

RENEWAL AND CHURCH GROWTH

The following two paragraphs from IT DEPENDS ON YOU by Erich F. Voeh-ringer (Muhlenberg Press, Philadelphia) express a popular and influential concept of what the Church ought to be doing. It should be renewing itself. If it does that, God will add thousands or millions to the Church.

To renewalists, effort to add to the Church is suspect. Evangelism is held to be a superficial activity.

The most important thing you can do is to strengthen your own church wherever you are and make it a real bulwark of the Christian faith . . . The life and witness of every Christian counts in the great struggle with the forces of darkness. Going to church on Sunday even when it's raining is a declaration that the church of Christ is important to us and to our community. Attending a youth meeting, even though we don't like it, is an act of witness and a vote for the work of the church. To stand up for what is right in factory, office, or shop is to hold the line or win a victory, be it ever so small, in our sector of the front between Christ and the forces of evil.

To increase production, to battle for brotherhood, to spread the light of learning, to work for public health or safety more vigorously just because we are Christians is what the Church most requires.

To take time every day for prayer, for Bible reading and meditation on the things of God, is to replenish our spiritual strength and thus the strength of our church, because we are the church . . .

These are the basic things that we . . . must do, as a matter of gratitude for what God has done for us in Christ . . . What we need first of all is not great numbers to add to our statistics, or to recoup the lost percentages and catch up with the world population, but to have living cells of Christians in our country and in all parts of the world. The influence of these vitalized Christian cells, and their outbreak to and influence upon the non-Christian masses, will inevitably follow . . . If the leaven is there and if it is alive, God can add millions to the church.

What does church growth theory say to renewal?

We need both great numbers and renewal. Renewal is helped by streams of converted people coming into the church; church growth is helped by streams of renewed people. It is not either or. It is both and. Let us not say, "We need first of all not great numbers." Let us say, "Proclaim Jesus Christ and persuade multitudes in and out of the church to become His disciples and responsible members of His church."

Real renewal issues in a passion to bring others (now outside the Church) into redemptive relationship with Christ. Multitudes of new Christians feeding on the Word, lifted by the fellowship of the Church, and available to the Holy Spirit are the surest way to renewal.

How do we know that the purposes of God must first be filled by renewing us, the "old Christians"? That is not the New Testament way. Had God the Holy Spirit waited till the Jewish Christian community at Jerusalem all by itself broke the barrier to the Gentiles, He would have waited a long time. Instead, the fresh advance of the Christian faith, the new relevancy to the Gentile world was achieved by baptizing hordes of those who in the year 50 A.D. were outside the Church.

Renewal to the New Testament Church did not come by creating cells of Jewish Christians so vitalized, so Christian that they were able to overcome their ethnocentrism and Jewish pride and see that Gentiles (all men) were able to be saved simply by faith in Jesus Christ, rather than by obedience to the law. Renewal came by church growth, by bringing new races into the Church, by multiplying churches around the Mediterranean. When these came in, the universality of the Gospel became a reality. Had Paul devoted himself to arguing with the Judaizers in Jerusalem that the full Gospel, real Christianity, living leaven, demanded that the Judaizers eat with the uncircumcised, he would have been singularly ineffective.

We should not conclude, therefore, in narrow partisan fashion that "renewal is not the first need of the Church, that is expansion." We should conclude that today the great need of the world and the supreme commission of our Lord is simultaneous advance both in discipling and in perfecting, in both church growth and church renewal. Nations must be won. We must demonstrate what being a Christian in this new world in process of creation means. Both must be done simultaneously.

This is no time for static introverted perfecting of the existing Church under the assumption (so often proved false) that once the leaven has really come alive,

it will grow. Neither is this a time for a discipling resolved to disregard other issues of twentieth century life. Both these ways lead to disaster.

Let us then be done with petty criticism of evangelism and church growth. Let us be done with depreciation of renewal. We must have such renewal that multitudes will be willing to die that others know Christ. We must have such church growth that the divine life becomes available to hundreds of millions now out of the Church and thus leads them both to live holy lives and to create a holy society.

- Donald McGavran