



CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	7
Introduction	9
1 Expository Exploration	11
2 Evangelism	21
3 Edification	29
4 Education	37
5 Elimination	45
6 Enthusiasm	55
7 Eldership	63
8 Effort	71
9 Evangelists	79
10 Encouragement	89
11 Emulation	99
12 Expectation	107
13 Epilogue	115
Additional Resources	119
End Notes	121







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INTRODUCTION

- “And all the more believers in the Lord, multitudes of men and women, were constantly added to their number” (Acts 5:14).
- “The word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase in Jerusalem” (Acts 6:7).
- “Then had the churches rest throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria, and were edified; and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, were multiplied” (Acts 9:31).
- “And considerable numbers were brought to the Lord” (Acts 11:24).

There were periods of relief from distress and persecution for the early church (Acts 2:47; 9:31). There were intense periods of struggle, trial, and persecution (Acts 8:1; 9:1–2; 11:19; 12:1–3). In these different circumstances, there was one constant: the church grew! How it grew is of great interest to those of us in the Lord’s church today, for every individual and congregation must desire to grow! Numerical growth rarely happens accidentally. Occasionally, a church is the beneficiary of member transfers—Christians relocating, for example. But spiritual growth never happens accidentally. No Christian will ever draw nearer to Christ without making the effort to do so. In the absence of prayer, Bible study, fruit bearing, and active involvement in the works outlined by the Lord in the Bible, members of the church wither and die. In His wrath, God cuts off such people from His fellowship (John 15:2–4).



Every member of the local church is either working for or against her growth. An unfaithful member may argue that he is completely uninvolved, so he cannot be working against the growth of the church. The inactive member—often identified as a “pew sitter,” the “Sunday morning only” member, or the “sporadic”—is possibly the greatest deterrent to growth within the congregation. The openly immoral, rebellious Christian leaves no question as to his loyalty. The active, faithful, and godly Christian makes a clear impression as to who his first love is too (cf. Revelation 2:4). The “in betweener,” trying to live part time for Satan and part time for the Savior, is the devil’s best friend. The uncommitted and those who carry an “I couldn’t care less” attitude unravel the fiber that makes for church growth and development.

How wonderful the church would be if each member worked in such a way as to leave behind the spiritual legacy of Stephanas’ household, of whom it is said, “It is the firstfruits of Achaia . . . they have addicted themselves to the ministry of the saints” (1 Corinthians 16:15 KJV). The question of relevance is, “Are you addicted to the work of the local church?” How can *you* build up the church of which you are a member? The goal of this book is to build a desire within every Christian member to be both a cause and a contributor to the growth of the local church. To that end, we begin.



CHAPTER ONE

Expository Exploration

Where do we begin our study of the growth of the Lord's church? In the Bible, in those passages that deal directly with its growth. From the very beginning the church was designed to be a living and thriving institution—a growing one. The Bible reveals at least three distinct phases of church growth: the church in prophecy, the church in preparation, and the church in fact. Consider these phases individually.



The Church in Prophecy



Many of the messianic prophecies in the Old Testament are concerned with the fact and the means of establishing God's kingdom. Prophetic passages such as Isaiah 22:2; 27:13; 56:7; and 66:20–24 probably refer to the church. Certainly Isaiah 9:6–7 and Micah 4:1–3 do. However, Isaiah 2:1–4 and Daniel 2:36–44 seem to capture the essence of all Old Testament prophecy concerning the coming church. While God intended these passages to prepare His people for the Christian Age, most of the Jews remained spiritually blind, deaf, and ignorant of their meaning (Matthew 13:13).

Here is Isaiah's description of a coming spiritual city, given about seven hundred years before the event occurred:

The word which Isaiah the son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. Now it will come about that in





the last days the mountain of the house of the Lord will be established as the chief of the mountains, and will be raised above the hills; and all the nations will stream to it. And many peoples will come and say, “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that He may teach us concerning His ways and that we may walk in His paths.” For the law will go forth from Zion and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. And He will judge between the nations, and will render decisions for many peoples; and they will hammer their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not lift up sword against nation, and never again will they learn war (Isaiah 2:1–4).

In this brief passage Isaiah sets forth some important characteristics of the coming kingdom:

- *Establishment* (v. 2). The kingdom will not continue only in the mind of God. It will have an earthly presence “in the last days”; that is, at some time after Isaiah’s prophecy.
- *Exaltation* (v. 2). The kingdom will “be raised above the hills.” Since it is to be the “house of the Lord,”¹ it has to be of the highest quality, an outstanding, notable institution, having no peers among earthly kingdoms.
- *Expansion* (vv. 2–3). The citizens of the kingdom will be from among all nations. Contrasted with the covenant from which other nations were estranged, the covenant under which Isaiah lived (Ephesians 2:12), this coming house is for all those of every race.

1. “House of the Lord,” does not refer to a literal physical structure or edifice. It is a figurative reference to the household or family of God (cf. 1 Timothy 3:15). Thus, in mind here is the totality of the church—from its Originator and Purchaser to those who gain entrance therein according to predetermined conditions.





- *Excitement (v. 3).* Not only will people of all nationalities and cultures want to be citizens of the prophesied kingdom, they will also want others to be a part of it. They will invite others to come into this house. No, the coming kingdom will not be titillating to the senses or appealing to fleshly appetites. The excitement is going to be genuine, built upon hope for the future and peace in the present.
- *Evangelism (v. 3).* Citizens will encourage others to join with them in entering and serving God in this house. Isaiah's words imply that others will be called as co-laborers in this great house of the Lord. That citizens will not invite others into the house is not even considered.
- *Education (v. 3).* Within the auspices of this house, the Lord will "teach . . . concerning His ways . . . that we may walk in His paths." This house is going to be governed by His teachings (John 12:47–48; Matthew 17:5). Citizens will be expected to "grow in the grace and knowledge of . . . Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 3:18).
- *Administrator (v. 4).* The Lord will be the judge and the lawgiver; He will "render decisions for many people." He is going to be the head of the new kingdom (Ephesians 1:22–23).
- *Influence (v. 4).* Finally, the kingdom of Isaiah's vision will initiate change. The influence of the Lord and His house will transform human lives. It will turn around the hearts of men once set on iniquity. It will bring peace with God to all who flow into it (Romans 5:1), but it will result in the reconciliation of those at odds with one another (Matthew 5:23–24). The church brings together people of



diverse backgrounds, including those who were enemies before their conversion. So on the basis of the word of the Lord, this coming house will bring harmonious, mutual acceptance.

A New Kingdom Foretold

While Daniel was in captivity, God gave him the ability to interpret dreams and visions. That is the background of Daniel 2:36–44, which tells us of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream in which he saw a great statue. According to Daniel’s interpretation, the king foresaw four successive empires: Babylon, Medo-Persian, Greek, and Roman. In the days of the Roman Empire, another unusual kingdom that will outshine all others was to be set up.

Daniel saw God as the architect and builder of that spiritual kingdom (Matthew 16:17–19; Colossians 4:11; 1 Thessalonians 2:12). Since God wanted this kingdom to exist, He effected its establishment. He put His character and seal upon it, distinguishing it from every rival (Matthew 15:13).

By virtue of its divine origin, that new kingdom was to be indestructible; it would stand forever. God would give the blueprints required to establish local organizations of that spiritual kingdom anywhere in the world.

It Shall Stand

That kingdom was established on earth about five hundred years after Daniel’s prophecy. Now, two millennia after its establishment, that kingdom still stands, and it will stand until Jesus hands it over to His Father at the end (1 Corinthians 15:24).

The new kingdom is powerful. Again, having the foundational attribute of divine involvement in its formation, this spiritual kingdom is unparalleled in power. Its mes-





sage, the gospel, is the power of God to salvation (Romans 1:16). Its central act, the cross, provides that power (1 Corinthians 1:18). Its eternal hope, the resurrection of Christ, also provides power for salvation (Philippians 3:10). The rock of God's all-encompassing power serves as the immutable foundation for the gospel, the cross, and the resurrection. Note David's praise to God:

Blessed are You, O Lord God of Israel our father, forever and ever. Yours, O Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, indeed everything that is in the heavens and the earth; Yours is the dominion, O Lord, and You exalt Yourself as head over all (1 Chronicles 29:10–11).

David's majestic language had been rehearsed by God's people for centuries, so the Jews should have been looking for the new house described by Isaiah. They should have been readying themselves for the new kingdom described by Daniel. The few who were ready listened attentively to the teachings of John, an eccentric wilderness man, and his amazing cousin Jesus. Eventually, they began to see Jesus as the person of prophecy. Their faith was forged by hearing the word of God (Romans 10:17).

The Church Explained (Parables)

Nicodemus told Jesus: "Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him" (John 3:2). Nicodemus, along with many others, accepted Jesus' teaching because of the miracles. The multitudes who heard Him deliver the *Sermon on the Mount* "were amazed at His teaching; for He was teaching them as one having authority, and not as their scribes" (Matthew 7:28–29). They accepted His teaching because of its confidence and conviction. Yet even His enemies were confounded, if not



persuaded, by His parables. He also silenced them with His teaching (Matthew 22:46).

All these things Jesus spoke to the crowds in parables, and He did not speak to them without a parable. This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet: “I will open My mouth in parables; I will utter things hidden since the foundation of the world” (Matthew 13:34–35).

Jesus used the parables to teach spiritual truths, many of which before were locked away in the mind of God, unrevealed. Jesus used the parables persistently, telling stories to illustrate powerful spiritual truths. One of His favorite subjects was that spoken before by Daniel. About a dozen of the recorded parables begin with Jesus saying, “The kingdom of heaven is like . . .” So He identified with parables His soon-to-come institution, its likenesses and its functions (cf. Mark 1:15).

Here are some of the characteristics of that promised kingdom:

- Will be comprised of people with at least three types of hearts (Matthew 13:19–23).
- Will encounter opposition, both from without and within (Matthew 13:24–30, 37–40).
- Will experience tremendous growth (Matthew 13:31–32).
- Will wield great influence upon the world (Matthew 13:33).
- Will be of great value (Matthew 13:44).
- Will be precious (Matthew 13:45–46).
- Will gather every kind (Matthew 13:47–50).
- Will demonstrate greatness through its service (Matthew 20:25–28).





- Will demand individual accountability for emulating the compassion and forgiveness they each had received (Matthew 18:23–35).
- Will always be open, so long as opportunity prevails (Matthew 20:1–16).
- Will be harmed by indifference and lack of cooperation (Matthew 22:1–14).

The basic thrust of the kingdom parables is to depict an institution with tremendous life-changing potential. Not only does the kingdom change those who are converted, but it also offers hope and forgiveness to a lost world. That kingdom changed the ancient world, and it has changed forever the lives of countless people. Jesus repeatedly sought to explain to His students the purpose and nature of the coming church. He also warned about the enemies of the kingdom—the devil, the world, the hypocrite, the apathetic, the uncommitted, the worldly, and the unforgiving. He warned about the harm to come from citizens not serving faithfully in the kingdom. Through His tenure as a teacher among men, Jesus set the stage for what the church came to be.

The Church Established (Pentecost Forward)

Many have shown that the teachings and parables of Christ make *kingdom* and *church* synonymous terms in most New Testament references (Matthew 16:18–19). At the time of Christ's ministry, the kingdom was "at hand" (Mark 1:15). It was to come with power in the lifetime of many of Jesus' hearers (Mark 9:1). Following His death, burial, and resurrection Jesus spent much time teaching His disciples about the kingdom of heaven (Acts 1:3). Soon after His ascension, while the apostles were still in Jerusalem, the power came upon them—the power He had promised (Acts 1:8; 2:1–4). Beginning on Pente-



cost, the apostles began to preach the things pertaining to the kingdom of God (Acts 2:14–40; 8:12; 14:22; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23). Church growth resulted! What Daniel foresaw, Peter and the apostles fulfilled (Acts 2). The conversion of about three thousand honest Jews resulted from the first gospel sermon (Acts 2:41). God placed them in the *ekklesia*, that collection of called-out people.

From Pentecost forward, that organized, unified group held together by the doctrine of Christ as revealed to His prophetic writers and teachers (2 Thessalonians 2:15; 1 Corinthians 2:12–16), continued to build “on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord” (Ephesians 2:20–21). A thorough study of the short epistle to the Ephesians clearly demonstrates that the object of Paul’s discussion is the church. The members of the church were given marching orders through the epistles. They were called to live holy, distinct lives (James 1:27), to shed light into the spiritual darkness of those lost in sin (1 Peter 2:9), to meet needs (Galatians 6:10; James 1:27), to bear the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22–23), and to be a general influence for good wherever they were by living out the teachings of Christ (Matthew 5:13–16).

Growth Was Not Automatic

Even a casual reading of the New Testament reveals that church growth did not automatically occur. It was hindered by sin and beset by eventual decline. The church in Ephesus started strongly, but that strength soon began to fade (Acts 18:19; 20:17–31; 1 Timothy 1:3; Revelation 2:1–7). Congregations in Corinth, Laodicea, Galatia, and other places were distracted from their mission by various sins (1 Corinthians 1:10; Revelation 3:14–17;



Galatians 1:6–9; 3:1). Persecution tempted Christians to withdraw their support from the church's mission.

Yet the evidence of Acts indicates congregations often did enact the gospel in their lives (Acts 2:41; 4:4; 6:1, 7; 9:31; 11:21; 16:5). Consequently, the church grew. Every Bible student knows growth was God's intention, even before the establishment of the church. God wanted His people to reach out to all men everywhere (Acts 2:39–40; 10:34–35; 17:30–31; 1 Timothy 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9). Epistolary writings urged the church to keep growing and reaching out to others (Colossians 1:23; 2 Peter 3:18; 2 Timothy 2:2; Jude 22–23). The congregations addressed, to varying degrees, responded to the challenge. Churches like Jerusalem grew early. Churches like Antioch soon soared in their growth and ability to function as fully mature, effective congregations (Acts 11:23–26; 14:26). In their success, they are a model for modern churches of Christ, as present-day Christians strive to build up the local church.

The *Great Commission* of Jesus has never been rescinded (Mark 16:15–16). The functions of the church have always been to reach the lost, edify the members, oppose Satan, and exercise vigilance over the flock. Having left us records of the acts of early churches, the New Testament provides models of God's desire for church growth.



QUESTIONS FOR THOUGHT

1. How do you account for the growth of the first-century church in both favorable and unfavorable circumstances?
2. Describe the average first-century church member in detail, giving circumstances, backgrounds, and level of involvement in the church.
3. Read Isaiah 2:1–4 and list some surprising prophecies about the church. How did God intend for the church to relate to His overall plan for man?
4. In the kingdom passages of the Gospels, Jesus referenced not only the primacy of God's will in our lives but also the importance of the coming church. List some ways to put God's will first in our lives, and show how they will help the church to grow.
5. Relate an example of public sin in the church. How did the church deal with it? Where are New Testament examples of churches ignoring sin? What has always been the result of dealing scripturally with sin?





CHAPTER TWO

Evangelism

Swelling Versus Growing

One of the flaws of the denominational approach to church growth is the coronation of culture and individual desire as supreme above all else, including the Bible. And our brethren are not innocent in this culture worship. As a result of non-demanding, easy-listening preaching, sensually appealing worship, and offense-free teaching curriculums regarding daily living and denominationalism, congregations sometimes swell in number. Then after a few years, the thrill of worldly religion often wears off. Family by family, the shallow and uncommitted, sometimes in droves, return to what they already had before they became a part of the new and hollow religion.

Yet, Christ's suffering and death on the cross proved it is vital to focus on people (Hebrews 13:12). Almost everyone we meet in our daily routine is lost (Matthew 7:13). And we Christians have the lifeline the world so desperately, if unwittingly, needs! God intended that the saving gospel message be told by the apostles to all whom they contacted, and then that it be further spread throughout the world by those converted as a result (2 Timothy 2:2). The faithful men to be entrusted with the gospel were individual members of local churches.

Needed—Good News!

The gospel is good news in a world sorely in need of good news. A husband and wife sat at the table reading





the morning paper when the wife moaned, “Everything I’m reading is violence, immorality, deception, and graft!” The husband, planning to console his wife about the reality of society, looked down at his section of the paper and says, “But, sweetheart, I have the front section. Where are you reading about all these devastating things?” She said, “The comic strips!”

Well, maybe that is an exaggeration, but sin is bad news. It is a weight (Hebrews 12:1), a major cause of heartache and grief (Psalm 31:10), and a destroyer and separator (Ecclesiastes 9:18; Isaiah 59:1–2). The gospel is the remedy for all these spiritual ailments; the world needs an antidote for the devil’s poison (1 Peter 5:8).

How Evangelism Builds the Local Church

- *Evangelism is the obedient response to the Great Commission.* The mandates (commands) of the *Great Commission* in Mark 16:15 and Matthew 28:19–20 are to preach and make disciples. Obviously, no one can be—or should they be—forced to accept the good news; the reception to the gospel is both individual and voluntary (Mark 8:34). Yet, the Lord’s church should always be doing what God has commanded. Preaching from the pulpit is the Lord’s plan for propagating truth in the worship assembly (Acts 2:42; 20:7; 1 Corinthians 1:21). However, the New Testament also reveals individual Christians communicating the gospel of Christ in their daily activities with friends and business associates (Acts 8:4; 11:19; 15:35; Titus 1:3).
- Making disciples, unlike preaching, is a process rather than a single act. By engaging in ongoing studies with prospects—candidates for conversion—Christians are working toward fulfilling the



second part of the *Great Commission*. If conversion takes place, a part of evangelizing remains to be done. Matthew 28:20 teaches the necessity of continuing the work by maturing new Christians through further teaching of the whole counsel of God. The objective is stated clearly by passages such as 1 Peter 2:1–2 and Hebrews 5:12–14.

- *Evangelism builds enthusiasm.* Congregations are edified through evangelism. There is an unmistakable air of enthusiasm breathed in by the local church when it is actively participating in soul winning. Hope grows within Christians as they see the church becoming a greater force for good in the community. Community members begin to have a greater awareness of the Lord's church. Positive response to the gospel message of Christ by lost souls reaffirms the faith of those who have already obeyed Christ. Zeal within the local church is contagious (2 Corinthians 9:2). No zeal pleases God more than that insatiable desire to continue to do His will (Titus 2:14). Enthusiasm inevitably begets more enthusiasm. More souls are reached and the local church is edified spiritually and numerically!
- *Evangelism is an active way to fight Satan.* Satan is every Christian's adversary (1 Peter 5:8). He is the enemy of every soul, for he seeks to separate everyone from Christ and the hope of heaven (Hebrews 2:14; Revelation 12:9). No positive trait portrays him. He is completely wicked and supports everything vile, depraved, perverted, and unwholesome. He must be combated. Evangelism is God's plan to fight him, and fight him we must! (Ephesians 6:10–20). Every soul won to Christ threatens Satan's domain. Every soul nurtured and admon-



ished, who subsequently dies in a saved condition, delivers a mighty blow against the father of lies.

- *Evangelism is a basic building block of the local church.* If the church is not engaged in soul winning, the lost die without the hope, joy, and peace that attends the Christian life. Without soul winning, the local church fails to obey God. Without soul winning, the community is deprived of a living, active, and faithful congregation of the New Testament church. Remember the words of Jesus: “Do you not say, “There are yet four months, and then comes the harvest”? Behold, I say to you, lift up your eyes, and look on the fields, that they are white for harvest” (John 4:35).

CONVERSION²

Except a man be born again,
In heaven's kingdom he cannot stand.
Until one puts away all of his sin,
He has no hope for the heavenly land.

Yes by water, but by water, any
Must submit in faithful obedience
To erase the defilement faced by the many
Who refuse God's gracious recompense.

By incorruptible seed one is spiritually reborn
From death of his spirit to new life.
The ever abiding Word one cannot scorn
Nor refuse the Lord's church, Christ's dear wife.

So, come, freely come to the blood of the Lord
For by the gospel He calls you today . . .
And spotless you'll be as His grace He'll afford
Change your course by His Son, the true Way!

2. All poems, unless otherwise noted, are written by the author, Neal Pollard.



MAKING IT PRACTICAL

Soul winning is often as simple as broaching the subject with a friend or even a casual acquaintance. A preacher once remarked to a bank teller as he made his deposit: "I have been praying to God for an opportunity to study the Bible with someone. Would you be willing to study?" The woman tearfully replied, "I have been praying for someone to help me understand the Bible better."

This true story may illustrate the providence of God through our obedience to the *Great Commission*. It also serves as a warning. Many Christians are letting golden opportunities pass that could result in saved souls. We often vaguely pray for opportunities to reach the lost and then turn a blind eye to His answer.

Here are some suggestions for making evangelism practical:

- *Have an ongoing training course in evangelism.* Teach a variety of methods, such as *Fishers of Men*, *Open Bible Study*, *Jule Miller Video Series*, Robert Oglesby's *One Story*, and the like. Individual Christians vary in their choices of methods according to their personality and knowledge. In a similar way, individual prospects respond differently to different approaches. The average person nowadays knows less about the Bible than the average person of the previous generation did. Some students will be able to read and comprehend well, while others will not have good literacy skills. Teacher preference and prospect interest determine the approach we take and the results that follow.
- *Make evangelism a congregational emphasis.* Encourage the preacher to deliver sermons that instruct and motivate Christians to involve themselves daily in the work of the *Great Commission*.



Encourage the elders to stand regularly before the congregation and pray for the lost and for success in soul winning.

- Conduct soul-saving campaigns in the community. While cold-contact studies are not as fruitful as warm-contact studies, they still serve several purposes. When Christians communicate the gospel to anyone in the proper spirit, that communication leads the teacher to greater maturity and an increased desire to do God's work. Honest souls, many of whom are cold contacts, are in your community searching for truth. Campaigns are tantamount to free advertising; they demonstrate to the community that the church is not only present but that it is also active and committed.
- *Focus on leading souls to Christ.* Encourage the congregation to set quarterly goals for conversions. Even if the target number is enthusiastically high, it will likely lead a congregation to exceed its normal number of baptisms. A tangible figure often serves as a beacon and causes the church to become goal oriented.
- *Involve one-talent Christians in evangelism.* Think of all the peripheral needs of a Bible study: babysitters for prospects or teachers engaged in studies, assemblies to pray for the studies in progress, workers to hang tracts and information about the church on doors, Christians to invite these dear, lost ones into their homes for meals or deserts, record keepers to track the studies and their progress, and many more.
- *Use experts to motivate the church.* Invite personal evangelists—experts in sound, biblical, and proven



church growth methods—to teach and train the congregation in more effective ways of evangelism. That investment will pay great dividends. Speakers not known to the congregation will generate special interest, bring fresh ideas, and motivate reluctant Christians in a manner that local talent will not.

QUESTIONS FOR THOUGHT

1. How does embracing denominationalism or considering the church of Christ a denomination hinder evangelism?
2. What are some of the most difficult barriers to overcome in order to evangelize effectively? What are some temptations we face when attempting to win souls?
3. What are the results of evangelism being left to only a few—elders, preachers, or one or two “interested members”? What can be done to involve more members in soul winning?
4. In addition to setting up and conducting studies, what are some ways Christians can be involved in the soul-winning process.
5. Consider the following premise: Satan rejoices when churches have no interest in soul winning. Is it true or false? Defend your answer.







CHAPTER THREE

Edification

A Byproduct of Spiritual Health

Spoken to the Rome church by the inspired Paul, written to church members by a church member about church members, and consequently for every Christian today, Romans 14:19 says, “So then we pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another.” Edifying—building up—the church has always been a primary principle with God (1 Corinthians 14:12). Edification is a natural byproduct of a spiritually healthy, obedient congregation (Ephesians 4:11–12).

If the answer to maintaining unity and love within a congregation were reduced to one word, perhaps the word would be *edify*. By definition, *edify* means “to promote growth in Christian wisdom, affection, grace, virtue, holiness, blessedness.” Edification is actually living out the *Golden Rule* as we deal with our spiritual family (Matthew 7:12). Imitating the behavior of Christ should compel us, His disciples, to be concerned deeply with the spiritual welfare of other saints and motivate us to encourage their spiritual growth.

The Bible teaches that the church grows by means of edification. From passages that deal with church growth, we can learn how we can contribute to the spiritual growth of other Christians. Let’s examine how edification is achieved through worship, preaching, and association.





Edification through Worship

Hebrews 10:25 explicitly addresses the subject of mandatory regular assemblies for Christians. In that verse, the most important word may be *but*. That little conjunction contrasts the discouraging effect of willfully forsaking brethren with the constructive impact made by faithful attendees. The first half of the verse forbids forsaking the assembly. The second half of the verse positively admonishes Christians to be “exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching” (KJV). *Exhort* simply means “to encourage and entreat,” and that exhortation is to be done in view of a specific day—not Sunday, as is sometimes supposed, but rather the day of judgment. (The six verses that follow substantiate that fact.) So every time a Christian chooses to obey God by assembling with the saints, he also engages in the vital function of edification; he encourages fellow Christians in their commitment to live for Jesus.

While every aspect of worship is to strengthen the worshiper’s relationship with God, it also serves to edify others. For example, the individual Christian’s singing is for the purpose of praising God, but it is also for “teaching and admonishing one another” (Colossians 3:16). God designed worship for us to build up one another—to edify the church.

Edification through Preaching

Preachers are to edify the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:11–12). To receive edification from the pulpit, Christians must be present for the preaching, listen attentively, and apply the message. For some in the audience, applying the message results in repentance—resolving to do what they have neglected and resolving to abstain from overt sins. For others it means being encouraged and reassured in the pursuit of God’s will. Yet God knew



Christians needed to be reminded often of the temporary nature of this life and the eternal nature of the next. He chose to present that message through preaching. Paul encouraged a young preacher not to “give heed to fables and endless genealogies, which minister questions, rather than godly edifying which is in faith: so do” (1 Timothy 1:4 KJV). What timeless advice for preachers: Stay away from falsities and stay with the faith! When biblical teachings from a Bible-based pulpit fall on the hearts of faithful hearers, the local church is edified.

Edification through Christian Association

Paul teaches that Christians must avoid evil associations (1 Corinthians 15:33). Why did an inspired apostle teach that? Because God wished to warn Christians that the people and events of daily life impact our thinking and, ultimately, our future—even our eternal future! That is why edification through Christian association is so important to building up the local church. One brother, now a deacon, said that upon his conversion he had to give up his old friends, along with his old habits. His choice was difficult, and in the minds of some, extreme. But it came as a result of his calculating the cost (Luke 14:28). Worldly friends have worldly values. When a person determines to live for Christ, he must sacrifice worldly values, including worldly friends who unduly influence him.

When a Christian’s primary associates are Christians, his godliness and the godliness of those with whom he associates will increase. The Bible says to Christians: “Therefore encourage one another and build up one another” (1 Thessalonians 5:11). Who understands the intimate struggles and temptations of living for Christ better than saints do? Christ-like relations among Christian families benefit the entire congregation (Ephesians



4:16). The best way to begin to build up the faith of fellow-Christians is to get to know them. Is there any room in a congregation for Christian strangers? Absolutely not! Building up our spiritual family is the most important building project of all. The method of such edification is clearly drawn up in the divine blueprints. Christians interested in edifying their brothers and sisters are careful with the words they choose, actions in which they engage, and interests they pursue. Before engaging in an activity, they ask, "How will this impact the church? How will it affect my brothers and sisters? If it harms them or their spirituality, I will never do it." Such an attitude builds up the local church!

THE BOND THAT BINDS

Heartily singing "I love thy kingdom,"
To God we give our solemn word.
We tell Him we've given His children the sum
Of our care, fraternal love all assured.

We zealously try to love one another;
Our heart is for our brother's welfare.
Since the church was bought by our elder Brother,
We try all her burdens to bear.

'Tis easy to love when harmony prevails;
'Tis tougher when we closer become.
Whichever the case, true love never fails;
It bears gently and helps overcome.

Unlovable, true, some brethren may be;
In error some tend to divide.
If a rebuke or a comfort, let everyone see
The motive of love at our side.

With heaven for a home and earth a brief stay,
We press on with God's family, hearts above.
Encouraging the good and forbearing those astray,
Walk as one under Christ's banner of love!