



TO GROW OR TO DIE

Recently, I came across a profound quote that put me into “pondering mode.” The statement was this, “The goal of the church should be not to grow, but to die.” This provocative statement flies in the face of almost everything we hear about church growth today. Yet it is a rock-solid, biblical statement. In John 12:24 (NASB), Jesus informs us, *unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.* He adds in Matthew 16:25 (ESV) that death is a requirement for life: *For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.*

This concept of dying to grow is routinely applied to individual believers, but I have never seen it applied to the church. And if the church is not saying with John the Baptist, *He must increase, but I must decrease* (John 3:30, NASB), its growth may be far more man-made than God-made. How would the 21st century American church need to die in order to grow? Let’s consider three clear ways.

The Church Needs to Die to its Pursuit of Comfort

Amos 6:1 warns, *Woe to those who are at ease in Zion* (NASB). Obviously, the desire to be comfortable is not a new inclination for followers of the King. Today, we construct absolutely gorgeous buildings; create children’s areas that resemble Disneyland; make the days and times for our worship services as convenient as possible; preach short, sweet, feel-good sermons. Impressive lighting and special effects are common. If we were totally honest, we might admit we spend massive amounts of Kingdom money making ourselves comfortable. “User-friendly” has become a byline for the church.

By contrast, the church in China continually faces life-threatening persecution. They meet secretly. They often are required to whisper their songs and prayers so as to not be heard by outsiders. They often sit on basement floors with dim lighting while sermons go on for hours. Buildings are not air conditioned. They have no theater seating or worship bands. It is just them and God for worship.

The churches in Asia, South America, and Africa enjoy none of the comforts we expect and take for granted. Yet the church on these continents is exploding at growth rates that dwarf the rather modest growth of the church in America with all its amenities and comforts. What should this be telling us? The church among the “have nots” is exploding, while the church among the “haves” is not. Maybe Amos was on to something when he warned, *Woe to those who are at ease in Zion.*

Maybe if the church were to die to its pursuit of comfort and decide instead that it could get by on a whole lot less, it would have a whole lot more to invest where there are massive amounts of human *discomfort*, both physical and spiritual. If the church really wants to grow, it needs to die to its pursuit of comfort.

The Church Needs to Die to its Quest for Cultural Relevance

I deeply fear that the American church has become so obsessed with being culturally relevant that it has actually become culturally irrelevant. I sense that in the church's attempt to reach out and relate to the world, it has actually fallen in. Consequently, the greatest challenge the church faces today is not getting the world *into* the church; it's getting the world *out of* the church. Anyone deeply involved in any church will appreciate exactly what I am saying.

It is tragic, but I have observed that the church in America seems to have abandoned its commission to be a countercultural revolution intent on changing the larger culture to match its own. It has instead become content with being one of many subcultures in America, maintaining its distinctive characteristics while peacefully coexisting within the larger culture. This concession is proving to be devastating to both the life and the impact of the church in America.

I have always liked how the King James Version translates Acts 17:6, where Paul's opponents assess the effectiveness of His mission efforts. They claim that, *These that have turned the world upside down are come hither also*. Paul wasn't coming to Thessalonica to "fit in" with the community and become a respectable citizen of their fair town. He was there for one reason and one reason only: to change that city and culture for Christ. And in following Christ's commission, he was turning *the world upside down!* The truth is that Paul wasn't turning the world upside down; he was turning it right side up. His countercultural revolution was working, and the unbelieving Thessalonians recognized it.

The church today no longer seems to be a driving countercultural force in America. The LGBTQ movement is. The environmental movement is. The socialist movement is. While they are forcefully pushing their countercultural agenda on our nation, the church's new "relevant" subcultural message has for the most part been reduced to a faint voice off in the distance with little meaningful impact in the culture wars.

When a church chooses to relate to our upside down world by turning itself upside down so the world will feel more comfortable being part of it, then the church's countercultural message has been forfeited. The church has become, in the eyes of this upside down world, just another club or organization to belong to that helps them feel good and get more out of life. The church must understand that the very message of the cross is not designed to be culturally *relevant*. It is designed to be counter culturally *radical*. If the church really wants to grow, the church needs to die to its quest to be culturally relevant.

The Church Needs to Die to its Acceptance of Superficial Commitment

The Puritans in early America were both influential and effective. If they had a thousand people attending a worship service, only a few hundred would actually be members. The rest were people considering the message yet undecided and uncommitted. Today we might have only a few hundred church members attending any given worship service out of the thousand who are official members of the church. What is the difference? It is quite simple: the Puritans demanded a high level of commitment to living the Christian life. The radical message they preached was so attractive that many wanted to hear it, but few would actually commit. Sounds a lot like what happened when Jesus preached, doesn't it?

Over time, however, the church has lowered its required commitment for belonging to the church, making it easier for more people to become members. Consequently, we reasoned, the church will grow more rapidly.

Everyone wants to grow, right? Then, this logic continued, once we get them into the church, we can grow their commitment to the Lord.

Sadly, with churches that have followed this approach, they now have the Easter and Christmas crowd; the every-other-week crowd; the once-a-month crowd; the give-nothing crowd; the slip in and slip out crowd—all considered members in good standing. Churches too often have become a mile wide and an inch deep. This approach to church growth is totally contrary to how Jesus called people to Himself.

Do you remember in John 6:25-66 when Jesus had gathered large crowds (too large, apparently)? He tells them that they need to eat His body and drink His blood. For a Jew, eating human flesh and drinking human blood was abhorrent—so abhorrent that *many of His disciples turned back and no longer followed Him* (John 6:66, NIV). What preacher would intentionally run off a huge crowd of interested followers? Jesus.

In Matthew 19:16-22, Jesus raised the bar so high for the rich young ruler to follow him that the young man walked away from the offer. What preacher would purposely run off a rich man who was seeking to follow God? Jesus.

In Luke 9:57-60, Jesus tells those who want to follow Him that they will have no place to lay their head, they will have to let the dead bury their dead, and there will be no looking back once they choose to join Him. Who would intentionally discourage people from following the Savior? Jesus.

Jesus tells us in Matthew 16:24, *If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me* (ESV). The cross in Jesus' day was used for only one purpose—to kill someone! Jesus was inviting us to come and die with Him. Are we presenting such a compelling call to commitment that those who hear our message can only conclude that if Christianity isn't going to be worth dying for, it isn't going to be worth living for?

The bottom line of Jesus' message is simple: Give it *all* up or go away. To be blunt: put up or shut up! We are in a war, and sometimes soldiers get killed in the battle. During times of war, great sacrifices are required. Everything we are and everything we have may be required to support the war effort. Abraham Lincoln eloquently described the men who sacrificed their lives at Gettysburg when he said, “[They] gave the last full measure of devotion.” Are we calling people to give their last full measure of devotion to our King and His cause? Are we calling people to be all in or go away? If the church really wants to grow, it needs to die to its acceptance of superficial commitments. Christianity, at its core, is counterintuitive. Everything always seems backward—even how we are called to grow the church. Odd as it seems, death leads to life and life leads to growth. Are you ready for your church to die?

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