



# TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Papers | Reviews | Essays

## Real Church Growth

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Not long ago, I heard a brother tell about an incident from his early days of preaching. Having shown some aptitude as a speaker, he decided that, if preaching was something he would do more, he ought to find out how to be good at it. So one day, as his Christian college Bible class ended, he approached his teacher, a well known preacher, and asked him to share the secret. The teacher, apparently discerning that the student was looking for a sort of magic formula, looked around in a conspiratorial way as if to see if anyone was listening, leaned closer to the student, and in hushed tones said, “Study the Bible and pray.” The student waited for him to go on, sure that this was just the prelude to the real secret. But his mentor continued, “That’s it. If you want to be a good preacher, study the Bible and pray.”

The preacher telling the story confesses that he really wasn’t sure what he expected to hear. Looking back, he marvels that he would have anticipated anything else, for no matter what skills one has as a communicator, it is impossible to succeed as a preacher unless one is willing to focus on the fundamentals of listening and talking to God.

But preachers are not the only ones who need to remember this fundamentals focus. The concern over the fact that churches of Christ went from being able to claim to be the fastest growing religious group to a stagnation where growth practically stopped in just a little over two decades has produced more ink on church growth than we can measure and more ideas about how to get it done than we can count. Apparently convinced that no one will listen if we don’t find the growth secret, we have expended untold hours at the feet of experts and consultants. We have tried techniques we’ve heard about and others we’ve devised. We have worked to meet just the right need or provide just the right attraction. All in our quest for the ultimate growth formula.

Well, here it is: *Spread the Word!* It is significant that Luke’s report of Christianity’s spread gives no attention to church programs and only mentions the increase in church size in a secondary way. But he does say a lot about their focus on God’s Word. The phrases, “word of the Lord/God,” “the word” and other descriptors where the Word is clearly

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God's appear some 35 times in Acts. There are statements like 6:7, "the word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly. . ." or 12:24, "the word of the Lord continued to grow and to be multiplied;" or 13:49, "and the word of the Lord was being spread throughout the whole region" (NASB; see also 4:4, 31; 17:11-12; 19:10, 20).

No matter what else we might try, we will not see the growth of strong, faithful churches if we do not stick to the fundamental technique of teaching the Word as widely and often as possible. Certainly, we can—and should—be wise as serpents (Matt. 10:16) in seeking favorable conditions for sharing God's message. And certainly we can implement biblical principles to serve one another and others in ways that address the needs of people whose physical and emotional issues cannot be divorced from their spiritual concerns. But the seed which produces godly growth has always been, still is, and always will be the Word of God. To allow anything else—no matter how good it may be nor how noble the intent behind it—to distract us from that fact is to depart from New Testament Christianity.

We may be part of a large group. We may increase our numbers and have vast resources to do other useful works. We may even be satisfied with our success. But if we leave out the Word, we will not have real church growth.

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