

True Growth

H.E. Phillips

"That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive; But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ: From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love" (Eph. 4:14-16).

A favorite slogan today is: "Get the church on the March." By this is generally meant: "Let's get the church to doing bigger things in bigger ways and keep reaching for bigger and better goals." No one resents or objects to a scriptural and sound growth of the church both in numbers and in spirit. In fact, that is the very goal every sincere Christian desires and toward which he labors. If calling in question this idea of putting the church of the Lord "on the march" in the sense of adding all sorts of "programs" to win approval of men, causes some to charge us with being against the growth and progress of the Lord's church, be that as it may. We are not against scriptural growth; we oppose modern innovations that are called growth. We speak against the methods employed and the goals set by these churches "on the march." When we have to serve donuts and coffee following "worship" to get the crowds; or when we have to join the "Little Angels Softball League" and dress "our young people" in their "church uniforms" to play the Methodists, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, etc. in order to "save" our young people; or when we must build, maintain and promote "Hobby Shops," "Church Camps," and "Church Play Grounds" to "win souls for Christ," we are not growing in the grace and knowledge of our Lord; we are "on the march" in reverse--we are marching straight toward apostasy.

In New Testament times the "word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly" (Acts 6:7). This was accomplished by sound, firm preaching of the gospel, and only that. No schemes or worldly appeals were made, yet the church grew greatly. "And believers were the more added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women" (Acts 5:14). That is the kind of "marching forward" we need today. The preaching must be the kind that draws the line between right and wrong.

Also, one of the greatest means of the church growing in New Testament days was the strict discipline of the unruly and false teachers under the direction of the apostles. There is no doubt about it: the church really "marches forward" under sound gospel preaching and proper discipline of all who walk not uprightly according to the truth of the gospel. When death was administered by the Lord upon Ananias and Sapphira for their sins against God, as recorded in Acts 5, "great fear came upon all the church" and "the believers were the more added to the Lord" (Acts 5:11,14). We are commanded to withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly and not after the word delivered by the apostles (2 Thess. 3:6). But it is not now considered "expedient" and "diplomatic" to enforce scriptural discipline in the church "on the march." Don't speak against the modern dance; don't oppose divorce and remarriage; don't preach against social drinking and the like. To do this will drive people away and we will not grow as we should! Apparently this is the philosophy of these modern day "growing churches."

Another view generally held by many churches is that NUMBERS and CONTRIBUTION are the only real gauge of growth. Nearly any effort to get more people in attendance and raise the weekly contribution is deemed scriptural. By this standard the church at Philippi was everything but a growing church because they were in poverty as compared to some when they sent relief to the poor saints. Yet this church was commended by Paul in his letter to them. The church in Smyrna was suffering tribulation and in poverty, but in Revelation 2 Christ said, "thou art rich" as he spoke of their spiritual condition. Not one word of condemnation was spoken against this church which did not have the "sign" of a growing church. In the same connection the church of the Laodiceans considered themselves "rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing," but the Lord said they were "wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked" (Rev. 3:17-18). This "growing" church was sickening the Lord, if, indeed, growth is determined by the wealth of a congregation.

The constant begging, employing of schemes, and setting and raising goals to increase the revenue of a congregation is a very common practice of the "marching" churches of today. We are not speaking against the scriptural teaching on the obligation of each member to give of his prosperity liberally on the first day of the week. This must be done to obey God. 1 Corinthians 9 shows that the church is to support the preaching of the gospel, and chapter 16 shows that there are obligations to relieve poor saints who are really in need. But we are speaking here of the overemphasis in the financial standing as an indication of a "growing church." Many extremely wealthy churches are far from growing in the way that pleases God; they are simply growing as the Catholic Church - growing wealthy but not spiritually.

As to the increase of "members" - large numbers - as a sign of a growing church, this, like that of the financial measurement, is often overemphasized. No one can say that the increase in those being added to the church as in Acts 2:41-47 is wrong, or that it is not an indication of good growth. However, to ignore all other elements and make this the one test of a growing church is wrong. The various denominations are increasing in numbers, but all the while they are thus increasing they are declining in morals and religious convictions. I personally know of some congregations that have steadily, and even rapidly, grown in numbers during the past five years, but there are far less spirituality and convictions among the members that are being added. Yes, they have even grown in weekly contributions. Even though they have a much larger membership, and much more financial power, these churches have NOT grown; they are not "on the march" in a scriptural sense. We want the "number of disciples" to "increase greatly," but we want this growth to be on a sound basis with deep spiritual conviction. Spiritual growth is the kind that counts, and this kind of growth will produce the increase in numbers without all the "extra aids" used by many today.

One other disgusting practice that grows out of the concept that numbers prove growth is that of proselyting members from other congregations. Many preachers become so busy trying to convince members of other congregations that they should leave and "place membership with us" that they have little or no time to teach the lost the word of salvation. It is possible that these preachers are more interested in making a personal reputation of making the church "grow" than in converting souls to Christ. They are especially gifted in "selling the faithful and prosperous Christians of other congregations on the idea of "coming over to help us." Perhaps you have been approached by some preacher of another congregation with, "We need you more than they do." "We

are small and you will be happier with us because you can do more." "We will give you a class to teach, etc., etc." Now let me make this one thing clear: Any time Christians are attending a place where error is taught and are themselves teaching and practicing error, it is the duty of any gospel preacher, or anyone else, to teach against sin and try to save as many as possible. If a congregation is teaching the false doctrine of premillennialism, any true preacher of the word will try to teach and save as many as possible from that congregation. But the "sheep thieves" operate on an entirely different level; they are trying to persuade faithful members from other churches to "build up" their own congregation.

The verses read at the beginning teach that the speaking of the truth in love, the fitly joining together of each member supplying what he can to the growth of the body, and the edifying of itself in love are the means of spiritual growth. Proper growth of the church includes individual growth in knowledge of truth by each member. If such spiritual growth is obtained, the growth in number and financial ability will follow.

Credit H.E. Phillips and HEPhillips.org
Preacher of the Word (Vol. 1, October 13, 1996, #42)
For copyright information see www.HEPhillips.org/copyright.