *spiritually* and *numerically*. But just *moving/going on* after baptism isn’t all there is to proper *spiritual growth*- we have *keep moving* in the right direction(s)...
4. **In the Fear of the Lord-** While Christians should not be *afraid of judgment*, cf. 1John 4:18, they should continue to **fear the Lord**. It is precisely this *fear of the Lord* that causes them to *learn* and *do* that which is “*pleasing*” to Him, Eph.5:10! But what often happens is that after becoming a Christian, and start to think we “have it made” so to speak, we become lax in our *fear of the Lord*. This is not only bad (Matt.10:28 was spoken to Jesus’ disciples!), it is counterproductive to growth. Note carefully 2Pet.1:5-11 in these regards. The “Christian graces” are to be not only “*yours*” (possessed) but “*increasing*” (progressing) if we are to be *useful* rather than “*useless*” and *fruitful* rather than “*unfruitful*”- otherwise, we become *blind*, *short-sighted*, and *forgetful*. Then we *fail to “practice”* and “*stumble.*” We say we don’t believe in “once saved, always saved,” but unless we “*go on in the fear of the Lord*” we start to act like we do, and won’t grow! We must understand that **satisfaction (no fear) → apathy → stagnation → death**.
5. **And the Comfort of the Holy Spirit-** The primary work of the Holy Spirit was to *exhort* and *encourage* through the *revelation of the word*, cf. 1Cor.2:10-16; Eph.3:3-5. In our primary text of Acts 9:31, “*comfort*” is translated from *paraklesis* (*para* is *by*, *beside*, or *near* + *kaleo* is to *call* or *invite*; thus *paraklesis* is to *call near/beside*). Metaphorically, it means to *exhort* or *summon near* to help. Thus, individuals or local collections of them (congregations) who want to grow in the right way(s) understand the importance of the *comfort/help* the Holy Spirit provides through the revealed word (His primary work). Think of this way: What is the *source* of our *initial faith*? It comes by “*hearing the word of Christ*,” Rom.10:17. Should we then expect to “grow” faith in ourselves or others by some other means than by **greater** “*hearing the word of Christ*”??? And what if my/your/our *faith* becomes *damaged* in some way? Are we to *heal*, *repair*, or *encourage* it by something other than which produced it in the first place, cf. Gal.3:3?

Conclusion: There are a myriad *thoughts of man* regarding the “growth” of individuals and churches. Unfortunately, few include the essential elements found in Acts 9:31 of *Peace*, *Being Built Up*, and *Going On* in the *Fear of the Lord* and *Comfort of the Holy Spirit*.