



"The popular notion that the first obligation of the church is to spread the gospel to the uttermost parts of the earth is false. Her first obligation is to be spiritually worthy to spread it."
—A.W. Tozer

20-May-05

Growth

In [the world](#) of money, *growth* is of supreme importance. Stock prices and ratings of companies rise and fall depending on the growth of revenue and assets. Countries are rated upon how much their economies grow during a year or during a quarter. It is considered to be bad news when a growth forecast is lowered and good news when it is increased. Untold wealth can be gained or lost in a day, depending on what the outlook for growth happens to be in a given sector. Companies are not allowed the luxury of taking time to regroup; if they are not continually producing—every three months, preferably—they are looked upon less favorably. One's personal wealth must always be increasing or it is at risk of being consumed by taxes and inflation. Such is the nature of the Babylon we inhabit today.

Regrettably, this approach has taken root within Christianity, too—both true and false. "Success" for a church is all too often measured in income, membership, and new converts, all of which are typically very unreliable indicators.

BusinessWeek Online recently produced a feature entitled "[God](#), Inc." The lead article, "Earthly Empires," examines the trend toward "megachurches," defined as those "that attract at least 2,000 weekly worshippers." Lakewood Church in Houston, for example, boasts 30,000 attendees who come to hear "upbeat messages of hope" each weekend. Weekly attendance—and thus income—has nearly quadrupled since 1999. How is that for "growth"? In addition to those personally in attendance, another 7 million people see the pastor's Sunday sermons on national cable and network channels each weekend. With an income of \$55 million in 2004, surely this must be an example of success! The article goes on to show that the largest churches are that way because of hefty market research and analysis. They learn how to most effectively market themselves and their message. They combine business and religion without shame, and glory in the "success" supposedly given to them by God!

The Bible has much to say about growth, but it is predominately weighted toward *personal growth*—that is, the growth of one's character, not one's wealth or social stature. What God desires is overcoming, meaning *growth* against a standard ([Revelation 2:7](#), 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21; 21:7). His focus is not on unrestrained numeric growth of His church at all. It will not be until *after* [Jesus Christ](#) returns and establishes His [Kingdom on earth](#) that "the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea" ([Isaiah 11:9](#)). The Father restricts the number of those who can come to the Son ([John 6:44](#), 65)!

This can be seen throughout the physical creation. Every species of plant and animal has limits on how big it can get. While there are ranges of size, a mouse will never grow to be the size of a housecat. A housecat will never be the size of an elephant. A trout will never grow to be the size of a blue whale. Their DNA—their design—simply will not allow it.

There is a nine-foot tall azalea bush outside my living room window. Apparently it has had the perfect conditions of sunlight, water, and soil acidity to grow tremendously. Yet, as unusual as that height may be, this plant will never grow to be the size of the oak tree that is 30 feet away. To do so, it would have to transgress the design and structure given to it by the Creator. Each aspect of the creation has bounds and limits to its size. God's

church, that spiritual organism of which His children are a part, is no different.

If we value our calling as unique and rare, we will recognize the utter futility of trying to open the mind of someone whom God has not called. Jesus told Peter that the only reason he recognized Him as the Christ was that the Father had revealed it to him ([Matthew 16:13-17](#)). Another human could not have done it! Likewise, we cannot impress the truth on someone whose mind God has not opened.

Does this mean it is pointless to try to preach [the gospel](#) to the world? Not in the least! Jesus Christ set the example for us ([Matthew 4:23](#); [9:35](#); [Mark 1:14-15](#); [Luke 4:43](#); [8:1](#); [16:16](#)), as did the apostles. Paul proclaims earnestly, "For if I preach the gospel, I have nothing to boast of, for necessity is laid upon me; yes, *woe is me if I do not preach the gospel!* " ([I Corinthians 9:16](#)) Jesus Christ says in no uncertain terms in [Matthew 24:14](#) that the gospel *will* be preached "in all the world *as a witness* to all the nations, and then the end will come." The gospel does not convert—it can only do that to those who have been given the [faith](#) by God to truly believe and respond. For everyone else, the gospel becomes a testimony *against* them until they, too, are given an opportunity to understand. As Paul said, one plants and another waters, but God gives the increase ([I Corinthians 3:6-8](#)). What we do not know is whether that increase will be given before Christ's return or after.

What we see, then, is that numeric growth in membership is not a good measure of success. We cannot know how many people have been called at this time. God knows the number of the Bride of His Son, and He knows how and when that number will be filled. Similarly, a church's income is, in one sense, relative. Anybody who has kept the third tithe knows that God controls the flow of money—a third tithe year budget may not work out on paper, but it always works out. A church's income will be sufficient for the work that God has given it to do. Church size and income are squarely in the realm of God's sovereignty. What He is more interested in for us is how we, individually, are growing into His character image. The "limits" on this growth are set at the very highest level:

...[T]ill we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ...([Ephesians 4:13](#))

- David C. Grabbe

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

[Parables of Matthew 13 \(Part 1\): The Mustard Seed](#)

by Richard T. Ritenbaugh

The Bible, in both parables and prophecies, interprets itself and remains consistent in its use of symbols. We cannot arbitrarily pull symbols out of the air and attach meaning. The first four parables of Matthew 13 (Sower, Wheat and Tares, Mustard Seed, and Leaven) all describe Satan's plan to destroy the church: (1) attacking at early stages of growth, (2) infiltrating through secret agents, (3) influencing unchecked, unnatural growth going beyond God's ordained limits, inviting worldly and demonic influence, and (4) influencing yielding to sin and false doctrine.

From the Archives: Featured Article

[Who Is Doing the Work of God?](#)

by John W. Ritenbaugh

What is more important: preaching the gospel to the world or feeding the flock? John Ritenbaugh gives reasons why we should at this time be concentrating on reversing the church's serious spiritual decline before we presume to go to the world.

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