



The Reflector

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Why Grow?

Edward O. Bragwell, Sr.

What Christian is not thrilled when he reads of the rapid numerical growth of the church in the first century? About three thousand added on the first day (Acts 2:41). This was followed by daily additions to the number (Acts 2:47). Shortly, the number had increased to five thousand men (Acts 4:4). This number did not include the women, so we do not know the total number at this time. Then a little later we are told that “the number of the disciples was multiplied” (Acts 6:1). Then this is capped off by, “And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly; and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith (Acts 6:7).

After the Jerusalem church was dispersed by persecution, the gospel was preached to “in all creation under heaven” by the 60’s A.D. (Col. 1:23). Just how many Christians there were by then we do not know. But we do know we would be thrilled to experience such growth in our time and that there is something drastically wrong with any Christian that would not like to see it. When there is no numerical growth it means that souls are not being saved. People are not being added to the church and consequently there are no people to join themselves to local churches (cf. Acts 9:26).

As members of local churches desiring to see the congregation grow the way the Jerusalem church did, we need to examine our motives and methods for growth.

We must not make numerical growth an end within itself. Then numbers become numbers for numbers sake. When this happens people find them-

selves doing *whatever it takes* to attract people to *them*. With numerical growth the prime goal, then whatever “works” to that end becomes the order of the day. Biblical evangelists and evangelism are replaced with high pressure “results oriented” preachers and programs to meet arbitrary growth goals. Efforts are made to bring folks to baptism without first bringing them to repentance. Gimmickery is employed to persuade more people to become members of the congregation. Social and recreational programs and directors are installed to entice the worldly minded into our “church family.” With these “adjustments” the numbers swell and the finances are improved. But is it the kind of growth Jerusalem had and that we should desire?

If our numerical and financial growth is the results of scriptural teaching and methods we have reason to rejoice. It means souls are being saved and that they desire to work and grow with other Christians in a local church setting.

However, we must properly take advantage of such growth. As the numbers grow and the collections increase, it is awfully easy to let these things feed our pride. Our “large congregation” and material wealth is viewed as a “bragging right.” Pretty soon we begin to make plans to tear down our barns and build bigger ones to better reflect our status in the community. It is no longer adequate to have or to acquire a meeting place with the space and facilities adequate to facilitate our assemblies, classes, and work space for preparing for congregational work and worship. As an up and coming congregation, we must have a “plant” that can be favorably compared with those of our

religious neighbors of the neighborhood.

Rather than viewing the larger numbers as more workers to equip for service (cf. Eph. 4:12 NASV), they are viewed as a broader base for improvements on our facilities. The larger contributions help our standings with the bank that we plan to use to finance our show place building(s).

I have a novel idea. Why not look upon any increase in numbers as an opportunity to train more workers to seek the lost in the community and look upon the increased contributions, that increased numbers bring, as an opportunity to support more evangelists at home and abroad. If the numbers outgrow the present facilities, then make the needed space adjustments to accommodate the increase – either by building on to the present facilities or acquire adequate space elsewhere. And in doing this do not saddle the congregation with a huge long term building debt that would be extremely difficult to pay should the present rate of growth cease or even a slight loss of members occur. Such a debt may very well cause the church to ignore discipline and soften its stand for truth for fear of losing members upon whom they depend for the contributions to meet their budget.

Let us desire and work for growth, but let it be the right kind of growth for the right reasons. ■

How to Reform Society

Ed Harrell

Late in the 19th century churches were under pressure to join national campaigns to pass legislation on such moral issues as prohibition and Sunday closing laws. F. D. Srygley took this swipe:

“Some church papers and preachers are whooping up the people to send petitions to the legislature to stop the railroads from running freight trains on Sunday, and the DAILY AMERICAN suggests that it would also be a good thing for the publicans and sinners to send petitions to the churches to stop church members from doing so much badness every day in the week and Sunday too. If this plan works out right we may reasonably hope for considerable improvement in the morality of railroads and churches

both. ..but I am not overly sanguine of the success of the scheme. Petitions may do very well for common sinners like railroads, but in severe cases of meanness I am in favor of something more potent. Nothing short of amazing grace and a living faith will improve the morality of churches. That’s my idea.”

That’s my idea too. Christianity has to do with the reform of society only as that is related to the purification of individual lives by the power of “amazing grace and a living faith.”

I see two reasons why Christians should not get caught up in the popular social reforms - even those that seem to rest on moral principles. First, a Christian’s responsibility is not the cleansing of the world but of individual men and women in the world. Jesus’s mission was to seek and to save the lost. (Lk. 19:10.) How can I justify time and effort spent in worldly crusades with worldly men which at best will make the world a slightly more comfortable place to live? Social reforms will save not one soul. And the danger exists that some may actually think they are performing their Christian duty by joining hand with false religionists to force sinners to behave themselves against their will. We need to keep in view our spiritual mission as Christians.

Second, all such moral crusades set out to accomplish the impossible. We will never escape sin in this world. (1 Cor. 5:10.) History has seen many moral reforms, and the world remains wicked and confused. Some societies are preferable to others, but in any of them we live in the midst of sin. Our mission is not to purify the world; it to escape it. Preach the gospel to your neighbor. That will make him a better person to live with. That is about all you can do. ■

Book, Chapter And Verse Preaching: Is It Outdated?

Allan Turner

The Word of God tells us that whatever we do in word or deed must be done in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (Colossians 3:17). This means that if we are going to say it or do it, we must have a “thus saith the Lord” for it. Additionally, we learn that

even our thoughts are to be governed by the Word of God (cf. Proverbs 27:3; Matthew 5:27,28; Romans 12:3; etc.). In fact, God, through His revealed Word, “has given us all things that pertain to life and godliness” (II Peter 1:3). In other words, God’s people, through a study of His Word, can be complete and thoroughly equipped for every good work, and this is why “All Scripture... is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness” (II Timothy 3:16,17). Consequently, if anyone speaks, he ought to speak as “the oracles of God” (I Peter 4:11).

Our allegiance to these truths has made us the unique people we are: a people dedicated to God and His Word. We have demanded book, chapter and verse for everything we do in all of life. Like the noble Bereans, we have “searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so” (Acts 17:11). While others around us have floundered in a sea of subjectivity, we have stood on the bedrock of that objective standard found in God’s Word. While those about us were allowing themselves to be further secularized, we were busy being molded into a seemingly ragtag group of “strangers and pilgrims on earth” (Hebrews 11:13; I Peter 2:11,12).

But an ill wind has begun to blow within churches of Christ. Even though we correctly resisted the unscriptural schemes of our more liberal brethren, who turned their meeting houses into holy gymnasiums and “Family Life Centers,” regrettably, we still fell victim to the various secular philosophies of our age. Humanism, rationalism, pragmatism, materialism, and hedonism form the foundation of the “American Dream” that has, in turn, taken its toll on us all. Our “can-do” spirit has taken us from an on-our-knees study of God’s Word to a stand - on - our - own - two - feet, we - can - do - it - through - science - and - technology mentality. Such has moved us away from our duties to God and caused us to seek personal gratification (i.e., the satisfaction of needs) in all that we do. As a result, churches are seen by many as country clubs—“places” created solely for the purpose of satisfying our “needs.” Consequently, “worship” must be entertaining, and will certainly be seen as a failure unless it promotes our self-esteem.

Discouraged by society’s resistance to the gospel

of Christ, and influenced by the previously mentioned mentality, some have begun constructing a gospel that is pleasing and acceptable to those who are “this worldly.” Therefore, the latest self-centered theories from pop-psychology, sociology and success/motivation training have been “baptized” in biblical language and passed off as gospel truth. Bowing to the totem of the self-actualized, autonomous SELF, more and more are rejecting what is being called the “sin-oriented, negative message” of the Bible and are replacing it with the “feel good about yourself” gospel of self-love.

In order to become successful in such an environment, some gospel preachers have become counselors and therapists. Instead of addressing the timeless message of God’s Word to the real problems of life, these preachers have poured over their secular books and accommodated the Bible to the messages found in them. Consequently, personal charm, eloquent speech, academic credentials and organizational ability are becoming much more important than a preacher’s knowledge of God’s Word. Of course, other than a preacher’s general faithfulness to the Lord, there is not anything more important than his knowledge of the Word of God. But because many other qualities are more important than a preacher’s knowledge of God’s Word, we are losing our biblical world view, both in the pulpit and the pews. Many are no longer preaching book, chapter and verse and many of the brethren “love to have it so” (cf. Jeremiah 5:31).

Like those of old who did not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, and because of their “itching ears,” heaped to themselves false teachers, many among us are turning their ears away from the truth and are turning to fables (II Timothy 4:3,4). The only thing that will prevent this ill wind from turning into a full-scale cyclone of apostasy is repentance and a return to the objective standard of God’s Word. If we are to be the unique people our Lord created us to be, then we must demand a “thus saith the Lord” for everything we do in every facet of our lives. We must demand that the Word of God be the only standard used to “convince,” “rebuke,” and “exhort” us, “with all longsuffering and teaching” (II Timothy 4:1,2).

Is book, chapter and verse preaching outdated?

Among some, yes; but among God's peculiar people it is the "power of God unto salvation for everyone who believes ... For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "The just shall live by faith" (Romans 1:16,17). ■

A Bible Is a Bible Is a Bible ... or Is It?

Edward O. Bragwell, Sr.

If the only Bible we had were the Hebrew Old Testament and Greek New Testament, then most of us would be in dire straits when it comes to reading and understanding the Scriptures. We must rely on translations into our own language. But all English translations are not equal.

The last fifty years has brought us a flood of English translations – each claiming to be better and easier to read by their publishers. When one says "The Bible says" one almost feels compelled to ask, "Which Bible..." One never knows which version a preacher or teacher is going to be using in his presentation. And people are asking, "What is the best translation to use in our personal study?"

One should be careful not to jump on to any translation simply because it makes for easier reading. He should be more concerned with the accuracy of translation.

Many of, or dare I say most of, the modern translations are the results of an agenda. Publishing companies are in the business of publishing books and the continuance of their business depends on bringing out fresh material periodically. Hence, the temptation of Bible publishers to bring out new translations from time to time to compete with other companies that are doing the same. I highly suspect that many of modern translations are the result of the desire to bring out a new product that will boost their sales for a while. So, their agenda is more commercial than anything else.

Some translations are the result of a doctrinal agenda of the persons or groups that publishes them. These translations are usually slanted toward the doctrine they want to propagate. The Watchtower people and some Calvinistic slanted versions are of this type. Most one person translations at least give

the appearance of an effort of an individual wanting to stroke his ego by putting himself forward as a scholar capable of producing a translations better than all the rest – at least one to his liking.

What is one to do to keep from drowning in the sea of translations and confusion? Actually, a few of these modern translations are pretty good. One does not want to go to the extreme of rejecting all modern versions. A suggestion to my preaching brethren, if you prefer to use a modern translation in pulpit, let the folks know which version you are using.

However, there are two older translations that have stood the test of time and critical examination. They are the King James Version of 1611 and the American Standard version of 1901. They have been recognized by preachers/teachers and groups of all stripes as the standard by which truth is measured for many years.

My practice has been, and I would recommend it to others, to use these versions as the foundation of personal study and the standard by which to measure the accuracy of any modern version. A version may reword a text in a way as to clarify some of the archaic language of KJV and ASV, much in the way we often do in our efforts to explain the scriptures. This can be beneficial. But as we compare the various renderings of various versions, we believe it to be a safe practice to check their accuracy by referencing these two versions.

The major objections that I hear to these versions is their archaic language. Personally, I have no problems with the "thou, thy, and thine" especially when referring to Deity. I still use them in addressing God publicly and privately. Even modern English recognizes them as being pronouns of Deity. Some wonder why I still use them in my prayers, do I not know that the Greek makes no distinction in personal pronouns referring to God and pronouns referring to man? My standard answer is that I am aware of this fact and that the next time I pray in Greek I would not make a distinction. But in the meantime, since this tool of distinction was available in English, that I would prefer to use them as I addressed God. I have no criticism of those who prefer to reverently use "You, Your, and Yours" as they pray to God. Just don't get on my case for not doing so. ■