

GOD AT WORK IN TIMES OF DRAMATIC CHURCH GROWTH

Isabelo F. Magalit

Dr. Magalit, Manila, Philippines, is the Associate General Secretary of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students in East Asia.

We have heard in this Congress how the church is growing in certain parts of the world — in Korea and Indonesia for instance, and in Brazil and Kenya. We rejoice over what God is doing and the rest of us have much to learn from our brothers and sisters whose churches are growing so quickly.

The most dramatic example of rapid church growth, however, is found in the New Testament. Luke tells us in Acts, chapter two, that the body of believers grew from 120 to 3,120 in one day. That's twenty-six times, or 2,600 per cent, and the figure does not even include those who were won day by day thereafter.

What is the explanation for this remarkable growth? The Holy Spirit coming in great power upon God's people on the day of Pentecost. The "greater works" which the Lord Jesus had promised his followers in John 14 (verse 12) have now been fulfilled. (Incidentally, that promise is for us also.) God himself had set the stage for this great event. Only weeks before, the earthly ministry of Jesus had ended in Jerusalem amid great excitement and he was now the talk of the town. He had not only been tried and crucified but his followers now claimed that he had come back from the dead and had made several personal appearances to them. His tomb was empty! And now, on the day of Pentecost, while Jews from all over the known world gathered in Jerusalem for a religious festival, the Holy Spirit came in power upon his people!

It is God who is at work in times of dramatic church growth. It is God who is at work. Look at the last phrase in our passage, verse 47: "And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved."

Now, numerical growth is not always a measure of true spiritual effectiveness. For instance, I am told that one reason some Indonesians have flocked to the Christian church is the risk of being presumed a Communist if one were neither a Muslim nor a Christian. Again, we are all familiar with the phenomenon we may call "many decisions but few disciples." By lowering the demands of the Gospel we can persuade many more adherents but only end up with a form of nominal Christianity. Then again, in the Philippines we have a fast-growing unitarian sect that is noted for its aggressive and indoctrinating methods. We would hardly ascribe its growth to God at work!

My professor in statistics used to warn us: there are three kinds of liars — simple liars, wicked liars, and then statisticians! Statistics do not always lie, of course. It all depends on the statistician. Who is the statisti-

cian? Who is doing the adding?

"And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved." There is numerical growth which comes because God is at work.

It takes place when the Lord Jesus adds to his church. He saves them first, and then he adds them to his church. Don't miss his double work: he does not add them to his church without saving them first, but neither does he save them without adding them to his church. In both instances, it is the Lord who is at work.

He did this work daily. Every day, the Lord saved people and every day he added them to his church. Church growth in this book of Acts was not an occasional, sporadic, specially organized campaign. It was normal, natural, continuous, and compelling!

And it takes place when the Holy Spirit comes in power upon the people of God. But what does it mean for the Holy Spirit to be present among his people in power? Our passage tells us two things. First there is Spirit-filled preaching, and second there is Spirit-filled community.

Spirit-filled preaching

Let me just list four characteristics of Peter's Spirit-filled preaching. First, Peter's sermon was arresting. He caught the attention of his audience. Second, Peter builds upon the interest and understanding of his listeners. He was aware that he was speaking to Jews. Third, Peter centered his preaching on Christ. The crucified Jesus is now both Lord and Christ, in fulfillment of prophecy. Fourth, Peter clearly set forth the need for decisive response. His hearers must repent and be baptized.

Spirit-filled community

There are also four things that characterized the Spirit-filled community.

Notice first that they were not a loose association with easy membership. They were the company of the committed. Only those who believed the Good News and repented of their sins as signified by being baptized were admitted.

Second, notice the things that preoccupied them: first — apostolic teaching, second — life sharing, and third — common worship.

Teaching by the apostles was not an occasional special event but something they devoted themselves to. When numerical growth does not produce "Bible addicts" it is wise to ask if the Holy Spirit is present in power. Apostolic teaching is a pre-occupation of every Spirit-filled church.

Look also at the quality of their fellowship and life sharing. Goods were communal and people received according to their need. While the particular pattern did not persist, surely the principle is abiding, namely, that all my goods, all my money, my time, my energy, my gifts, are not mine. They belong to God and to the people of God.

Look at the combination of joy and reverence in their worship as they gathered for prayer and the Lord's table. Reverence and joy together can only be produced by the presence of the Holy Spirit in power.

Third, notice the other supernatural evidences of God's presence among them: signs and wonders. I believe that miracles are given by

God primarily to authenticate his messengers (see verse 22). Therefore God's presence among his people is shown not only by spectacular phenomena but also by the unmistakable change in our character as the Holy Spirit produces love, joy, peace, and the rest of his fruit.

Fourth, and finally, notice their reputation with outsiders. They had favor with all the people. There was no question of confusing the church and the world: the church was so distinctive. And yet, we are sure that because the church was so distinctive in its common life, in its worship, and in its witness, it was attractive to outsiders. "And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved."

God grant that we in our churches and Christian fellowships may become like them. Then the earth will hear his voice.

Section III:

Plenary Papers and Responses

