

HOW DOES THE CHURCH GROW?

Jesus' apostle Paul talked about the church growing. For instance, in Ephesians 4:8, Paul wrote that when Jesus ascended back to his heavenly Father he left some gifts on the earth. Paul listed some of the gifts. Jesus gave a few people apostleship, to some he gave the gift to be prophets. Some men were given the gift to be evangelists, some were given the gift of being pastors and some teachers. Paul said these "gifts" were meant to equip the saints so they could minister, and when all the saints are ministering that would result in the "building up of the body of Christ." The body of Christ is His church, says Colossians 1:18. And so Jesus wants his church to be built up. How does the church of Christ grow?

Hello I'm Larry Murdock. I preach for the Gandy church of Christ.

How does the church of Jesus Christ grow? This is a fascinating question. What was it that the apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers have that could cause the church to grow? The answer is taught clearly in the New Testament of Jesus Christ. According to Acts 2:47, Jesus is the final person responsible for the church's growth! That's right! The passage says that Jesus added to the church daily those who were being saved. How does the church grow? The church was growing daily as people were saved daily, because Jesus was adding the saved to His church. Whatever it was that was causing people to be saved, was also causing the growth of the Lord's church.

When we examine the scripture found in Acts 2 we see that the Holy Spirit came upon the apostles of Christ on a day called Pentecost and caused the apostles to "speak in languages as the Spirit gave them utterance." The Holy Spirit was giving the apostles the words they were preaching and the message they were preaching. This phenomenon was predicted by Jesus in a promise that Jesus made to his apostles the night before His crucifixion. Jesus had said, "If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words. And the word that you hear is not mine but the Father's who sent me. These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you." (John 14:23-26 ESV)

Notice the emphasis that Jesus put on his "words." Jesus made a distinction between people who would **keep** his words and those who **would not keep** his words. And the thing that made the difference was the **love** they had for Jesus. Now love is a heart condition. That's right! Love is a human emotion. It is an attitude. On another occasion Jesus was talking about his words. Jesus was talking with a group of Jewish people who had come to believe in him. So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed on him, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." (John 8:31-32 ESV) Jesus' words are true. When people believe Jesus' words they are believing the truth, not a lie. And Jesus said **that truth** makes people free."

Free? Free from what? The Jewish people Jesus was talking to questioned what Jesus meant by that. "They answered him, 'We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, 'You will become free?'" Jesus answered them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin.'" (John 8:33-34 ESV) You see, Jesus was talking about the slavery of sin. Sin is the very thing from which we need to be saved. Jesus' words of truth can make people free from the slavery of sin! That's salvation! Earlier Jesus had asked his closest disciples if they wanted to leave him. Simon Peter answered, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God." (John 6:67-69)

How can the church of Jesus Christ grow? It grows when Jesus adds to the church. Whom does Jesus add? The saved are added to the church. When can a sinner be saved? A sinner can be saved only if he receives and keeps the "words of eternal life"; with the true words of Jesus the sinner can be set free from sin.

The true words of Jesus Christ were first preached by his apostles 50 days after Jesus was raised from the dead. That particular first day of the week was called Pentecost by the Jewish people. The church began to grow that day in the city of Jerusalem. The old prophet Isaiah had predicted that the Lord's "house" or kingdom would be established in Jerusalem and the "word of the Lord" would then go out from Jerusalem. (Isaiah 2:2-3) The word of the Lord is the words of Jesus Christ. Those same words Jesus gave his apostles by the power of the Holy Spirit. Among other things the apostle Peter and the others said, "Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and

Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified." Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" And Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself." And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, "Save yourselves from this crooked generation." So those who [gladly] received his word were baptized, and there were added [to them] that day about three thousand souls." (Acts 2:36-41 ESV) The church was added to. The church grew when Jesus was preached and those who were cut to the heart repented of their sins and were baptized, one at a time, in the name of Jesus Christ and into the forgiveness of their sins. And so these people were saved when they heard the words of Jesus and kept them. "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free." (John 8:32)

There occurs a great change in people when people are added to the church of Christ. The change is that they are now in a saved condition before God. They are no longer in Satan's clutches. They have received the forgiveness of sins. That forgiveness was purchased by the blood of Jesus Christ! And so it is said in Acts 20:28 that the church of God was "purchased with his own blood." But the Scripture describes this great change in even greater detail.

For instance, the apostle Peter describes this salvation from sin as being "ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers." (1 Peter 1:18) Obviously, that phrase "the futile ways of your forefathers" refers to the lifestyle they had once lived. These people had been saved from a lifestyle that was rooted in their history and could only lead to hell. They had been saved from that lifestyle! Furthermore, Peter calls this salvation a "purifying of souls." In verse 22 he wrote, "Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart, since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God...And this word is the good news that was preached to you." (1 Peter 1:22-25) In this text, Peter describes what happens to a person when that person is born again. Remember first that there was a change of lifestyle. That's repentance! Those people were persuaded against continuing in "the futile ways of their forefathers." A light had gone on in their minds. They turned away

from the futile ways! But when were their souls purified? Their souls were purified by their "obedience to the truth." Those people heard the purifying TRUTH of Jesus Christ. When they obeyed it, that is, when they kept Jesus' word, they were set free from their sins. They were saved. Their souls were purified, and now they were ready to live differently according to a pure heart.

Peter identified in this passage the change agent who is responsible for salvation. It is the seed, the imperishable seed. Fleshly seed is perishable. Peter acknowledged this when he wrote, "All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever. And this word is the good news that was preached to you." (1 Peter 1:23-25) The Word of Christ was responsible for the opened eyes, and the purified heart. The Word of Christ was the reason for the longing for a new life.

Jesus' apostle Paul said something very similar in 2 Corinthians 4. Paul wrote, "We have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God." (2 Corinthians 4:2, 3 NIV) Friends, the truthful word of God is responsible for the salvation of people.

Jesus' half-brother James put it this way, "[God] chose to give us birth through the word of truth...." (James 1:18 NIV) How can the church grow? The church grows when people hear, believe and keep the word of truth, the good news of Jesus Christ. As Jesus said, "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." (John 8:32) Friends, there are all kinds of falsehoods in the world. The church cannot grow through deception. The church cannot grow through lies. The church cannot grow from false doctrine. But the only way you can know the truth is by your learning the word of Jesus Christ. That word is found in the New Testament of Jesus Christ. Will you become Jesus' disciple? Jesus said to those who had believed on him, "If you continue in my Word, then you are my disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."

I am praying that you will repent of your sins, confess your faith in Jesus, and allow someone to baptize you into Jesus Christ. The Lord will add you to His church. That's His promise to you! Are you a member of Christ's church?