

## Theology, Ethics, and Church Growth

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At the beginning of the twenty-first century we face two equally important challenges in the area of church growth. The first one is very slow growth in some parts of the world and the second is its opposite, fast growth. Both situations bring with it specific problems that need to be addressed in a productive and yet aggressive way. Here I will share some thoughts about the theological and ethical challenges that we are facing and will face in areas of the world of intensive growth. I raise them hoping that this will be helpful to church leaders as they plan for the future of the church in order to avoid dangerous pitfalls, some of which may not look dangerous at all.

### I. Quality and Numerical Growth

Let me state at the very beginning that numerical growth and the mission of the church are inseparable and that they are both indispensable in order for the church to be the church. Growth indicates that the church is still alive and that it is being sustained by the Spirit of the Lord. But the question we need to explore, and to explore with an open mind, has to do with the purpose of church growth: Why do we want to grow? What is the fundamental purpose of baptizing more and more people? Obviously growth brings with it recognition, power, and influence, and we will talk about these. But I seriously doubt, in fact I do not believe that this is what church growth is about. The power of the church is not located in the high number of members that constitute it but in the commitment of the members to Christ as Savior and Lord.

Church growth is a phenomenon that should be theologically defined as the actualization of the power of the Spirit in the life of sinners that, through the grace of God and faith in Christ, transforms sinners into children of God and, through baptism, incorporates them into the body of our Lord Jesus Christ. In other words, church growth occurs through the proclamation of the word of salvation through Christ and the work of the Spirit in the human heart leading the person to experience a genuine *conversion*. Church growth without conversion is only numerical and, theologically speaking, artificial. The solution is not to stop church growth in order to make sure that those who are “in” have experienced conversion. A significant part of the spiritual vitality of church members is precisely located in their involvement in church growth—in the proclamation of the redeeming power of the cross.

However, the proper balance between church growth and conversion is achieved through Bible study and intense prayers on behalf of those with whom we are sharing the gospel. Conversion takes place through the convicting power of the Spirit in the human heart in conjunction with the hearing of the Word of God. Those who show evidence, through a life of commitment to the Lord based on Scripture, that they have surrendered themselves to the convicting power of the Spirit should be baptized. Such individuals should continue to be spiritually and doctrinally nurtured after baptism and trained for mission.

## **II. Ethics of Motivation**

Church growth takes place through the involvement of church leaders and church members in the mission of the church. Since there is such a thing as spiritual inertia, proper motivation occupies the center of the missiological stage. The power of the Spirit is interested in using human voices and actions to move others to engage in mission. Motivational approaches should be grounded in biblical theology in order to be spiritually enriching to the individual. A proper motivational focus has to be informed and determined by the biblical concept of the grace of God toward all of us. Motivation based on the fear of losing our salvation is theologically unsound and dangerous. Joy and gratitude, and not fear, should be at the heart of the involvement of church members in mission. Only the unbounded love of God manifested on the cross of Calvary is powerful enough to move believers to serve Him in church growth.

Motivating pastors to continue to be involved in church growth is perhaps as challenging as motivating church members. Some pastors may need more motivation than others because we do not all have a strong self-motivating personality. Assuming that a pastor does not need to be motivated in order to be engaged in church growth would be a mistake. We all need encouragement and motivation to fulfill the task assigned to each of us. Perhaps one of the reasons for having small or no growth at all in some regions of the world would have something to do with the possibility that church leaders may be leaving pastors alone, providing little or no motivation for them to engage in church growth. If this were the case, then they would need to be properly encouraged and motivated in order to have a church that is vibrant for the Lord.

But the truth is that an ethics of motivation for pastors is particularly needed in areas where the church is rapidly growing. Allow me to be explicit in my comments on this issue. The fact that we pay pastors to do their work could easily lend itself to improper motivational practices. Threatening pastors with losing their jobs if they would not increase their baptismal numbers is certainly inappropriate. Dismissing a pastor from the ministry should be preceded by a careful evaluation of his/her performance as a minister and not exclusively on a numerical issue. Any verbal or psychological threat of abuse of pastors that aims at motivating them to engage in church growth is not ethically acceptable. Church leaders should develop biblical ways of motivating pastors that corresponds to the teachings of our Lord and that contributes to the spiritual growth of the minister. Obviously pastors should clearly understand that it is their responsibility to go, like Jesus, and seek souls for the kingdom of heaven while at the same time training church members for mission.

## **III. Visibility of the Church**

In places where the church is growing, it is becoming highly visible. This is good but it also brings with it challenges that perhaps we have not anticipated but that we should start thinking about. Here I will mention two main ones.

(1) *Adventists and the Press*: There are some places in the world, and the number is growing, where what happens within the church is a matter of public interest; it is news. The church is so well known and influential that the non-Adventist population is kept informed by the press about events taking place in the church. Ecclesiastical transparency, which is always important, becomes extremely important in such cultural settings. How we do business is going to be scrutinized by the

general public in the open arena of society and we should be always ready for this. This means that church leaders should make decisions based on sound principles and on the policies of the church. Due process should be followed and occasionally revised to debug it from elements that could be misused by the press or that may not be based on the best ethical values.

A couple of examples may be useful to illustrate the point. The election of leaders at the Mission, Conference, and Union levels should be done in a way that follows due process as stated in the policies of the church. Internal politics that could allow for preferential treatment would have to be screened out of the process in order to make it as objective as possible. The same would apply in cases where a worker is dismissed. Proper protocol should be followed in order to make sure that the decision is objectively defensible. Another example could be the use of money and its administration. This is an area in which the General Conference has been promoting transparency within the church. My suggestion would be to make sure that if we have to justify in the public arena the distribution and use of money at the local administrative level we should be able to do it in a way that reveals our integrity as a church. Bad press based on things over which we do have some control should be considered unacceptable by church leaders. Our high visibility in many places around the world should continue to be a blessing for those societies and for the church itself.

(2) *Visibility and Power*: Having a large number of church members in a particular country or city does not only make the church visible, it makes it influential and powerful. In the western world we have traditionally been a minority church and consequently we do not know how to handle the power that comes with a church that is not necessarily a minority. The risks are many but the blessings are many more. The proper use of that power should be explored by church leaders and proper parameters should be put in place in order not to violate our integrity as God's end-time people. In societies where we are highly visible we would have to address the social issues confronted by the people at large and provide guidance based on clear principle that would not be considered to be an imposition of our doctrines on a society in which we are quite influential. These are matters that need careful attention before we are confronted with the issues.

We should also be careful concerning how we relate to the political system of the country or the city. Many persons in national political positions would like to give preferential treatment to the leaders of a church that is influential in society. This is understandable if we keep in mind that their interest is of a political nature and that at the appropriate time they will request from us special favors. Special treatment from political figures could make us feel important but those favors should be carefully scrutinized to make sure that they do not place us in a situation that could be damaging to the message and mission of the church. As leaders we should keep in mind that our leadership is not about us but about the church that entrusted to us the privilege of serving it for a period of time in a particular place. The use of the influence of the church by leaders should be determined by its impact on the church and not on the individual leader.

The question of power is an important one and we should not leave it up to local leaders only to define it. Seminars should be developed in which the issues arising from the power and influence

that come as a result of church growth are discussed and guidelines are formulated that will help us avoid some of the risks intrinsic to such situations.

Church growth will force us to deal with the theological and ethical issues that perhaps we have not thought about. What I offer here is the beginning of what would probably be a profitable agenda.

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