

**Numerical Growth in the Theology of Acts:
The Role of Pragmatism, Reason and Rhetoric**

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Presented at The Evangelical Theological Society, 47th Annual Meeting
Philadelphia, November 1995

Carl Holladay has argued that the numerical expansion of the church was not a “pervasive concern of Jesus and the New Testament writers.”¹ While noting that Luke “documents the numerical growth of the early church” with his “fondness for statistics,” he dismisses this as central to Luke’s theology.² Instead, he argues that a primary theme is the reluctant legitimization of the Gentile mission in contrast to a thorough-going triumphalism.

Critics of the Church Growth Movement have legitimately called attention to the apparent lack of theological foundation and formulation within the movement. It appears to have begun more as a sociological pragmatism than a theological understanding of the New Testament documents. The perceived lack of theological reflection in Church Growth literature has grounded the presumption that certain emphases, especially numerical growth, are sociological rather than theological. It is the issue of numerical growth that is particularly disconcerting to the Biblical scholar. Yet it need not be.

This article seeks to establish that Luke’s “fondness for statistics” is not simply a matter of historical record but part of the substructure of Luke’s theological purpose. His documentation of

the “numerical growth of the early church” is one of the purposes of Acts itself. Indeed, this agenda serves the larger theme of God’s restoration of Israel through the mission of the church. There is a theological motive behind Luke’s fondness for statistics. The growth of the community is grounded in Luke’s theology of restoration. Just as Israel multiplied and increased in number in the Old Testament, so restored Israel would multiply and increase in the Messianic age. Numerical growth is a covenant blessing.

A secondary purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that reliance on covenant blessing for numerical growth does not entail that the church reject or ignore the pragmatic, rational and rhetorical aspects of its ministry. Certainly a danger for the covenant community is to depend upon its own pragmatism (as perhaps in the Church Growth Movement), reason (as perhaps in sophisticated apologetics), and rhetorical flare (as perhaps in polished preaching) for its growth. Rather than the focus, these must be seen as tools of the Holy Spirit through which God provides blessing. While these tools are always secondary to the one who blesses the covenant community, they are to be sharpened and used in service to the kingdom.

Luke’s Theology of Numerical Growth

Before I proceed into the substance of my argument, I wish to lay out several assumptions. I will not defend these points, but assume them for the purpose of the paper. First, I do not believe Acts has a singular purpose, but a multi-faceted one.³ Acts is too complex a document to serve one purpose. Yet, in my view, the five growth summaries in Acts (6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20) give expression to one of these purposes.⁴ These are factual statements about the effectiveness of the church’s evangelistic ministry. They report God’s blessing of growth. Luke intends to document this growth. Second, I believe that one of the primary Old Testament themes for Acts is the restoration-fulfillment motif. Acts reports the fulfillment of God’s promises through the restoration of Israel in the ministry of the church.⁵ The kingdom has been restored through its inauguration at Pentecost though Luke

still anticipates a consummation for the kingdom that has not yet arrived. Luke writes not only as a careful historian, but as a theological interpreter of the history of the church in the light of Old Testament traditions.⁶ Third, I believe that Luke's vocabulary and thought is significantly influenced by the Septuagint. Semantic connections with the Greek Old Testament are important clues for understanding Luke's intent.⁷ In fact, James A. Sanders believes that Luke "knew certain parts of the Scripture in such depths that unless the modern interpreter of Luke also knows the Septuagint or Greek Old Testament very well in deed he or she will miss major points Luke wanted to score."⁸

The Linguistic Data

In light of the literary and theological significance of the Acts summary statements, I believe we can understand the theological intent of Luke's growth summaries. Luke uses two major terms to describe the numerical growth of the church. The first is *αὐξάνω* which is an agriculture term that means "to grow" or "increase". The second is *πληθύνω* which means "to multiply." These two terms are used together to describe the growth of the early church in Acts 6:7 and 12:24. In both texts the emphasis is squarely on numerical growth. The section in Acts 6 is prefaced in verse 1 by the statement that the number of the disciples was increasing or multiplying (*πληθύνω*). This statement is repeated in verse 7 with the addition of the term *αὐξάνω*. Acts 12:24 brings the two words together again. The word of God is increasing and multiplying which is a metaphor for the increase of believers through the acceptance of God's word. Interestingly, Paul uses a similar metaphor in 2 Thessalonians 3:1 where the word of God spreads and is glorified. Luke also speaks of the glorification of the word in the context of a positive response to the preached word (Acts 13:48). The same metaphor is used in Acts 19:20 where the word of God both increased (*αὐξάνω*) and prevailed (*ἵσχυω*).

Luke uses *πληθύνω* again in Acts 9:31 to describe the multiplication of the disciples. Actual numerical notations of 3,000 in Acts 2:41 and 5,000 in Acts 4:4 underscore the success of the

earliest Christian proclamation. $\text{AvriQmov}^{\prime}V$ is used by Luke to describe the increase of numbers in 4:4 and 11:21. It is also used in 16:5 in combination with the verb perisseuwn (abounding, increasing) to underscore the success of the Gentile mission churches. Interestingly, the mission churches are “increasing in number daily” which parallels the daily growth of the Jewish church in Jerusalem in Acts 2:47. The Gentile mission, then, in the context of Acts, succeeded in the same way that the Jewish mission did—both are increased daily.

Luke’s emphasis on numerical growth is scattered through the whole of his work, and connected to the geographical and ethnic expansion of the early church. Beginning in Jerusalem (Acts 2:47; 4:4; 6:1,7), spreading through Judea and Samaria (9:31; 12:24), and into the uttermost parts of the earth, i.e., the Gentile mission (16:5; 19:20). This, of course, follows the pattern of Acts 1:8. The church grew numerically, geographically and cross-culturally from Judea through Samaria to Rome.

This emphasis is difficult to ignore. Certainly Holladay was aware of it. To rehearse the data, to be sure, does not make the case that this is part of Luke’s theological purpose in Acts. It may be, as Holladay argues, simply a matter of historical record, that is, Luke’s emphasis is due to the historical nature of his task and not due to some theological emphasis on numerical growth. Nevertheless, it is necessary to rehearse the data in order to indicate both its presence and its pervasive character so that the theological case for numerical growth can be built. This data is the foundation from which one discerns Luke’s purposes.

The Theological Motive

The key to a theological motive here is the conjunction of auxxavnw and plhQuvwn in the book of Acts (6:7; 12:24). These two terms are further highlighted by the use of the former in 19:20, and the use of the latter in 6:1 and 9:31. Assuming the Septuagintal background of Luke’s historiography, style and vocabulary, this combination of terms is theologically significant. It connects the story of the church with the redemptive-historical story of God from creation through the history of Israel.

First, this language is theologically significant because it is the same combination of terms used by the LXX to represent the mandate given by God to his creation: “be fruitful and multiply” (NIV, “be fruitful and increase in number”). The phrase is used in this connection at Genesis 1:22, 28; 8:17; 9:1,7. Twice in reference to nature (1:22; 8:17) and three times in reference to the human population (1:28; 9:1, 7). Both in the context of creation and in the aftermath of the Noahic flood, God’s mandate is to populate the earth—to increase in number. It was part of God’s creative intent to fill the earth with his imagers who would share fellowship with him. God purposed an eschatological community by his creative act.⁹

Second, this language is theologically significant because it is the combination of terms used by the LXX to represent the numerical growth of the covenant community. The phrase is used in this connection at Genesis 17:20; 28:3; 35:11; 47:27; 48:4; Exodus 1:7; Leviticus 26:9. While used to describe the increase of Ishmael’s descendants (Gen 17:20), it also describes both Isaac’s blessing upon Jacob (Gen. 28:3), God’s vision to Jacob at Bethel (Gen 35:11), and Jacob rehearses this to Joseph (Gen. 48:4). It describes the fulfillment of God’s promise (Gen. 47:27; Ex. 1:7). It is specifically a covenant blessing of God upon a faithful nation (Lev. 26:9). When God began his covenant community through Abraham, he was concerned to multiply it through Jacob. It is part of God’s promise and his blessing for the covenant people to increase in number. In the aftermath of the fall, God inaugurated a redeemed community which he would multiply, and through it all nations would be blessed.

Third, this language is theologically significant because it is the combination of terms used by the LXX in Jeremiah to describe the blessedness of the messianic community, of restored Israel. The phrase is used in this connection at Jeremiah 3:16 and 23:3. In Jeremiah 3 the text emphasizes the unity of Israel and Judah (restoration) and the flowing of all nations into the new covenant community where there is blessing (3:16-18; 4:2). The Lord’s promise is that an increase in number will accompany

the messianic community. In Jeremiah 23 the prophecy concerns the “remnant” of God’s flock who will return to their land and increase in number. The two passages are linked by the reference to the shepherds which God will raise up to lead the new community (3:15; 23:4). The chief shepherd is David, the righteous Branch and King, the Lord our righteousness (23:5). Clearly, it is ultimately the messianic community which is in view. It is both a remnant and an increasing multitude. Remnant theology, therefore, does not imply a lack of numerical growth. Indeed, the remnant of Israel will increase and multiply through God’s own redemptive work in Christ.

Luke’s emphasis on numerical growth in Acts is best seen against this intense theological background. It is the command of the cultural mandate, and it is the command of the theological mandate both in the old covenant (the people of Israel) and the new covenant (the new Israel). The new covenant’s theological mandate (“be fruitful and multiply”; or the Great Commission in Matthew 28:18-20) includes “all nations”. This is clearly demonstrated in Luke-Acts with his emphasis on the Gentile mission. From the presentation of Jesus in the temple where Simeon delights in Jesus as the light to the nations (Luke 2:32), to Luke’s version of the Great Commission (Luke 24:47), to James’ argument from Amos for the inclusion of all nations (Acts 15:17), and concluding in Paul’s appeal to the Roman Jews for the inclusion of all nations (28:28), Luke has a constant emphasis on the inclusion of the Gentiles (all nations) in restored Israel.

In conjunction with that emphasis is Luke’s theological point that restored Israel multiplied like the Israel of old. Just as old Israel was fruitful and multiplied so restored Israel, according to the text of Acts, is being fruitful and multiplying (6:7; 12:24). Luke is aware of this terminology in the LXX, and purposefully uses it to describe the numerical growth of the church. He demonstrates his awareness when Stephen described the numerical growth of the children of Israel with the same conjunction of terms in Acts 7:17. Another indication that Luke uses this terminology purposefully is the key junctures at which this language appears—the transition from Jewish Church to the Samaritans and Judeans

(6:7), from Samaritans and Judeans to the Gentile mission (12:24), and the success of Paul's Gentile mission as he heads back to Jerusalem for the last time (19:20).¹⁰

Luke describes the growth of the early church in the same terms that the LXX describes the increasing population of the earth and the increasing number of the children of Israel. Just as children are a blessing from the Lord (Psalm 127), and just as the increase of Abraham's descendants was a blessing, so also the growth of God's kingdom is a blessing from God. Theologically, Luke sees the church (restored Israel) as the entity which not only includes all nations, but also will increase in number just as the world's population increases and the children of Israel increased. The church is the messianic community which is expected to be fruitful and multiply. It belongs to the messianic community not only as command, but also as promise and blessing. This gives theological validity and undergirds the "numerical growth" emphasis of the Church Growth Movement as well as aggressive and urgent evangelism. God wants his church to grow numerically and he gives that growth as blessing. Eschatologically, the kingdom of God is moving towards the goal of Christ's return where he will receive his people. Luke envisions a great number being involved in that final revelation of the kingdom of God (cf. Acts 14:22).¹¹

Tools of Growth

The Tension Over Tools

The tension over the relationship of the divine act to the human act, between divine blessing and human achievement, cuts across theological disciplines. It is a tension not only in works on Systematic Theology but also appears in evangelism (Church Growth), apologetics, and preaching as well as others. The root tension is the relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility which has perplexed theologians for centuries. It is a tension that surfaces in all theological disciplines.

Is the growth of a local congregation the persuasive power of good sociological techniques or is it a divine blessing? Many

church growth manuals seem to emphasize technique even to the point of handling the biblical text as a manual for Church Growth. A good example is cited by Holladay.¹² McGavran and Arn claim that the New Testament “is a series of Church Growth documents. The Gospels, the book of Acts, and the Epistles were written by missionaries for mission. These were written by Church Growth people to Church Growth people to help the church grow.”¹³ On the other hand, others have decried the use of techniques or the implementation of sociologically grounded methods for church growth. They perceive such methods as a secularization of the church and the reduction of the church to another social human institution. Such growth is human manipulation rather than the power of God in the lives of people. Consequently, the Church Growth Movement needs a theological framework for the effective use of sociological and pragmatic methods for growing local congregations. A recent book by Ken Hemphill, *The Antioch Effect*, may represent such an effort. The prologue to his book states that Church growth “is not something we do or produce...[it] is not the result of any program or plan...[it] is by definition a supernatural activity and thus is accomplished through the church by the Lord himself.”¹⁴ Genuine church growth is not the result of sociological manipulation but neither is it received by passive idleness. Rather, it is a by-product of faithfulness to the mission God has given us. We receive God’s gift as we minister in the world as his instruments.

Is faith intellectually compelled by a good apologetic argument or is it the convicting work of the Holy Spirit? The discipline of apologetics sometimes assumes the credit for bringing someone to faith or is assigned the demerit if someone does not come to faith. Indeed, there are some apologists, coming out of an extreme evidentialist tradition, that believe faith can be compelled by a persuasive rational argument. If faith does not follow, then either the person is stupid, incorrigible or the argument was not well articulated, well-formed or perhaps not pressed with sufficient vigor. Faith becomes a matter of an intellectual tug of war so that the question is whether the apologetic arsenal can pull the combatant over the line of faith. At the other extreme are fi-

deists who devalue the practice of apologetic art and deem it unnecessary. Indeed, some fear that apologetics does more harm than good by weakening the certain foundations of faith. Many have placed presuppositionalists in this camp. However, there are mediating voices today. I have found John Frame's, *Apologetics to the Glory of God* refreshing.¹⁵ I might best characterize him as an apologist with a presuppositional foundation and framework but with an evidentialist superstructure. At heart, Frame understands that faith is God's work but that God works through us. Our fallible apologetic arguments, our evidentialist superstructures, are the tools by which God engenders faith in the hearts of people. Presuppositionalism is foundational and provides the theological heart of apologetics, but within that framework evidentialist arguments should be fully exploited. The Holy Spirit will work through those fallible human arguments to convict the unbeliever.

Is preaching a rhetorical art or a theological witness? Karl Barth and Harry Emerson Fosdick represent two extremes in answering that question. Karl Barth believed that preaching is more announcement than it is persuasive speech. Preaching announces what God wants to say, and it is God who makes himself heard.¹⁶ Barth downplays the use of introductions, rejects the tactic of connecting with public events for the sake of relevance, and decries the hunt for illustrations.¹⁷ For Barth, preachers give witness to the Word of God through expounding the written word of God—they give what God would have the audience to hear.¹⁸ Technique is almost ignored and he even suggests a lectionary approach so as to avoid being overly influenced by situations within the local church.¹⁹ Too much relevance can be a bad thing. At the other extreme is Fosdick who touted a philosophy of preaching that is rooted in consumerism. His classic 1928 article "What is the Matter with Preaching?" advocated beginning with the consumer rather than the text in preaching.²⁰ Preaching must be individualistic, problem-oriented and dictated by audience. The preacher is not an authoritative spokesperson for God but rather the preaching event is a cooperative effort between the preacher and the congregation.

Preaching is cooperative problem-solving. Technique is all-important because it provides the means by which the cooperative exercise is conducted.

A mediating voice between these two extremes might be William H. Willimon's two recent books, *Peculiar Speech: Preaching to the Baptized* and *The Intrusive Word: Preaching to the Unbaptized*.²¹ Bad preaching is actually bad theology,²² and good rhetoric does not make good preaching.²³ The sermon is the means by which God intrudes into the comfort zones of our lives. It is not fundamentally the arena in which our felt-needs are met, but where our unmet needs are elucidated and confronted by the gospel. This does not mean that rhetoric should be ignored, but that it should serve the larger theological purpose of preaching. Modern communicative techniques provide helpful models for effective public speaking, but these must always serve a secondary role in preaching. According to Willimon, preaching must begin with the Gospel and not the experiences of the audience, but the Gospel must be told as effectively as possible. Preaching is fundamentally a divine intrusion into the lives of people. It is God's act through the preacher who serves as God's instrument. God's act is not dependent upon the rhetorical arts, but rhetoric is a tool to be utilized by God's instrument as a means towards effective communication.

This tension between divine activity and human instrumentality crosses all theological disciplines. Whether in Church Growth, apologetics or preaching, we struggle with the emphasis we give to human efforts or the expectations we have of divine activity. This is an age-old problem whose emphasis swings like a pendulum, but it has become particularly acute in recent decades. It is my hope that applying Luke's theology of numerical growth might provide a theological perspective which might help us balance some of these tensions.

Tools in Acts

In Acts, numerical growth is a covenant blessing where God multiplies and increases the number of his people through the ministry of the church. God acts to restore Israel and increase it

through his servants. The theological substructure of Acts is that growth is God's act; it is his blessing by which he shows his faithfulness to his promises. Growth is a covenant blessing; a by-product and fruit of the restoration of Israel. Church Growth is not something we accomplish but is something that God does through us. The church, as the inaugurated kingdom, prays for and expects God's blessing of growth. We await the fulfillment of God's promise to multiply and increase the number of his people. Consequently, when the word of God has spread and the number of disciples has increased, we give our thanks to God for it is he who has been faithful.

Nevertheless, the tension remains. God commissioned witnesses for himself to go to the ends of the world. He commissioned witnesses for Judea and kings; for Jews and Gentiles. These witnesses were God's human instruments who carried the message of God's redemption into the world. They are the vessels in which God entrusted his treasure (2 Cor. 4:7). The tension between divine activity and human instrumentality is present in the beginning of Acts when the apostles are commissioned in chapter one. The promise of divine empowerment and blessing stands alongside of the commissioning and sending of human witnesses. While numerical growth is a covenant blessing from God, that blessing is given through the instrumentality of human witnesses. People will not hear without a preacher.

In Acts these human witnesses make pragmatic decisions, engage in rational argumentation, and construct skilled pieces of rhetoric in the service of God's kingdom. The expectation of God's blessings does not undermine the need or the value of pragmatism, reason and rhetoric. Indeed, as one reads through the movement of God's Holy Spirit in the book of Acts, one also sees the pragmatic decisions, rational argument and skilled rhetoric of God's witnesses. God uses these disciplines as tools through which he provides blessings of growth. Paul's second missionary journey illustrates this point.

The second missionary journey begins with the pragmatic decision to divide the original mission team into two, Paul and Silas as one, and Barnabas and John Mark as another (15:36-

40). In Lystra Paul makes the pragmatic decision to circumcise Timothy so he could be a more effective witness in the synagogues (16:3). We also see pragmatic decisions by Paul in choosing the cities he would evangelize. Paul chose urban centers and leading cities to evangelize. His Macedonian and Achaian targets included the important cities of Philippi, Thessalonica, Athens and Corinth. Certainly pragmatic decisions were involved in leaving Philippi and Thessalonica, sending Paul alone to Athens, and reuniting the team in Corinth. The whole missionary enterprise was filled with pragmatic questions: Who will go? Where do we go? Where do we start in a city? How long do we stay?

The second missionary journey also illustrates the use of rational argumentation. Paul reasoned with the Jews in the Thessalonian synagogue as he attempted to persuade them from the Scripture that Jesus was the Christ. Some were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas along with a “large number of God-fearing Greeks” (17:4). Paul argued from the Scripture as he explained and proved his contention that Christ had to suffer and then rise from the dead. The expectation of divine blessing did not lead Paul to practice some intellectual passivity or to put his mind on the self in the service of his faith. Further, Acts 17 is the classic text for the discussion of the role of reason in Paul’s apologetic strategy because it contains his Areopagus speech. In addition to reasoning with the Jews in the synagogues (17:17), Paul also reasoned (or dialogued) with the philosophers in front of the Areopagus (17:22). The contents of this speech are well-known as an example of the use of reason and the “spoiling” of Greek philosophy. Paul found a point of contact with the Athenian philosophers. Whatever may be the exact character of Paul’s rational argumentation, it seems clear that he was making a rational argument.²⁴ The use of reason was not exceptional to Paul, but an established practice.

Illustrating the use of rhetoric during the second missionary journey is a bit more difficult for several reasons. First, there is only one recorded speech by Paul in this section of Acts (though there are others in the book, chapters 13-14, 22, etc.). Second,

rhetoric is a technical art and would involve a detailed analysis to fully ground my point here. However, in a recent article by J. Daryl Charles, this point is made with regard to Paul's Areopagus speech. The speech demonstrates rhetorical skill and its presentation is calculated to persuade the hearer.²⁵ As H. Flender has summarized this rhetorical strategy, Luke intends to communicate the gospel in the language of his hearers, build on pagan literary illustrations, adjust pagan assumptions in the light of revelation, give evidence of God's revelation through the resurrection of Jesus, and persuade the Athenians to repent.²⁶ The use of rhetorical argument is not antagonistic to the enjoyment of God's covenant blessings. Indeed, blessings are received through that very means.

While the second missionary journey is replete with examples of pragmatism, rational argument and skilled rhetoric, it is also full of notations of growth. As Paul passed through the Galatian churches, the churches were increasing "in numbers daily" (16:5). A church was planted in Philippi, and "a great many of the devout Greeks" of Thessalonica were converted (17:4). At Berea "many" believed, including a significant number of Greek women and some men of high standing (17:12). Even in Athens, which is often characterized as a disappointing event for Paul, "some of them joined him and became believers, including Dionysius the Areopagite and a women named Damaris, and others with them" (17:34). In Corinth Paul also experienced success as Crispus, an official of the synagogue, was converted along with "many of the Corinthians who heard Paul" (18:8). Indeed, it was in Corinth where the divine promise of blessing was given to Paul in a vision. God assured Paul that there were "many in this city who are my people" (18:10). The theological foundation of Paul's evangelistic success is summarized in that vision. It is what undergirds the whole of church growth in the book of Acts. The divine blessing of growth is the foundation upon which Paul served as God's witness. Paul ministered with the confidence that the hearts of God's people would be opened.

Theological disciplines, such as Church Growth, apologetics or preaching, must function within the covenant expectation of

God's blessing. These disciplines ought to be pursued, but they must never supplant the proclamation of the Word nor puff themselves up in their righteousness. We must pursue these disciplines and skills under the authority of the Word of God and with the recognition that these are mere feeble human efforts. They will produce fruit only under God's covenant blessings. They do not possess the power within themselves to achieve these blessings or produce their desired fruit.

Paul's Theological Reflection

It is not surprising that we find in Paul a didactic theological application which is complementary to Luke's theological narrative as I have just explained it. In Colossians 1:6 Paul uses *auvxavnw* to describe the spread of the gospel into the whole world. But instead of conjoining *plhQuvnm* with *auvxavnw* as Luke and the LXX do, Paul joins *karpoforevw* (bearing fruit) with *auvxavnw*. Paul uses a different term, but his meaning is the same as Luke's. The gospel is bearing fruit and multiplying disciples in the whole world. Paul and Luke have a corresponding vision and analysis of the growing Christian movement. In fact, they share the same theological understanding of how this movement grows.

1 Corinthians 3 is the text which explicitly addresses this theological understanding. It is a text occasioned by sectarian divisions within the Corinthian church. Apparently these divisions exalted one minister of God over another, or thought one minister as more important or impressive than another (1 Cor. 3:4-5). This produced jealousy and boasting (1 Cor. 3:3,21). It reminds me of the kind of competition and tension that exists within various theological disciplines, such as apologetics, church growth and preaching. Or better, the kind of tension that exists between competing evangelistic, apologetic or homiletical methods. Paul, however, clarifies what is important.

Apollos and Paul are servants of God working for the same purpose in the same field (1 Cor. 3:8-9). Boasting does not belong to either one, but to God alone. Paul planted the seed and Apollos watered the crops, but it was God who gave the in-

crease. Neither Paul nor Apollos, or any servant or God, can claim credit for the growth of the kingdom.

Paul cautions us against arrogance and worldly wisdom in the service of the kingdom. He quotes Job 5:13 as a warning against arrogance since God will catch “the wise in their craftiness” (1 Cor. 3:19). And he quotes Psalm 94:11 as a warning against those who put their emphasis on their own wisdom since human wisdom is futile (1 Cor. 3:20). Within our theological disciplines, whether it is pastoral counseling, apologetics, homiletics or church growth, we easily fall prey to our own wisdom and give credit to our programs, rationale and techniques. We boast in our leaders, preachers and methods. Paul’s rejection of boasting is as relevant to twentieth century evangelicalism and scholarship as it was to the Corinthian church.

Fundamentally what God seeks in his servants is not human wisdom, secularly legitimated techniques or insurmountable arguments that blow away our opponents. What God seeks is faithfulness. Paul is not concerned about what kind of commendation he will receive from others or how successful his ministry will be, but he desires preeminently to be faithful to the task God has given him (1 Cor. 4:1-3). Paul will continue to plant and water; he will leave the increase to God. Or, to use my earlier language, Paul will be God’s human witness and fully exploit the tools that are available to him, but success, growth and increase are the work of God. They are his covenant blessings. Only as we embrace this theological presupposition will we escape a competitive spirit, boasting and reliance on human techniques.

Conclusion

If we accept the theological foundation that only God gives the increase and growth in a church, then clearly the most important tool of church growth is prayer. We must ask for God’s blessing and expect those blessings as we are faithful to the task given to us. Prayer becomes the centerpiece of evangelism. It is not the right technique, the right words, the salesmanship of the evangelist, but it is God who works through us to give the increase. A growing church is one which has been blessed by

God—God has given his grace to that believing community (Acts 11:22-23). Consequently, a church committed to revival, committed to growth, must fundamentally and foundationally be a praying church. We see this throughout the book of Acts (e.g., 4:23-31; 13:3) and in the letters of Paul (e.g., 2 Thess. 3:1; Col 4:3). Church growth is a divine blessing, not a human achievement. Church growth is a divine act, and as Hemphill states, “If you want to see your church grow, teach your church to pray.”²⁷

Nevertheless, we are called to be faithful in our task of planting and watering. This faithfulness carries two senses. First, it means we are to be faithful in the sense that we actually function as witnesses in the world, that we are actually engaged in the task of planting and watering. We are not called to passivity, but to active engagement with the world. We are called to go and preach. In Paul’s second missionary journey we see Paul’s use of pragmatic reason, rational argumentation and skilled rhetoric. These are the tools that are available to us, including sound sociological insights, effective communication techniques and sound rational arguments. Consequently, let us consider the sociological, pedagogical, and psychological dynamics of human persons when we organize small groups or bible classes. Let us explore the value and the use of the kalam cosmological argument in light of Big Bang cosmology. Let us give attention to different techniques and methods of preaching from inductive to narrative models. These are tools: they are gifts. Let us not bury them. We would be unfaithful servants if we did not use them.

However, a second sense of faithfulness relates to the manner in which we carry out this task. The methods, techniques, content and attitudes of the witnesses must be consistent with the gospel message. We are to act and speak as people who have been “approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel” (1 Thess. 2:4). All techniques, methods and argumentation must be submitted to the Word of God and to the theological presupposition that only God can boast in the use and effectiveness of these tools. Church growth, if it comes at all, is a by-product of faithfulness before God. Growth without faithfulness is secular manipulation, but growth through faithfulness is God’s blessing.

However, as in the days of Noah, Jeremiah and Paul at Athens, faithfulness does not translate into automatic growth. Growth as blessing does not arise out of faithfulness in some mechanistic way or else we could claim our faithfulness as the reason or merit of the church's growth. We could boast that our faithfulness brought about growth. Rather, growth is always a matter of God's sovereign blessing to his faithful people according to his own purpose and will.

We as God's servants ought to fully exploit the tools and gifts God has given us, but we must always remember that they are secondary to God's blessing and grace lest arrogance rear its ugly head. We carry out our task faithfully, and we leave the increase to God. It reminds me of the old line, "pray as if everything depended on God, and work as if everything depended on you." I want to temper both ends of that saying with a measure of balance, but it expresses the two sides of the tension between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. The covenant community must seek to be faithful, prayerful and missionary in character. As we plant and water, God will be faithful and he will pour out his spiritual blessings on the covenant community. As we pray and work, God will give whatever increase he desires and we will praise him for it.

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NOTES

1. Carl Holladay, "Church Growth in the New Testament," *Restora-*

tion Quarterly 26.2 (1983), 89.

2. *Ibid.*, 98.

3. See any of the standard introductions for the diversity of Luke's purposes, especially D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), pp. 194-99

4. Carson, et. al., 182-85, gives a structural significance to these five summaries

5. Jacob Jervell, *Luke and the People of God: A New Look at Luke-Acts* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1972); Eric Franklin, *Christ the Lord. A Study in the Purpose and Theology of Luke-Acts* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975); Willem A. VanGermeren, "The Spirit of Restoration," *Westminster Theological Journal* 50 (Spring 1988), 81-102; I. Howard Marshall, "The Significance of Pentecost," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 30 (1977), 347-69 and David L. Tiede, "The Exaltation of Jesus and the Restoration of Israel in Acts 1," *Harvard Theological Review* 79 (1986), 278-86

5. Jacob Jervell, *Luke and the People of God: A New Look at Luke-Acts* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1972); Eric Franklin, *Christ the Lord. A Study in the Purpose and Theology of Luke-Acts* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975); Willem A. VanGermeren, "The Spirit of Restoration," *Westminster Theological Journal* 50 (Spring 1988), 81-102; I. Howard Marshall, "The Significance of Pentecost," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 30 (1977), 347-69 and David L. Tiede, "The Exaltation of Jesus and the Restoration of Israel in Acts 1," *Harvard Theological Review* 79 (1986), 278-86

6. H. Flender, *St. Luke: Theologian of Redemptive History* (London: S.P.C.K., 1967); H. Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982); and I. Howard Marshall, *Luke: Historian and Theologian* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971).

7. See, for example, the studies by G.J. Steyn, "Die manifestering van Septuaginta-invloed in die Sondergut-Lukas," *Hervormde Teologiese Studien* 45 (1989), 864-73 and "Intertextual Similarities between Septuagint Pretexts and Luke's Gospel," *Neotestamentica* 24 (1990), 229-49.

8. James A. Sanders, "Isaiah in Luke," *Interpretation* 36 (1982), 146

9. This is the thesis of Stanley Grenz's, *recent Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 30-31.

10. Acts 19:20, however, adjusts the terminology from *auvcavnw*

kai plhQuvnuw to auvcavnw kai i'scnvw. This switch intends to have the same impact or meaning, but the terms are changed in order to connect it explicitly with the context. In Acts 19:16 the term i'sxnvw is used to describe the overpowering activity of the demon who pursued the seven sons of Sceva. Luke changed the Septuagintal terminology in Acts 19:20 in order to emphasize the power of the gospel. This is supported by the fact that the LXX has no occurrence of auxxavnw kai i'sxnvw. It was Luke's unique expression in the light of the context. Yet it fits into the pattern of "be fruitful and multiply."

11. One qualification is necessary. In the context of Acts this growth is attributed to the church, as a whole, and does not necessarily reflect the numerical growth of a particular local congregation. It is the kingdom which is expanding and increasing in number. Consequently, this does not mean that local congregations which do not grow numerically are by that fact rendered unfaithful. Rather, God's promise is that his church as a whole, the kingdom of God, will increasingly "be fruitful and multiply." It is within the realm of biblical theology that a local congregation may not numerically increase though it is faithful to its call from God (e.g., the church at Philadelphia in Rev. 3:7-13).

12. Holladay, p. 85, note 11.

13. D. A. McGavran & W. C. Arn, *Ten Steps for Church Growth* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 24.

14. Ken Hemphill, *The Antioch Effect: 8 Characteristics of Highly Effective Churches* (Nashville: Broadmen, 1994), 10.

15. John M. Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God: An Introduction* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Pub. Co., 1994).

16. Karl Barth, *Homiletics*, translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Donald E. Daniels (Louisville, Ky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), p. 46.

17. *Ibid.*, 117-118.

18. *Ibid.*, 44.

19. *Ibid.*, 94-95.

20. Harry Emerson Fosdick, "What is the Matter with Preaching?," *Harpers Monthly Magazine* 157 (July 1928), 133-41.

21. William H. Willimon, *Peculiar Speech: Preaching to the Baptized* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992) and *The Intrusive Word: Preaching to the Unbaptized* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

22. *Intrusive Word*, pp. 22-24.

23. *Peculiar Speech*, pp. 49-53.

24. See for example the recent work of J. Daryl Charles, "Engaging

the (Neo)Pagan Mind: Paul's Encounter with Athenian Culture as a Model for Cultural Apologetics," *Trinity Journal* 16 (Spring 1995), 47-62.

25. Ibid., pp. 52-60.

26. H. Flender, *St. Luke: Theologian of Redemptive History* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967), 71-72.

27. Hemphill, p.27.