

GOD BRINGS THE INCREASE

1 Corinthians 3:6

The decline of churches has been very clear in what are called “mainline” churches—what are the traditional denominations like Catholics, Methodists, Presbyterians, and of course, Lutherans. This is not recent news. But we saw the growth of the “megachurches”—huge churches without an official connection to any denomination. But in the last five years “how the mighty have fallen!” Bill Hybel’s empire at Willow Creek, Illinois, Rick Warren’s in California, and Joel Osteen’s in Houston have all seen massive fall in attendance. The “Hillsong” movement based in Australia has seen its leader in New York go to jail and the leader in Sydney under charges of covering up sexual misconduct. One of the only groups that has seemed to have consistent growth are the Mormons, who if they truly follow what the group teaches, reject the message of Jesus. The largest growing segment of our population are called the “nones,” those saying they have no religious affiliation.

In that kind of world some sincere Christians face enormous pressure. All those people who reject or ignore Jesus are not going to be saved. That can make us think not only of all who are falling away now, but those in the past and in the future. Research claims that the vast majority of native Americans died from 1500-1600 of diseases introduced by people from the eastern hemisphere. Few of those people got to hear the Gospel of Jesus. Huge portions of the world population, where Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and other pagan beliefs dominate, have little idea of who Jesus really is. When we think of all those who seem to be condemned to hell, it can leave us feeling overwhelmed or to just go on and concern ourselves to hanging on what we have.

That is what so many churches are dealing with now. Estimates are that every day churches close in this country. Every month a Lutheran congregation folds. Many churches survive financially only because of endowments that eventually will be used up. There is a shortage of pastors, but even more congregations that cannot afford the benefits, much less a salary, to pay for a pastor.

This is where we might expect to hear about how we need to go out into our world and bring people to church. That either causes us to wriggle in our pews or to tune things out. What can I do when so many seem to be leaving the church? How can we maintain in a world in which getting kids to a sporting event on a Sunday morning is more important than church, where we are taught that science and evolution have turned the Bible into a fairy tale, where the new ISU football coach introduces himself to the crowd at a basketball game with the “f” word, where it is so easy to get hooked on things in our devices without having to leave the comforts of home, and our religion seems to have so little relevance to our daily lives?

But listen to what St. Paul, the great missionary has to say about that: “I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God brings forth the increase.” Apollos was another Christian missionary. People in the congregation in Corinth were arguing over who was the better person to be baptized by—Paul, Apollos, Peter, or some other missionary. But Paul makes it clear to make things happen— “God brings forth the increase.”

In his explanation to the third article about the work of the Holy Spirit, Luther wrote, “I cannot by my own reason or strength come to the Lords Jesus or follow Him, but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the one, true faith.” He goes on, “Even as He calls, gathers, and enlightens the whole Christian Church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one, true faith.” We are not called by God to bring people to faith and save them from hell. We can’t do that for ourselves, much less the rest of the world. Coming to faith in Jesus Christ is described as being “born again.” Birth is not something we choose to do; it is something done to us. The only one that can give to a Christian is God, the Holy Spirit.

That puts the pressure off us to bring people to faith. God doesn’t give us a command to do what we cannot do. People have tried. You can get people to church by having it be really entertaining or by having a lot of cute young girls or providing activities to keep kids busy. You can build an empire based on a charismatic leader who creates a megachurch and its daughter churches. But the only way that people can truly be brought to faith is by the work of the Holy Spirit bringing into the hearts of each individual.

We might think, “That leaves us off the hook. All I have to worry about is my own personal faith. I can mind my own business, and let others think what they want.” But knowing that God “produces the increase,” does make us complacent. Instead, it gives up hope when we otherwise would not have it. God produces the increase so it is worth our effort, as Paul said, to “sow the seed and water it.” Notice how he uses an illustration from agriculture. It is the same area that Jesus so often used in His parables. Things start as seeds, and then grow up. And it happens in ways we can’t understand.

I didn’t have to buy any pumpkins last fall. No, I saw something growing in my mulch box last summer. I let it go, not being sure what it was, even though I had to wait to harvest the mulch in it. Then as we got near fall, I could see the little pumpkins growing on it. But they were green. Fortunately, frost came late last year, so there was time for them to ripen and turn orange. What a volunteer! All that happened so slowly, so quietly, so without fanfare!

That is how Jesus describes the Kingdom of God. It works often without us seeing it, in ways we cannot imagine. How could the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians and dragging God’s people Israel advance God’s Kingdom? It placed believers with their Old Testaments in places all over the near East, places where they formed synagogues which

became the starting point of so many Christian congregations founded by people like St. Paul. How could the death of Stephen benefit God's Kingdom? It scattered early Christians to other places where people could hear from them the Gospel of Jesus. How can the migration of poor people from the Middle East to European countries advance God's Kingdom? By bringing them into contact with churches like our Lutheran churches in Germany where you find the churches now filled with former Muslims. The most Christian continent in the world is not Europe or North or South America, but Africa. When Christian missionaries were expelled from China in 1949 by the communists, it was estimated that there were 5 million Christians in China. It looked as though the Church was doomed there. But in 1980's when China began to open up again, it was discovered that there were about 50 million Christians in China! God brought forth the increase!

We may try to grow God's kingdom by our efforts—politics, trying to compete with popular culture, using all kinds of “carrots” to lure people inside. But God has decided to grow His Kingdom by grace, not might. His Kingdom works when we drive an elderly person to a doctor's appointment, when we stay up to listen to a fellow student going through a rough time, when we befriend the person everyone wants to avoid, as we remember people in our prayers, as we refuse to spread gossip, as we ask someone if we can pray with him or for her.

The prophet Elijah thought in his despair that he alone worshiped the true God after he was marked for death by King Ahab and Queen Jezebel who worshiped the god Baal. But God came to him and assured him that there were 7,000 remaining in Israel who had not turned from God. Despite all who fell into idolatry God's people continued on until the coming of Jesus. And people will continue to become God's people until the time Jesus comes again. We do not always see that. But God does—and that's what counts!