

This article originally appeared in *The Restoration Herald*, October 1971.

Church Growth And the Restoration Principle

By Roger Chambers

Church Growth speaks primarily of methodology. Church Growth does not necessarily espouse a particular cause or doctrine. It is interdenominational. Church Growth is more often seen to wear overalls than the robes of the theologian. This is because it is a methodology which has been hammered out on the anvil of experience. It is realistic and practical. No one can accuse the enthusiast for the application of growth dynamics of being quixotic. The principles of Church Growth did not flutter down from someone's ivory tower.

Church Growth works!

The dynamics recognized by this methodology have been repeatedly shown to speak to the human spirit as it actually is, not necessarily as we would like it to be.

Such principles as growth by groups, student-teacher ratios, classroom size, systematic visitation, and teacher training and motivation must be recognized by the leaders of any church that is going to grow.

But Church Growth, by definition, has neither a faith nor a persuasion. Liberal churchmen have often been in the forefront in the development workable methods because their pale preaching has created a lifeless atmosphere. They have depended upon principles of motivation for survival. And the application of principles of Church Growth has often produced for them the artificial kind of life in which there is religious enthusiasm in the absence of actual Biblical faith. The Baptist congregation which recognizes growth dynamics will produce more Baptists than the Baptist congregation that does not. Identical methods are used by Mormons and Methodists and each reproduces after its kind, having the right number of pupils per teacher, working the right kind of program, having the right kind of organization, using properly-motivated people, will result in growth for whoever has, works, and uses.

Therefore a soaring attendance and a booming program does not insure real growth in the Church which Jesus built. Church Growth can become a method whereby hell is peopled.

While Church Growth is a methodology, the restoration of the church of Christ is a *principle*. It has to do with *content*. What we term the Restoration Movement is, in reality, only one attempt to apply the principle of restoration. There have been many other movements in the past. Restoration is a principle, and basic to that principle is the proposition that the *content* of doctrine or teaching must be Biblical. And while the principles of Church Growth can be and are exploited to produce both Free Will Baptists and Seventh Day Adventists, teaching that restores the content of the gospel message will never do that kind of thing.

Bane or Blessing

Because Church Growth as an emphasis and as a methodology is interdenominational and neutral, its relationship to the nondenominational and free Church of Christ must be carefully scrutinized. Church Growth can be either bane or blessing to the Lord's Church. It is the conviction of the writer that the impact of Church Growth principles in congregations of the Church of Christ has been negative more often than has been recognized or admitted.

Liberalism and modernism wreaked havoc in the Church of Christ in the generation just past. But liberal Christianity has run out of steam. The theological poverty and practical failure of liberalism has become so embarrassing to "progressive" churchmen that they are beginning to look the other way. The liberals are still talking, but few are listening.

The danger to the Church in this generation is from another quarter. The danger is from fundamental interdenominationalism. And Church Growth may become one of the avenues of incursion, the nose of the camel under the tent. This will happen if careful distinction is not made between method and content.

The principle of restoration is delicate. It can very easily be lost or broken. It has been lost in the past by unbelief. It can be lost again by wrong belief. The *sine qua non* of the restoration principle is the affirmation that human, religious, sincere, substitutes are not as good as the truth, in teaching and preaching. Denominationalism is not as good as the Lord's Church. If one is to be saved he must obey the gospel as it is.

When leaders in the Church of Christ declare that we really are, after all, just another denomination, then the principle is lost and we become just another denomination. And it seems that more and more the principle is being surrendered in the area of *methodology*. Preachers are declaring by word that the plea of the Restoration Movement is unique, but are, in practice, allowing the principle to go down the drain.

Two Baptisms?

It may be only coincidence that while the Church of Christ is adopting denominational methodology, there is an increase in the acceptance of denominational conversion, i.e., content. It is not uncommon to find congregations in which Baptist baptism is accepted as being equal to Bible Baptism. The theory is that immersion of a believer in water is baptism, regardless of the content of the believer's faith. This practice partakes of the sacramental view of baptism, in that, the presence of water makes up for inadequacies in the understanding of the candidate. (It is also a kind of open membership). But the only similarity between Baptist baptism and Bible baptism is the fact that both are immersion in water. To be Bible baptism, one's immersion in water must come as an act of intelligent faith. This speaks of *content*. If one has not been baptized "into Christ" he has not been saved. He may have been converted. He may have been motivated. He may have become religious. He may have become spiritual. But unless he has obeyed the gospel, no change has taken place in regard to his standing before God, and he is still lost. And if he has been informed that he has been saved, he is more lost than ever to the fact of his lostness.

If Baptist baptism saves a person, then the Baptist Church is just as is the Church of Christ and we are guilty of causing division by our failure to seek fellowship with them.

There is the growing practice of participation in interdenominational revivals and evangelistic crusades. If a Church leader who really holds out for the truth has ever been through one of the counselor-training sessions often held in preparation for these revivals, he quickly has seen the difference between what they are taught by the "expert" and what they are taught in the Word of God.

A clear example of the loss of the principle of restoration is this year's North American Christian Convention. The promotion and publicity is very confusing. On the one hand we are told that we ought to register for the convention even if we are unable to attend, because we will be supporting a powerful presentation of the "unique plea of the Restoration Movement." Did W. A. Criswell, past president of the Southern Baptist Convention, and Dr. Willke (Roman Catholic) present the unique plea of the Restoration Movement? The apology offered for their inclusion on the program is that we have much to learn from them. Did we learn enough from them to justify the fact that we held up to a lost world religious teachers whose own obedience to the terms of the gospel is in question? Let's not be surprised when the world doesn't quite catch on to this business of a "unique plea." The convention becomes, in the eyes of the nation, an ecumenical and interdenominational one. This is precisely the picture given by television coverage of the 1971 convention.

And if we carelessly sacrifice principle for successful method, we shall leave our children the bitter task of repeating the heart-breaking struggle for the Church as it is in the Bible.

Caution Needed

Because the denominations and the sects have proved that people can be, by the application of Church Growth, principles and dynamics, motivated, and maneuvered and made religious, we must be constantly on guard that we be satisfied with nothing less than the truth. We must not be content with the appearance of growth. We must recognize that it may often be easier to get a person to occupy a chair in a Bible school class than to get that person to heaven. Because Church Growth works, because it works almost regardless of the content of the doctrine preached in a given situation, we must redouble our

efforts to confront people thus drawn with the actual conditions of salvation.

The growing awareness of Church Growth dynamics is a challenge to the Church of Christ. It need not be a danger. With a little courage and conviction, we can preach the truth and stand for it, even though it may be more convenient to preach something less. Truth does not turn people away. Bible preaching will not hinder Church Growth, it will promote real growth. The combination of intelligent methodology and faithful preaching will produce revival. It will produce revival that will dwarf the best efforts of denominationalism. People believe and are enthusiastic about what they are taught to believe. They might as well be taught the truth. We ought not be so enamored of successful programs in non-scriptural religious systems that we are reluctant to incur their wrath and ridicule by standing for the one Church.

Let's make it grow. But let us also make sure that it is the Church, the true Church, that is growing.