

**GOD'S PRESENCE WITH US:
WHAT CAUSES CHURCHES TO GROW
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This discussion is not a study of the Chinese church in the light of today's needs and today's society, nor is it concerned with church renewal as discussed by Dr. Findley Edge in the March issue of the Baptist Program. However, it will attempt to answer the important question: how can we make Chinese churches grow? The presentation will take a suggestive approach based on experience rather than a "hard and fast rule" based on theory.

The Great Commission of our Lord in Matthew 28:19-20 will be used as the basis for this discussion. Inquiries will also be made into different biblical passages and from this study we will gather the correct approach with related methodology concerning how to make the Chinese church grow. The passage will be discussed as follows:

- I. Salvation: growth in quantity.
- II. Discipleship: growth in quality.
- III. God's Presence: growth in spirituality.

I. Salvation: Making a Church Grow in Quantity

"Baptizing them in the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit"
(Matt. 28:19)

"And that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name among all
nations" (Luke 24:47)

Making a Chinese church grow in quantity will be done simply by reaching the Chinese people with the gospel. "God will save the heathen when He gets ready without your help or mine" is the voice of man's laziness. Since the church's prime goal is to make God known to others by bringing penitent sinners to Christ and then discipling them, the church then must reach out or die! However, man's skull is much thicker than we think. We can send a message around the world in one-seventh of a second, yet it may take years to force one simple intelligent idea through a quarter-inch of human skull. Conveying a spiritual message is even harder since "the natural man receives not the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him" (1 Cor. 2:14).

Throughout history, making salvation known to an unbeliever has always been a hard task. This is especially true of our fellow countrymen who have been darkened by their traditional superstition and have taken Mammon as their god and security. In order to win them to the Lord and cause Chinese churches to grow, the following steps should be considered.

Build up Chinese people's confidence in the church. Most Chinese assume that Christianity is just one of many religions. Since religion to them is mere superstition, they see Christianity as no different. When they are exposed to the Gospel, they think, "Those church people are either asking for donations or trying to persuade us to take western superstition in place of our own." Their defense mechanism goes up

immediately and results in their stubbornly clinging to their old ideas or beliefs. However, this attitude is not present in most second generation Chinese. They do not have the traditional superstitions, are much more open, and not so enslaved to money as their parents. Thus the best approach to evangelize Chinese people in North America is to win the second generation first. The first generation can then see the reality of Christianity through the second generation, rid themselves of their earlier prejudice toward the Gospel and dare to come to the Lord. This is what we have heard and seen recently from some Chinese churches. The practical outworking of reaching the second generation simply means developing a working Sunday School.

A Sunday School youth in one of the Chinese churches who had been praying for the salvation of his father for a long time once related, "I spoke to my father one evening and asked if it would be all right for me to ask our youth director to come and talk to him about salvation." The father answered with a question, "Why can't you talk to me?" This resulted in the youth having a half hour discussion with his father, and the young man led his father to the Lord.

Developing a Sunday School is not an easy job. It takes knowledge, wisdom and perseverance. No Sunday School can be developed overnight. A long-range plan and program are necessary.

Train Sunday School Teachers. Most Sunday School teachers today are not qualified for their jobs. They do not have sufficient spiritual experiences, nor do they have enough teachers' training. Technically and spiritually they are inadequate and immature for this sacred work. Many of them do not know how to make an interesting introduction, how to present the contents orderly, or how to conclude the lesson with appropriate applications. As a result, they do not know how to lead a student to Christ or cause a student to grow spiritually. Some of them do not even know the difference between ethical teaching and spiritual teaching. They take for granted that teaching students to be good is equal to teaching students to be spiritual. Further, they may treat the Sunday School class as a time of fellowship or an opportunity to make friends, instead of using the time for imparting truth into hearts almost as empty as a vacuum, or enlightening believing students' spiritual understanding to cause them to grow in Christ. Some teachers do their best in their teaching, yet because they have no confidence in themselves, their teaching carries no authority and produces no inspiration. Therefore, the training of Sunday School teachers and the building up of their confidence in their own teaching may be regarded as the first step towards making the Chinese church grown.

At the start of any church, the lack of personnel is universal; yet, we can begin with only what we have. According to this writer's experience, even a sixth grader can be trained to be a good Sunday School teacher, provided the minister himself has the gift of teaching and knows how to train others. Teachers may meet together for teachers' meeting every Wednesday evening after the prayer meeting to discuss the lessons which they are going to teach. Frequently the Sunday School lessons in the Teachers' Quarterly are not appropriate and cannot meet the practical needs of a local congregation. The minister must rewrite the outlines, gearing them for the practical situation of his church. He may have to write three or four outlines every week in order to meet the needs of

various ages. This work is certainly time consuming for a minister, yet the need for good Sunday School teachers is a must for the growth of any Chinese church.

After about one or two years of training, the minister can ask each teacher to take turns making outlines under his supervision. A teachers' training class can also be opened for advanced Sunday School students during the Sunday School time. The courses for training classes may include teaching methods, biblical doctrine, and biblical interpretation. Among the topics of biblical interpretation, the knowledge of how to construct an outline for the lesson should be regarded as a vital study. If a teacher cannot control the contents of a passage and make an orderly presentation in class, there is no way for the lesson to be effective, or for the student to learn useable principles. The way to create a teachable outline is as follows:

A. Making an Adequate Outline

1. Pray for your task earnestly and read the lesson thoroughly.
2. Change the topic of the lesson if the topic in your quarterly does not meet your need.
3. Consider the situation and age of your students.
4. Use "what, when, who, why, where and how" to design the outline according to the practical needs of your class.
5. Outline the passage according to the order of its verses if possible.
6. Carry your central point all the way through your outline (intuitively if possible).
7. Know your outline whether it is inductive or deductive.
8. Use parallel word structure in your points as much as possible and polish your wording.
9. Check whether or not your outline matches the topic. If it does not, you may change your topic.

B. Checking Your Outline

1. Is it relevant and attractive?
2. Is it based on sound doctrine?
3. Is it geared to Christian education?
4. Is it properly related to the church program?
5. Is it essential to the spiritual development of your students?
6. Is it related to the preceding lessons?
7. Is it adapted to the teacher's ability?
8. Is it applicable to the students?
9. Has it been a blessing to you already?

When the Sunday School grows larger and enough teachers are trained, it can be divided into departments, and superintendents can be appointed to take care of each department. Also, a team teacher system may be adopted in order to provide for the counseling of students who are unsaved or have particular spiritual problems concurrent with the group teaching. This has proven to be very effective. For what class teaching cannot do, individual counseling often will.

II. Discipleship: Making a Church Grow in Quality

“Go ye therefore and disciple all nations . . . teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:19).

“Verily I say unto you, that you who have followed me, in the regeneration when the Son of man shall sit in the throne of His glory, you also shall sit upon twelve thrones” (Matt. 19:28).

The church is neither a charity association nor a religious society, but is a training center for the coming kingdom. Hence to believe in Jesus Christ is comparable to when a student first enrolls in school. After the pupil has finished registration, he is ready to begin his hard study. Believers are called to be disciples. So after his salvation, he enters God’s school for training. Aside from God’s grace, whether he can be graduated or not depends on his efforts. As Christ says, “Strive to enter in at the strait gate; for many, I say unto you, will seek to enter in, and shall not be able” (Luke 13: 24). Therefore, if any Christian believes that as soon as he has accepted Jesus Christ that everything is fixed and he has nothing to pursue, he deceives himself! He is forgetting what Paul says, “I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3:14). It is absolutely true that everything connected with salvation has been accomplished by Christ, and no one can either add to it or merit it. But to be His disciple is a long process. To be saved is punctiliar action, but discipleship is linear!

Church history and believers’ experience have taught us that it is impossible for the whole body of any congregation to be discipled. Even the Lord said, “Many are called, but a few are chosen” (Matt. 22:14). However, the scope of training should be for the whole congregation. The way of training God’s people and of causing a church to grow in quality may be as follows:

Establish a Training Program. Although Sunday School teachers’ training is a part of discipleship training, it is far from enough. We need some special program to train believers to be Christ’s disciples and to serve the church as their regular practice. The steps for discipleship training may be as follows: first, train them to “recognize” that they have been with Jesus; second, develop their ability to face various testing without being offended and to serve the Lord without reservation; third, heighten their desire to see others saved and also become disciples of Christ. If any church will focus on these three steps in their discipleship training, adequate personnel for the church will soon be obtained.

The importance of having good and capable leaders is inseparable from that of making a church grow. The hindrance to many churches’ growth today has a lot to do with the poor spiritual and moral caliber of church leaders. Elders and deacons in many churches may not have been born again. They do not know the real meaning of salvation. Many of them might not have finished reading even one Gospel. They never teach Sunday School, nor have they attended prayer meetings with any regularity. How can a church grow with such a rotten foundation? The youths today look at the church as they

would view a decaying building. This has a lot to do with the poor impression which they have been getting from those unsaved and worldly church leaders who have been a stumbling block to the young people of many churches. Without their resignation, any growth of the church will be improbable. Yet a church cannot be a pastor's "one man's drugstore." She needs leaders to make her grow. Therefore, to train new leaders is an imperative for the growth of any church.

Preach Progressively. Besides teaching, progressive preaching is also imperative. Teaching is different from preaching. The former develops Christians' spiritual gifts, and the latter edifies their spiritual lives. But the steps of edifying are similar to those of training. This writer dares not have his preaching pre-planned. He waits on the Lord for the topic and outline weekly. Although at times it has been very tough, yet His grace has always been sufficient. Now as he looks back, he has discovered the order of his preaching in the past years to be: first, faith was emphasized, then hope, then love. The Lord wanted him to emphasize repentance and accepting Jesus Christ as personal Savior in the first few years, then leading a godly life in order to reign with Christ in the future in the second period, and brotherly love and personal work in the third period. Recently, even some of the children in the church went out to witness to the unbelieving children and led them to the Lord. Let us remember, the first priority in making a church grow is not visitation but Spirit-inspired preaching.

Build Up the Spirit of Prayer. The real growth of a church cannot be determined by the attendance on the Lord's Day worship service, the number of members, and the enrollment of the Sunday School but is determined by the status of the prayer meeting. Some have said, "The Sunday morning service indicates the popularity of a church; the evening service, the popularity of the preacher; only the prayer meeting shows the popularity of Christ!" Indeed, prayer is the secret of having God's presence and making a church grow. God's blessings are rich, yet they are objective. Without prayer (spiritual application) His blessings will not become ours. In other words, prayer paves the way for God's blessings to come into His church. Therefore, to make the prayer meeting grow is necessary for the growth of a church.

During a ten-year period, one church reported that the Sunday School and the worship service attendance increased five times, but the prayer meeting attendance increased twenty-five times. This is real growth!

Concerning prayer, tragically to say, many ministers have never personally realized its importance, nor have they ever experienced its power. How then can they encourage their members to pray fervently? No wonder the prayer meetings in many churches today are attended by only a handful of members. The way of making the prayer meeting grow may be as follows:

The ministers should cause their own prayer life to grow. A pastor should carry the members of his church as the high priest of the Old Testament when carrying out his duties carried the names of the tribes of Israel on his breast. Pray for them daily and individually according to the order in the church directory; or take a section a day from the directory if the size of the membership is too large for one prayer. Let us remember, to pray for them is more imperative than to visit them!

The congregation should be taught in detail how to pray. Today there is a common mistake about prayer. People are always taught that prayer should be short and not in detail (our old nature surely likes that). They misinterpret Matthew 6:7. Our Lord's emphasis here is on "vain repetition" and has nothing to do with long and detailed prayer. On the contrary, the Bible does teach us to pray long and in detail. David spent nineteen verses to confess one sin (Ps. 51). Solomon's prayer of dedication took twenty-nine verses (2 Chron. 6:14-42). In fact, many long Psalms are prayers rather than songs. Even our Lord often had a night-long prayer. If the members of a church pray for one or two hours together for different requests at the prayer meeting and that church does not grow, it would be very unusual! Thus, to develop the spirit of prayer is another "must" for the growth of any church.

III. God's Presence: Making a Church Grow in Spirituality

"And, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world, Amen" (Matt. 28:20).

"If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy; for the temple of God is holy, which temple you are" (1 Cor. 3:17).

In order to make a church grow it is necessary to develop the church both technically and spiritually, with the latter having priority. Since we have made a cursory examination of the technical aspects, the spiritual aspects should now be considered.

The meaning of "church" can be studied both etymologically and biblically. Etymologically, it comes from "*kaleo*, to call" and "*ek*, out from" and thus means "to call out from," which refers to an assembly of the citizens called out by the state to discuss and execute the state's affairs. It defines the nature of a church; not just for a gathering but more for a serving. Its emphasis is on man's side. Biblically, it means "the body of Christ" or "the temple of God," both of which mean the dwelling place of God.

When the *shekinah* (the visible manifestation of God's glory) dwelled with Israel, the temple at Jerusalem was the dwelling place of Yahweh; but when His glorious Presence departed, the temple was but an ordinary deserted building. Likewise, a church can be God's house only when God's presence is there. When God's presence is withdrawn, the church is no more God's, and no one can make her grow spiritually. In other words, to keep God's presence in the church is an absolute requirement for the growth of any church. There is a church in California where the worship service is always long. The preaching itself is at least one hour. The minister had challenged the congregation by saying that the worship service should be a minimum of one and a half hours, and if any one felt that this was too long and could not take it, it would be better for him to attend a church that was less taxing. Yet the attendance keeps going up.

Today everything in society is very commercial. Flowery talk without sincerity is everywhere. However, some individuals are seeking reality and sincerity. Yet many churches cannot offer such food to them! The reality of a church is having God's presence, and the sincerity of a minister is to preach God's Word with his heart on his sleeve as in God's presence. Without these two factors, trying to make a church grow would be like "climbing up a tree to catch fish!"

God's promises in the Bible are classified as unconditional and conditional. The former is accepted by faith alone without works, whereas the latter must first have its conditions fulfilled before the pledge can be realized. For instance, the promise of God's presence in the Great Commission is a conditional one. It is conditioned not only by the preceding contextual statements, but has been thus taught throughout the entire Bible. In other words, the blessing of having God's presence is obtained in the same manner as God's other conditional blessings. Thus, God's promise of His presence is objective and needs some way for it to be realized in our life and church. The following discussion shows how to make this blessing real to us.

Keeping the body of the Lord pure. Among the conditions for having God's presence, purity has the priority over all others. As the Lord said to Israel once and again: "ye shall be holy, for I am holy." Moreover, the Bible says that without holiness no man shall see the Lord!

When the Israelites came out from Egypt, some mixed people came out with them. These mixed people were later the troublemakers among the Israelites and caused judgment to fall upon God's people. Most churches today are extremely careless in accepting members. When a person attends only two or three times, he is soon pressured into becoming a member. The leaders of the church often do not care whether a person has been born again or not. They care only for numbers. As a result, many churches today are full of dead members. How can we expect to have God's presence in the midst of filthiness? Therefore, in order to have God's presence in a church, examine carefully all you receive as members and preach with such power of life and words that those who attend will have a desire to be clean of conscience and pure in life!

Keeping the offering for the Lord holy. Chinese churches have long had a bad reputation among their own people about money. A few times a year some religious organizations often send someone to Chinese stores begging for donations. Once a brother wanted to witness to an old Chinese gentleman whose first question was, "Do I have to pay?" So to an unbelieving Chinese, church is second only to a beggar or door-to-door salesman! Although many Chinese churches may not do such things as mentioned above, yet the majority of Chinese churches do not care whether the offering they collect is holy or not. This writer learned that once a member of a certain Chinese church went to a Chinese family asking for a donation for the church building fund while that family was gambling. The man of the family picked up a five dollar bill from the gambling table and gave it to the member who accepted it with thanksgiving! Many Christians would think that anybody who gives money to God is certainly doing a good deed. They ignore or rather do not know that the Bible says, "The sacrifice of the wicked is abomination: how much more when he brings it with a wicked mind" (Prov. 21:27). Since financial iniquity is in many Chinese churches today, we cannot expect to have God's presence in the midst of such abomination! Therefore, **to refuse unbeliever's money and uncheerful giving is another necessity to keep God's presence in a church.**

Keeping the worship service genuine. Many churches regard the Lord's Day as a rest day for Christians and the worship service as a kind of gathering. They do not realize that the first day of the week is the Lord's. Thus the first priority of the worship service is

to worship the Lord, and the singing and prayers in the service are the New Testament sacrifices to the Lord. The Lord blesses His people so much every day and the worship service is the only time for them to express their gratitude and honor to Him publicly. It is not an evangelistic meeting or a Bible study time. The singing and prayers are not merely preparation for listening to the minister's preaching. All the items in the program should be for worshipping the Lord, and any other parts such as announcements, compliments, greetings, and so on, if made, should not disturb the dignity of the worship service. The congregation should worship the Lord as the creator and ruler of the universe in the morning service and have sweet fellowship with Him as the Heavenly Father in the evening service. In these last days many worship services are mocking God rather than worshipping God. They shut the door of the church on the Lord and leave Him standing outside the door knocking. The Psalmist says, "Except the Lord build the house, they labor in vain that build it." Likewise, except the Lord's presence is in a church, the church's excellent program, sweet music, eloquent speech, and so forth, will be all in vain!

Conclusion

In conclusion, causing the Chinese churches in North America to grow is a long process and often a hectic task, yet in principle it is very simple. First, find ways to reach out; second, train believers for the Lord's kingdom; and third, keep God's presence in the church.

For a more thorough discussion of the biblical basis for church growth and how to put it into practice, see Timothy Lin, *The Secret of Church Growth* (Los Angeles: The First Chinese Baptist Church, 1992).

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